

A Conversation with Robbers

by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab
translation by Matt Reeder and Chalermchai Wongrak

Translators' Introduction

Many rural crime sprees punctuated the last two decades of King Chulalongkorn's reign, but one of the worst broke out in early 1903. A violent gang of robbers repeatedly made off with herds of water buffaloes, consistently eluding the newly established provincial police force and the local officials who were dutifully cooperating with the Ministry of the Interior. As the head of that ministry from 1894 to 1915, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab played a starring role in the king's campaign to centralize the administration of Siam. Local leaders were often marginalized, however, and the reorganization of authority in rural areas contributed to a spike in crime.¹ The gang was finally captured and put on trial in July 1903.

The interrogation of this group of robbers yielded such a wealth of information about bandit practices that Damrong concluded that it ought to be written down and distributed to the kingdom's administrators so that they would be better informed in dealing with rural crime. Despite the conversation's appearance, the reader should bear in mind that neither the questions nor the answers are direct quotes. Not only did Damrong reorder the content of the testimony, but he also rewrote many of the questions and edited the answers. This is evident from the formal wording of most of the conversation, markedly different from what would be expected from the verbal testimony of a rural bandit. Even by the 1920s, Damrong's conversation was still printed in textbooks used by the School of Administration to train aspiring bureaucrats.

In addition to Damrong's stated purpose of providing administrators with information about the workings of bandits and thieves, a second purpose can be inferred from his decision to republish the conversation in a cremation volume in

¹ For details about administrative centralization, see Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam, 1892-1915: The Ministry of the Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977); but note the critique of Tej's analysis in Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), especially 145-6. For more on rural crime, the economy, and policing in Central Siam, see David Johnston, "Rural Society and the Rice Economy in Thailand, 1880-1930," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1975; and [Phirasak Chaidaisuk] พิรศักดิ์ ชัยปัสดุสุข, ชาติเสือภัลย [Brave tigers (bandits) earn their stripes] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2008), and the sources cited in the notes to this translation.

1925.² He saw it as a contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on social groups and rural society in the kingdom, complementing the array of mini-ethnographies, travel essays, and treatments of peasant life published by Siamese officials in the early twentieth century.³ Cremation volumes offered a medium for the printing of a wide array of historical documents and scholarly essays. The readers of these volumes were primarily nobles, bureaucrats, and intellectuals. Damrong's decision to republish the conversation for this wider audience of Bangkok elites indicates that he did not intend this conversation to be read as simply the testimony of particular bandit individuals. It could also be read as a study of a subgroup of rural Thai society that was resisting the modern bureaucratic order represented by ministry bureaucrats, the new police force, and the new legal system.

This conversation therefore reflects two of the creative interests that have made Damrong famous: his ingenious and tireless efforts to assert royal bureaucratic authority throughout the kingdom, and his scholarly endeavors to craft a narrative of Thai history, culture, and progress.

² It is this text that forms the basis for our translation: กรมพระดำรงราชานุภาพ [Prince Damrong Rajanubhab], “ເຊື່ອສນທາກົບຢູ່ວາຍປະນ” [A Conversation with Robbers], printed in the cremation volume for Phra-tamruat-tri Phraya Aphichitchanyut (Caroen Sawettanan) (Bangkok: Sophonphiphatthanakòn, 1925). The conversation can be found on pages 1-41, but see also Prince Damrong's comments on it in his introduction to the cremation volume, page (2).

³ Thongchai Winichakul, “The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation in Siamese Subjects 1880-1910,” in *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, edited by Andrew Turton (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2000), especially 40-41, 44, 50, 51, and 54.

Explanation

There was a gang of badmen¹ who conspired together and went around committing robberies in Khwaeng Müang Pathum Thani, Krung Kao [กรุงเก่า], Suphanburi and other nearby *miang*.² In July 1903, this gang of badmen made off with a herd of water buffaloes in Pathum Thani district and then committed another robbery in Müang Suphan[buri]. The officials worked together to investigate, track down, and arrest them. Several heads of gangs were sent to trial in Monthon Nakhòn Chaisi. These badmen gave their confessions truthfully. When the trial was over, some people queried them about bandit methods. I found that those badmen told intriguing stories, so I wrote them down as a conversation and had it printed so that those responsible for investigating and arresting bandits can read and be informed about bandit methods. However, the reader is welcome to consider and investigate whether other groups of badmen have the same methods or not.

1. On what grounds do badmen first consider robbing a place?

For any robbery, whether the target is a house or cattle,³ someone who lives near the owner is the first to think up the plan. Then, he acts as an informer [สาย], and invites other badmen to team up for the robbery.

2. What kind of person acts as an informer like this?

He is a *nakleng* living in the neighborhood of the owner, not someone who lives far away; not a stranger.

3. How are *nakleng* different from badmen?

Badmen do not call each other badmen. They call each other *nakleng*. People who call each other *nakleng* are known to be those who understand

¹ *Phurai* (ผู้ร้าย) can mean a criminal, lawbreaker, or bad guy. Because the term is used so frequently in this text, and because all of these other possible translations might be misleading in one way or another, we have opted to invent the term “badman” to stand in for *phurai*. We have translated the more specific terms *phurai plon* (ผู้ร้ายปล้น; lit. “robbing *phurai*”) consistently as “robber,” and *conphurai* (โจรผู้ร้าย) as “bandit.”

² A *monthon* was the largest administrative division in Siam at the time; a *müang*, which we have left untranslated, was an administrative division of a *monthon*, but could also refer to a city or a town center specifically. A *khwaeng* was similar to today’s *amphoe*, or “district” (the term is now used to refer to the sub-districts of the city of Bangkok) or, alternately, could refer to an administrative area in general, as in the several references in the text to *khwaeng müang*, which might best be understood as simply within the administrative area of the *müang*. Krung Kao or “old capital” is an alternate name for Ayutthaya.

³ We use “cattle” for *khokrabü* (โคกระเบื้อง), which means both cows/bulls and water buffaloes (in other words, bovines). We have shortened “water buffalo” to just “buffalo” in most cases. In this “conversation,” Prince Damrong always uses the formal term, *krabü* (กระเบื้อง), for “buffalo” rather than the more common informal term, *khwai* (ควาย).

robbery. Or if not, they are people who furtively steal⁴ cattle, or those who aid and abet them, buy their stolen or robbed cattle, and so on. So, they call each other *nakleng*.⁵ It is understood that they are these sorts of people.

4. Are badmen who steal included in the group of people called *nakleng* as well?

That sort of person is considered to be different from *nakleng* because their preferences are different. Thieves usually work alone, always looking for opportunities to covertly steal other people's things. They do not like to do daring things and they do not have many comrades. On the other hand, *nakleng* work with many comrades. Thus, badmen do not regard thieves as being in the same group.

5. Are badmen who use guns to assassinate people considered *nakleng* or not?

Nakleng do not assassinate people like that. They may shoot people, but only those who accept bounties. If *nakleng* find out that somebody has accepted a bounty to catch them, they may shoot him. However, the shooter must be a *nakleng* who lives by himself. *Nakleng* who have households do not usually do that.⁶

6. If there is nobody living close enough to be an informer, can the robbery take place?

If there is no informer, the robbery cannot be committed. There must be an informer in every case.

7. Why is an informer needed?

Badmen have to be sure about several things before a robbery, namely:

⁴ We have translated the term *plon* (ปล้น) consistently as “rob” or “robbery,” and the term *lak* (ลัก) as “steal” or “theft.” The distinction is clearer in Thai than it is in English. “Robbers” (โจรสลัด), according to the definition in the Three Seals Law, “are criminals that gather in groups of [roughly] ten, twenty, or thirty, and rob houses during the day or at night. Shooting guns and shouting, they enter [the house], shock and scare the owner, and collect all the valuables.” “Thieves” (โจรจลาจล), on the other hand, “are criminals who sneak into boats, houses, and shops and remove all the valuables.” See กฎหมายตราสามดวง [Three Seals Law] (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 1963), III: 211-12. The answer to the next question indicates that thieves usually worked individually while robbers operated in groups.

⁵ *Nakleng* can be glossed in English as “rogue,” “rascal,” “gangster,” or “thug.” They have hierarchical relationships with other *nakleng*. According to a contemporary writer for the *Bangkok Times*, a *nakleng* was characterized by his “manly bearing and courage, readiness to fight in single combat or in a riot, fidelity to friends, deep loyalty and respect to feudal lords and parents.” Historicus (pseud.), “The Nakleng,” *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 26 May 1898, 21-22. Quoted in David B. Johnston, “Bandit, Nakleng, and Peasant in Rural Thai Society,” *Contributions to Asian Studies* 15 (1980): 91.

⁶ The implication is that *nakleng* loners are less vulnerable because they have no family or permanent residence.

1. Where the valuables are;
2. To what extent the owner has manpower and guns for defense;
3. To what extent there are neighbors close by with guns and manpower to help defend;
4. What the route to get to, and escape with, the valuables is like;
5. Which day provides an opportunity for the robbery; in other words, a time that the owner is careless, does not have any manpower present to help defend, and so on.

The informer has to find out all this information before inviting badmen to commit the robbery.

8. How can the informer find out this information?

The informer lives nearby the owner, in the same village or the same sub-district.⁷ Usually, they have visited each other often, so he can find out naturally; it is not so difficult. Sometimes, there are other people who live in the same house as the owner, such as a servant who wants money, or a relative who has had a dispute with the owner. For example, if a relative goes to borrow money but the house owner refuses, the relative is angry. In some cases, these people then take information about the amount of the household's valuables to the informer.

9. When the informer thinks a place should be robbed, how does he go around inviting the group of badmen?

First, the informer usually goes to the powerful *nakleng* who is the boss of the *nakleng* in that area.⁸

10. How does the informer know who the *nakleng* boss is?

Nakleng usually know very well who all of the *nakleng* are. If *nakleng* are familiar with each other and have become sworn friends, they have no secrets to hide. Even if a *nakleng* goes off to commit a robbery, and his *nakleng* friend comes to ask him about it, he will tell the friend everything—without hiding a thing.

11. How does a *nakleng* know that someone else is a *nakleng* too?

Every *nakleng* typically works in a way that requires a group. The more comrades he has, the more effectively and widely he can commit crimes and the more powerful a *nakleng* he becomes. Thus, it is natural that

⁷ A “sub-district,” or *tambon*, refers to a grouping of villages forming an administrative division smaller than a *khwaeng* or *amphoe*. It is also sometimes translated as “commune.” It is headed by a *kamnan*, or a “sub-district chief.”

⁸ We have consistently translated the Thai word *thin* (thin) as “area.”

nakleng are always trying to make friends with other *nakleng*. So, they know many.

12. What kind of *nakleng* becomes a boss? What kind does not?

A *nakleng* with many followers becomes the boss of that area. *Nakleng* with fewer followers living in the same area as a local boss have to obey him.

13. Why do *nakleng* with few followers need to obey the boss? Can they just remain *nakleng* without obeying him?

No, if a *nakleng* with few followers is not willing to obey the boss in his area, the boss will order his followers to harrass him in all kinds of ways. Therefore, the boss has the power to call for subordinate *nakleng* to rob any place or prohibit them from targeting any place as well.

14. How is an area defined?

There is no way to measure that. For example, Kò Yai [ເກະໄໝ] is counted as an area and has a boss. Chiangrak Nòi [ເຊີ້ງຮາກນອຍ] is another area. Khlòng Singhanat [ຄລອງສິງຫານາດ] is another area. Khlòng Sa [ຄລອງສະ] is another area.

15. Is it like this everywhere?

There are probably *nakleng* in every place. The only difference is that there are more in some places and fewer in others. Where there are *nakleng*, there is bound to be a boss. Because robberies need a gang [to succeed], there also needs to be a boss to make the arrangements.

16. What kind of people become *nakleng*?

Nakleng come from three kinds of people: those who smoke opium and drink liquor, those who gamble, and those who live in remote places⁹ in *nakleng* areas.

17. Why do these three kinds of people become *nakleng*?

Those who smoke opium and drink liquor usually do so in opium dens and liquor halls.¹⁰ There, they often smoke and drink with those who are *nakleng* already. When they see each other often and get acquainted while drunk, they get to like each other and swear friendship. Eventually, they

⁹ An area described as *pliaw* (ເປົ້າຍ້າ) is remote and deserted, and carries the implication of being dangerous.

¹⁰ A *rong fin* (ໂຮງຝິນ) is an “opium den.” A *rong sura* (ໂຮງສຸກາ) is the corresponding location for liquor consumption, although not necessarily like a “bar,” so we have opted for the more literal translation, “liquor hall.”

allow the *nakleng* to draw them into becoming *nakleng* too.

Those who gamble lose their possessions, but they never lose their greed. So they turn to being *nakleng* in order to get things to gamble.

Those who live in remote locations in *nakleng* areas—for example the people who go to establish farms in remote locations—are harrassed in so many ways by the badmen that they can no longer stand it. Sometimes they have to become *nakleng* only to protect themselves. When they become *nakleng*, other *nakleng* will be considerate and will not do them harm. This will protect their relatives too, as they can ask other *nakleng* not to harm them. Even if an area is not remote but an established locality or village like Ban Mai Tra [ບ້ານມ້າຕ່າ], Kò Yai, the villagers there are *nakleng* more often than not. In places like these, even if people who are not *nakleng* move to live there, they usually become *nakleng* as well. If not, they will not be able to stay.

18. Do the *nakleng* who are just starting out as robbers immediately join a robbery group or do they have to be trained somehow first?

The badmen who group together to commit something like a robbery are usually skilled in crime already. Badmen do not usually let newcomers participate in a robbery because they are afraid that the newcomers will be clumsy and botch the operation. Another reason is that they do not trust that the new people can keep a secret. Sometimes, if the new people are a little drunk, they may go around telling stories about the badmen's comrades. As a result, when badmen search for comrades to rob with, they only select those who they think they can trust.

19. If that is so, how can someone who has never committed a robbery join a robbery gang?

Before becoming a robber, he starts by just stealing cattle first. After stealing cattle successfully many times, other *nakleng* will consider him skilled or brave. So they convince him to join a robbery gang.

20. In a village where there are very few *nakleng*, do they have to worry about the villagers who are not *nakleng*?

Nakleng live their lives normally, like everyone else. Although villagers may not like *nakleng*, no one usually knows which *nakleng* did what bad deed where. Only the *nakleng* themselves know. Even if some villagers find out, they will be afraid of the *nakleng*. Some villagers who have *nakleng* relatives or friends, on the other hand, are glad to feel that they are protected against bandits.

21. When an informer comes to talk to the *nakleng* boss, what does the boss do?

The boss will interrogate the informer until he is satisfied that there are valuables and an opportunity for the robbery. If he thinks that the robbery will be successful, he will accept the informer's suggestion and immediately make an appointment for a particular date. That is, he will set a meeting [for some time] in the next one or two days at someone's home or in a specific field, as he discussed and agreed upon with the informer.

22. When they make an appointment like that, what does the boss do next?

He must estimate the size of the group that he will bring along.

23. What criteria are used to estimate the number of comrades to bring along for a particular robbery?

Usually, badmen do not want to bring along too many comrades because the more people, the smaller the portion of the valuables allocated to each. So, the expected haul has to be estimated first, and then the manpower and guns that the owner and his neighbors have to defend against them must be estimated as well. The badmen's side needs about twice the number of people and guns as the owner's. In addition, people from both that area and from other areas have to be recruited, because those who will be positioned near the owners during the robbery must be people from other areas. If they are from the same area, the house owners will recognize and remember their faces. Another thing: the estimated number of people must be an odd number. It is believed among badmen that if they go in an even number, something will usually happen to the group. For example, at the robbery in Bang Sò [ບ່າງສ່ອ], Khwaeng Müang Suphanburi, in July 1903, twelve badmen went and one was gunned down dead.¹¹

24. Are the recruits for the robbery gang selected by any criteria or not?

Badmen are not very picky. What is important is to mostly select people who have guns. They do not really want people without guns. Also, young men are preferred.

25. Until what age can badmen remain badmen?

Badmen are rarely older than 40. The only ones who are older than 40 years old and are still committing robberies are the bosses. Even so, when they reach 50 or older and lose their energy, they usually have to do

¹¹ This robbery was one of a series also mentioned in the explanation at the beginning of the document and in questions 45, 86, 96, and 98.

something else for a living, for example buying stolen cattle or acting as an intermediary for ransomed cattle.

26. What kinds of guns are used nowadays by badmen?¹²

Percussion cap guns and single-round muzzle-loaders are not really used anymore.¹³ They usually use guns that hold more rounds. There are four kinds of guns that badmen use these days. First, breech-loading guns with eight rounds are sometimes used, though infrequently because they are so heavy. Badmen usually prefer to use these three kinds of guns: seven-round guns (Mauser), twelve-round guns (Winchester), and sixteen-round guns (Colt Lightning).¹⁴ But, the ones with seven rounds are the best because the cartridge is strong. In the guns with twelve and sixteen bullets, the power is weaker.¹⁵

27. Where do badmen buy these kinds of guns?

These guns are sold on two rafts tied below the Bangkok distillery, in a raft on Bangkok Noi Canal [คลองบางกอกน้อย], and at two *Khaek* shops near Wat Kò [วัดเก้า].¹⁶ Each gun costs 120 baht; the same price for all three kinds. Cartridges are sold for two *salang* each.¹⁷ These cartridge guns are sold openly, not in hiding. However, the badmen who buy them usually tell the sellers that they are normal traders, such as boat traders dealing in rice, and that they are only buying guns to protect themselves

¹² We posted questions on two online gun-enthusiast forums in order to help us translate questions 26 and 27. Thanks to the respondents to both of our posts for taking the time to explain terminology and the mechanics of these old guns. The online discussion threads may be viewed at <http://thefiringline.com/forums/showthread.php?p=4696886>, first posted 4 August 2011; and <http://www.firearmstalk.com/forums/f108/questions-about-gun-terminology-used-thai-bandits-110-years-ago-81007/>, first posted 11 January 2013.

¹³ *Pün kaep* (ปืนแกป) are “cap guns.” More specifically, they are probably percussion cap-and-ball, muzzle-loaded shotguns, which are still sometimes used in the Thai countryside, even today, to hunt birds and rats.

¹⁴ While Mauser (มาเชอร์) and Colt Lightning (โคลต์ลิตนิง) are clear, Winchester is actually spelled as วิลเชลเตอรา (Wilchester?). We could find no evidence of a gun with that spelling, so we believe that “Winchester” was meant.

¹⁵ The term *patsatan* (ปั๊สตัน) refers to gun cartridges, and sometimes also the power of the cartridges, either strong or weak. Thanks to Chris Baker for alerting us to both its more common spelling (ปั๊สตัน) and Prince Damrong’s comment on its meaning in one of his prefaces to *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. See the translation by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen: Siam’s Great Folk Epic of Love and War* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), 1366.

¹⁶ *Phae* (แพ) refers not only to “raft” but also to houseboats and other modest, flat-bottomed boats. The *rong lao Krungthep* (ร่องเหลากรุงเทพฯ), or the “Bangkok distillery,” might, alternately, be some sort of liquor warehouse or a prominent tavern. We could not identify it. *Khaek* (แขก) refers to a person, usually Muslim, of South Asian, Middle Eastern, or Insular Southeast Asian origin. A *wat* is a Buddhist temple.

¹⁷ One *salang* is a quarter of a baht.

against bandits. It is assumed that the sellers do not realize that they are selling guns to badmen.

28. How are members of the robbery gang recruited?

Sometimes in person, or by having someone else call on them. If participants from another area are needed, the bosses of those areas are asked to recruit some people. However, they are not told beforehand what will be robbed and where. It is only hinted that there is an opportunity, and they are told to gather together at a certain place and time.

29. If a badman is recruited for a robbery, can he not go?

Yes, it is not compulsory at all. If anyone does not want to go, he just says so, and other badmen will be called upon.

30. Is the recruitment process fast or slow?

It is not slow. Everyone is recruited in a single day. Usually, the recruitment is done the day before the robbery, but the meeting must be on the same day as the event. If the recruiting takes place too far in advance, not everyone will show up.

31. How is committing a robbery in one's own area different from robbing in other areas?

Committing a robbery in a badman's own area differs from committing a robbery in another area in the following ways:

When committing a robbery in his own area, it is not hard to figure out the approach and getaway routes because he has come and gone frequently and already knows his way around. However, he needs to be mindful that people will recognize his face because he lives nearby and many people know him. Another point is that after the robbery, he needs to make sure the village chief does not catch him looking guilty.

Going to another area to commit a robbery is difficult because he does not know the way in and out or how to escape. He is afraid that the local badmen of that other area will save their own skins and that he will not be able to get away. On the other hand, he does not have to worry about the risk he faces when committing a robbery in his own area, because when he goes to other areas, people there will not usually recognize him. Even if they see his face, they will not know who he is or where he comes from. After the robbery, he only has to manage to get back home. Nobody will track him down.

32. Do badmen have any tricks in order to solve these difficulties?

Yes, they do. To prevent people from recognizing their faces, the robbers from other areas are usually positioned near the owners, who are unfamiliar with them, during the robbery. Those that the owners know, such as the informer, are positioned further away, for example as lookouts. Sometimes, an informer who lives near the owner does not participate in the robbery. He stays at home to welcome the inspection¹⁸ or to help the villagers make noises, pretending to chase after the badmen and sometimes he even shoots at them. However, he shoots high, not intending to hit them, and he leads the villagers in pursuit of the robbers in the wrong direction so that they are not caught.

Another trick is that if a badman is going to commit a robbery in his own area, he first approaches his village chief, pretending that he has some business to attend to in another *müang* for four or five days. Then, he leaves for a day, comes back for the robbery, and then leaves again for the rest of the specified time to avoid the suspicions of the village chief. Or, at the very least, he goes straight home to sleep after the robbery. When the village chief calls the villagers out for an inspection, he comes out to be inspected like all the other villagers so as not to arouse suspicion.

When going to commit a robbery in another area, a badman must bring a lot of companions—not fewer than three people—to join the badmen who are local to that other area. If there is an emergency, comrades from his own area will help each other solve any problems and return safely. No one participates in a robbery in another area by himself or with only one companion. One more point about going to commit a robbery in another area is that the badmen of that other area must lead the way up to the [targeted] house. Otherwise, they must first take the non-local badmen to scope out the target in the daytime, on a pretense, so that they know the way in and out.

33. Which do badmen like better, robbing homes or robbing cattle?

House robberies and cattle robberies have different advantages and disadvantages. Robbing houses is more convenient because it takes just a moment to get and divvy up the valuables. It is finished; nothing else needs to be done after that. However, there is a disadvantage as well: it is not usually known where the owners keep their money. Even after they have entered the house, robbers still need to search high and low for the money, but they usually cannot find as much as they expected.

¹⁸ For more on the village inspection carried out in immediate response to a robbery, see question 53.

As for cattle robberies, on the other hand, the value of the cattle can be estimated just by looking at them. However, the disadvantage is that after the robbery, they still have to be taken through the forest for sale. If they cannot be sold quickly, the badmen are usually caught. It is difficult to hide the stolen property.

These are the differences. However, badmen nowadays seem to prefer robbing water buffaloes to houses because the price of buffaloes is higher than before.¹⁹

34. Is raiding a boat [ตีเรือ] easy or difficult?

Nowadays, raiding a boat is rarely as successful as it was before because, first, a trading boat is usually towed by a steamboat in order to move faster. Another reason is that police patrols and provincial gendarmes patrol along the rivers.²⁰ If badmen want to raid boats, they first have to get into another boat to do it. If they meet police patrols or provincial gendarmes, they usually cannot escape, even if they have not robbed anything yet. If they do not have a torch light, the police will call for an inspection. If weapons are found, the badmen will be arrested. Therefore, they rarely opt to raid boats.

35. I have heard news of robberies of itinerant boats²¹ and trading boats. How can you say that they do not raid boats?

Robbing boats is different from raiding boats because the boats that are robbed are the ones that dock here and there alongside houses. For example, a Chinese boat going to buy rice docks here for a day and then docks somewhere else for another day or two. The informer therefore knows that the boat has money and will be in a certain place, so he can make arrangements to have it robbed. In regards to the boats that run back and forth for several days without staying anywhere, the informer cannot know which

¹⁹ The price of buffaloes had been increasing for several decades due to growing buffalo (and buffalo meat) exports, the expansion of agricultural lands, and a devastating case of Rinderpest. Around the time this “conversation” was published, the price of a buffalo was roughly 70-120 baht. See Prince Dilok Nabarath, *Siam's Rural Economy under King Chulalongkorn*, Walter E.J. Tips, trans. (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000), 147-150.

²⁰ We have translated *phon trawen* (พลตระเวน) as “police patrols” and *tamruat phuthòn* (ตำรวจนครชั้น) as “provincial gendarmes.”

²¹ It is not clear what *rìa khao* (เรือขา; lit. “entering boats”) were. We have translated the term as “itinerant boats” because our best guess is that they were trading boats that “came in” to dock and trade at various points along a route. We think it is unlikely that *khao* (ขา; “enter”) is an alternate spelling for *khao* (ข้าว; “rice”), as some colleagues have suggested, for two reasons: first, because “rice” is not spelled this way elsewhere in the document, including in the answer to this question. And, second, because the copy of this document in Prince Damrong’s personal library, which has several other corrections marked in pencil, does not modify this term.

of them has money and which does not. So, they are not robbed.

36. When the recruits have all gathered together for the robbery, what do they do next?

They make an appointment to meet at the place that was agreed on with the informer. If there are a lot of them, they will walk in groups of three or four to avoid the suspicion of other people, just as long as they meet all together at the meeting place on the afternoon before the night of the robbery.

37. Do badmen like to go to the meeting place for their appointment by boat or on foot?

It is the tradition of badmen to make their way to a robbery on foot. If they need to cross a river, they will get in a boat, but once across, they will continue on land because they have weapons with them. On a boat, it is difficult to hide or escape, unlike traveling on foot. Therefore, badmen do not like to go by boat.

38. According to your earlier answer, there are badmen everywhere. When going to commit a robbery in another place, are you not respectful of the badmen of that other area?

Such robberies are usually initiated by the local robbers of that other area. The badmen from outside that other area are only assistants. Therefore, some local badmen of that other area would have to participate in every robbery there. But sometimes, the badman boss of that other area does not participate in the robbery. However, he must give his permission for the robbery to take place. If the local badmen of that other area do not allow the robbery, others would not dare to do it.

39. Why would others not dare to commit a robbery if the local badmen do not allow it?

If the local badmen do not allow a robbery but one is committed anyway, the local badmen will be annoyed. They may call in the officials to make arrests. They are considerate of each other for this reason.

40. If that is so, when there is a robbery in an area, will the local *nakleng* there necessarily know who committed the robbery in every case?

They know in every case, but sometimes they may not know all the participants. However, they probably know that a particular person led the robbery gang.

41. How is the meeting and feast before the robbery conducted? Where is the meeting place?

The meeting place cannot be a specific place. It is up to the boss and the informer to agree on a place. Sometimes, the badmen meet at the informer's house. Sometimes, they meet at a *nakleng* friend's house in that area. Sometimes, they meet in the middle of a field, taking a particular tree as a landmark. Meeting points cannot be fixed because the meeting must take place about 40-50 *sen*²² or even farther away from the place that is going to be robbed, so as not to make the owner aware. In addition, they cannot meet in a village with many people; they worry that people would become suspicious. So, they have to meet in an appropriate place.

For the feast,²³ no particular food is necessary, aside from rice and liquor. The snacks²⁴ depend on what is available; they are not always the same. These treats are usually prepared by the informer. If there is not enough, the badmen will use whatever money they have on them to buy more. When they have all arrived, the feast begins. After the feast, they swear friendship.

42. Why do they swear friendship?

If *nakleng* have not yet sworn friendship, they do not yet trust each other. Sometimes, they swear friendship the very first time they meet. But sometimes they are from different areas and have just met each other for the first time before the robbery. Therefore, after the feast is over, if anyone sees any badman at the meeting who he has not yet sworn friendship with, they will swear oaths to each other right then.

43. How are the oaths sworn?

Liquor is poured into a coconut shell cup and then a pinch of salt is added. Then, everyone who is to swear friendship dips one finger into the liquor and swears the following oath:²⁵

²² One *sen* (เสน) is approximately 40 meters. Therefore, the meeting place is about 1.5 or 2 kilometers (or more) from the robbery target.

²³ This “feast” is, in Thai, *kanliangdu* (การถวายดุ). The verb *liang* means to treat another with food, or to feast them. The English term “feast” suggests that the food is a kind of offering to guests on a special occasion, and that there is a lot of it. In Thai, *liang* also implies that the food is an offering and that the occasion is special, but it does not necessarily imply that there is a large quantity (but evidently there should be enough, or other badmen will have to go out and supplement it). The commensal aspect of the meal is crucial.

²⁴ “Snacks” are *kap klaem* (กับข้าว); that is, food usually eaten along with alcohol.

²⁵ Many thanks to Winai Pongsripihan, especially, and also to Chairat Polmuk and Danai Ployplai for their help translating this oath. One commented that the oath seemed confused, as if the speaker could not remember the particulars. As children playing at being bandits, the characters Khun Chang and Khun Phaen make a similar oath to each other in the epic poem, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, 14.

I, whose name is *Ai* that, living in that village, in that district and *müang*, forge a bond of friendship with *Ai* this of this village, this *müang*.²⁶ From now on, if I do not remain faithful to *Ai* this, may the sword of a royal guard of the seven or eight divisions not miss my neck, the neck of the one whose name is *Ai* that, comrade of *Ai* this.²⁷ From now on, whenever I learn of anything, if he is near I will tell him; if he is far, my state of mind will be dire.²⁸ If I discover anything tricky, but I do not inform my friend *Ai* this, may I, the one named *Ai* that, be condemned to not meet any of the future Buddhas. May I burn in Hell like the monk Thewathat for a hundred thousand eras, without end.²⁹

As each of them finishes this oath, he takes the finger he dipped in the liquor and smears the liquor somewhere on the throat or arm of the sworn friend indicating the part that will be cut off if they are unfaithful to one another. Then, they each drink from the oath-taking liquor. After they take this oath, the senior badman among them slowly pours the oath-taking liquor as he chants an *imina* incantation.³⁰ Then, he blesses the oath-takers, saying that if they are faithful to each other, may they become more prosperous, by a hundred *chang* or a thousand *chang* per year.³¹ If they are unfaithful to each other, may they lose everything, die violent deaths, and be the victims of other terrible things. The ceremony finishes there. From the time of the feast and the oaths until the robbery is over, none of the badmen at the meeting can isolate himself from the

²⁶ The term *ai* (ອາຍ) was used as a prefix title for male criminals, slaves, and other low-status commoners.

²⁷ The translation of this line in particular remains uncertain. We follow Winai's assumption that the seven or eight divisions refer to sections of the royal guard. It is also possible that the phrase (translated literally as "the royal guard and the seven or eight sections") may be a muddled allusion to the guardians, or gods, of the eight directions, as Baker and Pasuk have interpreted certain passages in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, 14, 41-42.

²⁸ We interpret this line to indicate that *Ai* that will be frustrated if he needs to faithfully inform *Ai* this of some matter, but he cannot because of the distance between them.

²⁹ The monk Thewathat (ເຖເວທັດ), often transcribed *Devadatta* from the Pali, is remembered for turning against Gautama Buddha, trying to kill him in various ways, and causing a schism. In Thailand, the most popular account of his death is that the Earth opens up to swallow him whole and sends him straight down to the deepest Hell, which is clearly the kind of death that the robbers are referring to here.

³⁰ For "pour" here, although the text has *truat nam* (ຕរាងນໍາ), the standardized modern spelling is now *kruat nam* (ກຮາດນໍາ; "pour the water"). Water is poured ceremonially in order to dedicate merit to divinities, the dead, living relatives, friends, or even enemies. An *imina* incantation is used to bless, or pass on merit and good wishes to people, spirits, or animals.

³¹ One *chang* (ໜັງ) is a unit of weight/currency equal to 80 baht (or 600 grams). A hundred *chang*, or 8000 baht, was used at the time to indicate something of generally high value (such as a brideprice), and a thousand *chang* would be even more valuable than that!

group. If any of them separates from the group and arouses suspicion, the badmen can shoot him dead.

44. Is the meeting and feast for house robberies similar to the meeting and feast for cattle robberies?

Yes, the meetings and feasts are similar, but the characteristics of these kinds of robberies are different.

45. Are there any houses that badmen avoid robbing?

Apart from the places they know they cannot rob because the owner or neighbors have more forces to fight with than the badmen do, places they avoid are: first, the houses of the people who have done favors for the boss by, for example, raising him or lending him money; second, the houses of *nakleng* relatives that a *nakleng* comrade requests no harm be done to; and third, temples. However, even temples are not certain, because when the badman gang was going to commit the robbery in Bang Sò this time,³² there were some badmen urging the robbery of a particular temple, saying that the monks there were entrusted with a lot of money and things. However, most of the badmen were afraid of committing a sin and were unwilling to rob a temple, so they did not do it. If there had been no opposition, they would have robbed the temple on that occasion.

46. What are the methods of robbing a house? Please explain the methods of robbing a house: when the feast is finished, what do badmen do next?

After the feast, as soon as it is dusk, they walk directly from the feasting place to behind the house they are going to rob. When they get about ten *sen* away, they stop again.³³

47. Why do they stop again?

They need to stop again to prepare for the robbery.

48. How do they prepare?

They assign duties among the badmen, prepare themselves, conduct a prayer ceremony for the divinities,³⁴ and rest up until the time.

49. How are the duties assigned?

After the boss tells everyone whose house to rob, he assigns a group to enter the house and another group to be lookouts.

³² The explanation at the beginning of the document and question 23 also mention this robbery.

³³ Ten *sen* is about 400 meters.

³⁴ Conducting a prayer ceremony for the divinities: *tham phithi buang suang* (ทำพิธีบวงสรวง).

50. What supplies are used by the group entering the house?

They must have torches and guns, although just one or two guns are enough. Other than that, there are knives and axes. Axes are used to split open chests and hack down doors.

51. I have heard people say that badman bosses and spiritual leaders rarely enter houses themselves.³⁵ They usually use their impetuous subordinates to do that. Is this true?

It is not true that the boss does not enter the house. In fact, going into the house is an important matter. Those going in must be resourceful and understand robbery because whether the valuables can be gotten or not all depends on the robbers entering the house. If they are stupid and inexperienced, they rarely succeed. Therefore, important people must enter the house. But care must be taken not to use anyone that the house owners know for this.

52. Do the robbers who enter houses nowadays still paint their faces as in the past?³⁶
Nowadays, they do not paint their faces as before.

53. Why do they not paint their faces as before?

Badmen do not paint their faces anymore for two reasons. The first reason is that nowadays, when there is a robbery in any sub-district, the village chief usually calls the villagers out for an inspection. If the badmen painted their faces, they would not be able to wash their faces in time for the inspection. Another reason is that if badmen paint their faces, the owner and the officials who are investigating would suspect that they are locals because then they would need to paint their faces to prevent anyone from recognizing them. If the badmen use people from other areas to go into the house and show their faces, the owners will not know who they are or where they are from. Both the house owners and the officials will suspect that they are badmen from other areas, and they will not search for people in the local area. For these reasons, badmen do not paint their faces as before.

54. What are the duties of the lookouts?

The lookouts must surround the house with guns and fire them continuously to keep the neighbors from coming to help. If they have brought along too few guns, sometimes they use big firecrackers instead

³⁵ Literally “teacher,” the *khru* was the group’s “spiritual leader.” He was probably an elder and might also have been the boss.

³⁶ That is, in order to conceal their identities.

to make an intimidating noise so people are afraid to come help.

55. How do the badmen prepare themselves?

The badmen in a robbery gang all wear the same headwraps as a common emblem. Or, they all wear the same jacket. This is so that in the midst of a chaotic robbery, they can recognize whether someone is from their group or not. In addition, they have phrases that they use with one another. They call each other “*Ai* Tiger.” When entering a house, they shout, “*Ai* Tigers, let’s go!” and “*Ai* Tigers, enter!” After they have gotten the goods and are about to make their getaway, they say, “*Ai* Tigers, withdraw!” If they encounter resistance, badmen are injured, and the robbery will not succeed, they call out, “*Ai* Tigers, retreat!” to signal that they have to escape from the house.³⁷

56. How is the prayer ceremony for the divinities conducted?

At the stopping place, the weapons are stacked together in a cone-shape and amulets are hung from the top. The badmen sit around this in a circle. The spiritual leader among the badmen sprinkles alcohol on the weapons and on the badmen, and utters words of prayer to the divinities [ເຫວັດາ], the gist of which is to assure the guardian spirits of the land [ພະຍົມືຈາກີ], the gods [ເທິພຍດາ], the royal family [ເຈົາຝ້າ], and the king [ເຈົາແນດດິນ] that their conspiratorial gathering has no intention of committing treason against the kingdom. They are committing this act because of their extreme poverty. He asks that they may get valuables from those houses to support themselves, and that they may achieve their wishes. This is the gist of the prayer. However, if there is no spiritual expert present, the prayer ceremony is not done.

57. At the stopping place, what do they do while they wait for the right time?

Because walking from the feasting place is tiring, they have to rest and catch their breath before they can commit the robbery. Also, they need to wait until late at night, around midnight, to start the robbery.

58. Why is the robbery committed at midnight?

The robbery time cannot be fixed. The important thing is that they have to wait until the owners and neighbors are sound asleep. Another thing is that they have to allow time [after the robbery] for the local badmen of that area to return to their houses while it is still night time, not around dawn

³⁷ The robbers’ exclamations are as follows: “*Ai* tigers, let’s go!” is *ai süa ao wā* (ອ້າຍເສື້ອເຄາວ); “*Ai* Tigers, enter!” is *ai süa khün* (ອ້າຍເສື້ອຂູນ); “*Ai* Tigers, withdraw!” is *ai süa tōi* (ອ້າຍເສື້ອຄອຍ); and “*Ai* Tigers, retreat!” is *ai süa la* (ອ້າຍເສື້ອລາ).

when people may see them. For these reasons, badmen usually commit robberies at midnight, when the owners are usually asleep already and there is enough time for the badmen to return to their houses before dawn.

59. Do badmen prefer to commit robberies during a moonlit or moonless night?

They prefer to rob on nights when the moonlight is bright enough to see each other. If it is too dark, they are liable to accidentally hurt each other.

60. Once they have waited until the time, what do they do next?

They walk straight up to the house. The lookouts surround the house and fire their guns. The group entering the house lights their torches, breaks open the door, enters, and searches for the owner.

61. Why do badmen look for the owner first?

House robbers have to capture the owner first because they do not know where he keeps his money. They have to capture the owner, beat him up, and threaten him until he tells them where he keeps his valuables so that they can get them quickly and easily. If the owner gets away, the badmen need to search for the valuables themselves, and they rarely get much.

62. If the robbers only need the owner in order to interrogate him about the valuables, why do they kill him in some cases?

Robbers never mean to kill the owner, or to kill anyone. They just want to get the valuables. The house owner dies only when he fights back against the badmen. Or, if the owner injures a badman, the badmen will be furious and kill the owner in anger. In addition, if a badman notices that the owner recognizes him, he will usually kill him. But, it is never the badmen's intention to go and kill the owner.

63. If the owner manages to escape while the badmen are already in the house, why do they not help each other to search for every last valuable?

Robbing a house has to be done as quickly as possible. They cannot take their time searching. Because the noise of the badmen's guns can be heard from a distance, they worry that the provincial gendarmerie, police patrols, or neighbors that live far away will gather together and come help. So, they need to finish the operation quickly. They cannot let people from far away arrive to help.

64. If a badman is injured or killed during the robbery, what do his badman comrades do?

If a badman is injured but still alive, they help him up and carry him

with them; they do not leave him. If he is dead, they cut off his head and dump it far away, so as not to let the owner's party recognize his face.

65. Once the robbery is over and they have gotten the valuables, what is done after that?

The badmen go to the middle of a field or the middle of a forest beyond the house. When they reach an isolated place, they huddle together to divvy up the valuables. After that, they return separately to their houses.

66. How do they divide up the valuables?

They put all the valuables that they managed to get in the center. First, they allocate some for the cost of the food, liquor, and cartridges that were used that day. Then they divvy up the rest, for each person equally.

67. Do they ever get a lot of valuables from robbing a house?

They do not usually get a lot because the informer can rarely find out just how much there is and where it is kept. Some places have lots of money, but the owner has buried it, hidden here and there. If they cannot capture the house owner, they will not get all the valuables.

68. If the informer asserted that there were a lot of valuables, but the badmen do not get as much as he said, will they do anything to the informer?

They do not do anything. They just learn that this person is unreliable. If, later, he comes and tells them something, they will not really believe him.

69. After the robbery, where do the badmen escape to?

After the robbery, the local badmen of that area who told the village chief that they were going somewhere far away rush out of the area during the night. If any of them did not take leave of the village chief, they hurry back to their houses to sleep. When the chief comes to inspect, the badmen find witnesses to say that they were asleep in their houses that night.

70. For house robberies, are spikes laid out to impede people from following?³⁸

It is not necessary to use spikes for house robberies. Spikes are only used in cattle robberies.

³⁸ “Spikes” (*khwak*; ឃុំ) are made from sharpened bamboo. They are described in detail in question 81.

71. Why are spikes not used in house robberies?

It is difficult to use spikes because they need to be made beforehand. If anyone sees badmen carrying spikes along with them, it is a sure sign that they are badmen. They cannot make excuses like they can for having weapons. So, spikes are used only when necessary. It is not necessary to use them when robbing a house because after robbing, the badmen go back to the fields beyond the house. Each of them then departs separately without leaving any tracks to follow. But with robbing and driving off cattle, they leave tracks for the owner to follow. So, they need spikes to impede the owner from following.

72. What are the methods of robbing cattle?

There are two types of cattle robbery. Robbing cattle from a pen must be done at nighttime, but robbing and driving off a herd of cattle that was let loose in a field is done during the daytime.

73. Why must robberies be committed one way at night and another way during the daytime?

Pens for cattle are usually right next to the house. If the robbery is committed in the daytime, the badmen will be seen and they will not be able to succeed. So they need to rob at night, just like robbing houses. But if cattle have been let out to graze at the edge of the forest, they can be robbed in the daytime because the badmen can approach through the forest and the owner will not see them. They emerge from the forest and immediately herd the cattle back into it.

74. How do badmen prepare to rob buffaloes from a pen at night?

They prepare just like they do for robbing a house. The only difference is that when the badmen enter the buffalo pen, they fire their guns at the shelter where the watchman is lying to frighten him into running away. Then, they open the pen and herd the buffaloes away.

75. Once the buffaloes have been robbed, what is done after that?

Once the buffaloes have been herded to a remote area, the badmen gather to divvy up the buffaloes they got.

76. What is the method of dividing up the robbed buffaloes?

There are two ways. In the past, they were usually divided up and sold separately. The badmen then put together whatever money each of them got from the sales and, after deducting expenses, the profits were distributed, like how the valuables robbed from houses are divvied up.

But now a different method is used. When they have herded the buffaloes to a gathering point, they appraise each buffalo. Added together, this is the value that was robbed on that occasion, from which they subtract expenses. The amount leftover is divided up and allocated to each person. After this amount is calculated, the buffaloes are sold to the badmen in the group according to the values already estimated. It is up to each person how many buffaloes he will buy. If he buys and then sells them for a higher price than appraised, then he will make a profit. If the buyer sells them and gets arrested, he will lose out. The buyer still needs to pay according to the prices estimated.³⁹

77. Are spikes used when buffaloes are robbed at night?

No, that is not necessary. They are only used for robbing a herd in the daytime.

78. Why are spikes unnecessary when robbing buffaloes at night?

Once the badmen have herded the buffaloes from the pen to the allocation place, they divide them up and drive them off separately in the middle of the night. There are no tracks for the owner to easily follow. But when robbing and herding off buffaloes in the daytime, the owners usually follow in quick pursuit. The badmen need to drive the buffaloes far away before they are able to divide them up. Driving a whole herd of buffaloes usually leaves traces for the owner's party, in pursuit, to easily notice. So, they need to use spikes and find ways to cover up the buffalo tracks completely.

79. How is a buffalo herd robbed in the daytime?

Badmen need to meet up and feast each other just like robbing at night, but they do it in the morning. After that, they walk together [to a place near the target] and rest up until two pm. Then, they walk through the forest to the place where the buffaloes are grazing. First, they have the non-local badmen emerge, shooting and chasing the herders until they have all fled. Then, they drive the buffaloes into the forest. When the buffaloes are all in the forest, the badmen help each other herd them off altogether.

The method of covering up any traces is this. If the badmen know of

³⁹ In other words, a badman is assigned a share of the value of the total haul of buffaloes. If he decides to "buy" buffaloes worth more than his share, he does not necessarily have to pay the difference with money upfront. But he must eventually pay for the additional value of the buffaloes that he bought according to the prices estimated just after the robbery, regardless of whether he sells his animals for a higher or lower price, and even if he gets arrested.

a path used for herding buffaloes and they can use it, they will drive the herd along it as far as possible before turning onto another route. Because buffalo herds are always using such paths, if another herd tramples over the tracks of their buffaloes, the tracks will be obscured and the owners will not be able to identify them.

80. Why are cattle herds robbed in the afternoon?

If they are robbed in the morning, the buffaloes will be exposed to the blazing sun. Gasping for breath and exhausted, they cannot be driven far. So they must be robbed in the afternoon. If the buffaloes are driven off when the sun is less strong, they can go all night and they will not be panting for breath.

81. How are the spikes used?

There are three kinds of spikes used: water chestnut spikes, people spikes, and horse spikes.⁴⁰ All three are made of *mai ruak* bamboo.⁴¹

Water chestnut spikes are spikes tied together to make four sharp points. However they are dropped, a point sticks up; the spikes do not have to be planted into the soil. They are ready for use immediately. But they are difficult to make and carry along, so badmen do not usually use them.

There are three sizes of people spikes. The small size is stuck into the ground to stab feet. The medium size is stuck into the ground to stab shins. The long size is stuck in the ground to stab thighs. But the small size is the best. They are called *Khun Dan* spikes.⁴² Thin *mai ruak* bamboo strips are sharpened. The tips are tapered into points, notched into barbs, and singed until they become brittle. They are stuck in the ground so the points are level with the tips of the grass. As soon as they are stepped on, they pierce the foot and the points break off inside. Badmen use these a lot. They do not usually use the medium or large size.

Horse-spikes are made of the whole stalk of *mai ruak* bamboo. One end is split into two, and both tips are sharpened. A piece of wood is forced into the split to spread open the two tips. [The other end] is stuck into the

⁴⁰ “Water chestnut spikes” are *khwak kracap* (ขวากกระเจ็บ). Water chestnut shells, especially when dried and open, resemble caltrops, weapons of obstruction used in the West that share the same basic form as the bandits’ water chestnut spikes. Western observers have also noticed the similarity between the nut and the weapon: water chestnuts are sometimes called water caltrops in English. “People spikes” are *khwak khon* (ขวากคน) and “horse spikes” are *khwak ma* (ขวากมา).

⁴¹ *Mai ruak* (ไม้ราก) is a kind of straight, sturdy bamboo without thorns. It is commonly used in construction and to make tools.

⁴² *Khun Dan* spikes, *khwak khun dan* (ขวากขุนด่าน), are probably named after a famous checkpoint officer from Nakhon Nayok who helped to fend off an invasion from Cambodia during King Naresuan’s reign.

ground; it is used to pierce the breasts of horses or buffaloes ridden in chase. But it needs to be planted in tall grass.

82. The buffalo herds are driven across broad fields. How can badmen know where the owners will walk so they can plant the spikes in the right places?

They usually drive the herd of buffaloes along paths through the forest. The owners have to walk following the tracks of the cattle; they cannot go other ways. So, this is one place to trap them with planted spikes. Also, once the badmen have driven the buffaloes for a while already, they might come upon a pond or fruit trees. The path down to the pond or up to the fruit trees is also a place to stick the spikes because the owners in pursuit will probably be exhausted. When they arrive at the pond, they are likely to be thirsty. Or when they see fruit ready to eat, they are likely to want to eat it. So, they are sometimes spiked in these places.

83. Why do the badmen need to use spikes?

The owners follow in pursuit more quickly than the badmen can drive the buffaloes away in escape. The energy of the buffaloes that they are herding off only lasts for a while; not so long, really. After just one night and half a day, they are exhausted.

84. In what way is the herd of buffaloes that you have robbed and driven off divided?

They are divided up the same way as buffaloes robbed from pens at night. But they have to be driven until very late at night or daybreak. When the badmen see that they are past the point where the owners can catch up, then they do the dividing up.

85. Which is more worthwhile for badmen: robbing a house or robbing cattle?

In terms of monetary value, robbing cattle is more worthwhile. But robbing cattle is more troublesome than robbing a house in that after the robbery, the badmen have to rush to sell the cattle in order to quickly get them off their hands, and they have to choose the route to drive the cattle and sell them so as not to get caught along the way.

86. Are the robbed cattle sold in the same district, or do badmen have to take them to sell in a different district?

Selling them in the same district or *müang* is unheard of. They have to be brought and sold in another *müang*. For example, the buffaloes robbed in Khwaeng Müang Pathum Thani had to be taken for sale in Krung Kao district or in Suphan[buri] district in [Monthon] Nakhòn Chaisi. If the

buffaloes are from Krung Kao or Suphan, Nakhòn Chaisi, they have to be brought for sale in, say, Müang Pathum Thani or Nonthaburi.

87. You have said that badmen have to sell the robbed cattle quickly; how is that done?

Before badmen rob cattle, they first have to figure out for sure who is going to buy them. After they are sure that a certain person will buy, they commit the robbery. If they cannot figure out where to sell the cattle, they will not commit the robbery.

88. What kind of person buys the cattle?

The *nakleng* bosses are the people who buy the cattle. When every badman becomes an old *nakleng* with properties and houses—some have become sub-district chiefs, some have become village chiefs, some became local officials in the old system⁴³—he may buy the cattle. But there are two types of people who buy cattle from the badmen: those who buy all of them, and those who are not very daring and buy just some of them selectively.

89. What kind of people buy indiscriminately, and what kind buy selectively?

Those who have a lot of resources and are well-known, with a lot of friends in different *müang*, usually buy the whole lot because they have enough capital for the purchase and they have enough manpower to get the cattle to other districts or *müang* quickly. They buy them at night and send the buffaloes away by dawn, before anyone realizes that they have bought anything. But the *nakleng* who have little means of transport rarely dare to buy them all like that, so they have to be selective.

90. How are the buffaloes selected?

Buffaloes are selected from among buffaloes robbed in large numbers or buffaloes stolen on the sly, which are called “hot” buffaloes and “cool” buffaloes.⁴⁴ If they are hot buffaloes, those that were robbed, they have to be rushed away quickly. Their buyers rarely offer high prices. Those without means of transport will not dare to buy them at all. If they are cool buffaloes, ones that were stolen, they can be kept for several days. There is no need to scramble to get them quickly out of town. They can be sold easily and at higher prices.

⁴³ This refers to the administrative system before its reorganization by the Ministry of the Interior, under Prince Damrong, beginning in the 1890s.

⁴⁴ For the distinction between “robbed” (ปล้น) and “stolen” (ลัก), see the note for question 3.

91. When badmen sell buffaloes, do they only have to say whether they are hot buffaloes or cool buffaloes?

They have to explain to the buyers precisely from which village, which way,⁴⁵ and which *miüang* the buffaloes have come, whose buffaloes they are, and whether the owner is a person with means of transport or just a commoner [ราชภราชน์]. All this information is important; the buyers need it so that they know which direction to send the buffaloes away and what else they need to be aware of. The origin of the buffaloes has to be communicated from person to person among the buyers of the badmen's cattle until they have reached the point where they think they are too far to have been followed. Then they bring the buffaloes out for use, and trade them as if they were local buffaloes.

92. Why are robbed cattle sold at a cheaper price and stolen cattle sold at a higher price?

For robbed cattle, because there was a robbery clash, officials will be in pursuit. If the buffaloes were furtively stolen, the officials do not usually follow up. So, there is no reason for the buyer to be as anxious as he would be with robbed cattle. Another reason is that a large number of cattle are usually robbed at once, but only one or two cattle are stolen. Even the size of the owner's pursuit party differs.

93. Therefore, the people who buy the cattle off the badmen are normally only middle-men, seeking profit in the trading process, right?

That is right. No one buys cattle from bandits to keep for their own use. They only buy them and turn around and sell them somewhere else for a higher price in order to make a profit. Therefore, the farther the badmen can take the robbed or stolen cattle for sale, the higher the price. The closer they are sold, the lower the price.

94. If there is no one willing to buy the bandits' robbed cattle, is there any way to sell them?

If there are no *nakleng* waiting to buy the bandits' cattle, the bandits probably will not rob or steal the cattle in the first place. Because cattle are large animals, once they have been robbed or stolen, it is impossible to hide them. If they bring them around from place to place trying to sell them, they may arouse suspicion and get arrested. Although these days there are *nakleng* willing to buy the cattle, it is still extremely difficult for

⁴⁵ In the print copy of this "conversation" in Prince Damrong's personal library, *bang* (ບ່ານ) or "area," has been corrected to *thang* (ທ່ານ), which we have translated as "way."

a badman who has robbed or stolen cattle to get them to the selling point, as he needs to walk through the forest for one or two days to reach it.

95. As you have said that one must be careful not to get arrested en route, how is that done?

When driving away cattle that have been robbed from people, badmen cannot just walk through open rice fields. They are afraid that people will see them. If there is an overgrown forested area that they can walk through, they will walk through it. If they go through fields, they have to walk at night and take care to avoid the provincial gendarmerie and police patrol stations. They also need to steer clear of areas with village chiefs who take their official duties seriously.⁴⁶

96. Why do they have to avoid walking through areas with village chiefs who take their administrative duties seriously?

If they run into a strong village chief, he will hit the *krò* to call his villagers to help him chase them for a while, and the badmen will have to leave the cattle behind.⁴⁷ For example, when the badmen robbed buffaloes from Müang Pathum Thani in July, they were going to take the buffaloes to sell in Müang Suphanburi. They passed through the area of the village chief of Ket [บ้านเกต], who hit a *krò* to call his villagers, who chased them for a while. The badmen had to abandon all the cattle.

97. How do badmen know which village chiefs are strong and which are not?

For this, the badmen are always trying to find out which sub-district chiefs and village chiefs are inclined to take their administrative duties seriously, which are weak, and which are *nakleng*. As badmen are intimidated by strong village chiefs, they are satisfied with village chiefs who are *nakleng* because village heads have the power to dominate their villagers. If a village chief cooperates with the badmen, no one can catch badmen who are visiting or staying with him.

98. Which are badmen more afraid of: patrol police and provincial gendarmes or village chiefs who take their administrative duties seriously?

The badmen are more afraid of strong village chiefs because there are village chiefs everywhere and they know many people. If they are strong, they can call many villagers out to help, constituting a large force. As for the police patrols and provincial gendarmes, badmen are really afraid of

⁴⁶ “take their official duties seriously” is *khaengraeng nai ratchakan* (แข้งแรงในราชกາจ).

⁴⁷ A *krò* (ເກຮົວ) is a section of bamboo that is struck to signal others.

them only on rivers. But on land, patrol police and provincial gendarmes normally just stay at their stations. Badmen know the locations of these stations and do not commit any crimes near them. They also do not herd robbed cattle nearby the stations. Sometimes, when the stations have been established in remote places for a long time, the provincial gendarmes and patrol police stationed there go out and about until they get to know and make friends with the *nakleng*. On land, the badmen are only afraid of the police patrols and provincial gendarmes when they chase a big herd of cattle by. If the police patrols or provincial gendarmes follow in pursuit without losing them, they generally cannot get [the cattle] through. After the robbery at Bang Sò, for example, the provincial gendarmerie of Müang Suphan pursued the badmen to the Lan The fields [ทุ่งลานท์]. The badmen had to abandon the buffaloes; they could not get them away.

99. Provincial gendarmes are always going out inspecting at night. How can you say that they only stay at the station?

It is true that the provincial gendarmes go out inspecting at night, but they usually go straight to the village chief's house to ask if anything is going on. If badmen are hiding in that village, they will have enough time to escape as soon as they become aware.

100. When officials are in pursuit, do the badmen ever fight against them?

We have never heard of badmen even thinking of fighting. They only think of escaping. Only a ferocious badman such as Ai Rak [อายรัก] would fight. He fought when he was cornered, as the officials were about to catch him.

101. I have heard that badmen thought of robbing the police station at Lan The once. Is that true?

We have heard Ai Rak and Ai Yuang [อายย่าง] saying that if they robbed the gendarmerie station at Lan The, they could get the provincial gendarmerie's guns because sometimes there were only two or three policemen stationed there. But this was all talk; it does not appear that they ever actually considered committing the robbery. But one time that they did think seriously was when Müang Pathum Thani arrested Ai Rüa [อายเรือ] and imprisoned him in the Müang Pathum jail. The badmen had a meeting and planned to break Ai Rüa out. But they did not pull it off in time. Krung Kao arrested Ai Yuang, the boss who initiated the plan, so it was canceled.

102. If badmen learn that officials are looking into arresting them, how do they plan their getaway?

If they learn that there are officials on their tracks, perhaps because some of their friends have been arrested already, badmen will escape to another *müang* to stay. If they have no firm roots, they might simply migrate to another *müang*. For those who have fields and a house—a stable residence—they escape to another *müang* for a while. They watch and wait. When they see that the investigation is easing up, they come back to visit their homes from time to time. At first they come only at night; later they start to come during the day time. They come and go until they see that the investigation has gone completely quiet. Then they will come back home to live as before. It is usually like this.

But after their escape, some people become ferocious badmen like Ai Rak. In the beginning he was just a buffalo thief. But when Village Chief Pan caught his [stolen] buffaloes, Ai Rak became annoyed and shot Village Chief Pan [ผู้ใหญ่บ้าน] dead. Ai Rak then escaped to live in a remote area, and went around behaving himself like a ferocious badman, killing and slashing people and committing robberies until, recently, he was shot to death by officials.

103. If their friends are arrested and taken to court, in what ways do badmen look after, support, and help them?

We have heard of badmen in the same robbery gang who have agreed to be witnesses for their arrested friends, and helped them get away with it. Other than this, it appears that they do not help each other in any way. If anyone is arrested, it is their relatives' business.

104. Are the badmen who steal only one or two buffaloes a year in the same category as badmen who commit full-blown robberies, or are they in another group?

There are so many badmen who steal buffaloes that they are almost impossible to count because stealing buffaloes is like the initiation for every *nakleng*. Since they were young men, they have gone around consuming liquor and opium, or gambling until they have become dissolute. They need money so they often turn to surreptitiously stealing buffaloes first. Then, those that are skilled in stealing buffaloes become willing to commit more serious crimes. So they commit robberies. Therefore, all robbers are bound to be skilled at stealing buffaloes. But once they have committed a robbery, they prefer robbing over stealing because they can get more.

But they still usually steal every now and then in their free time or when they happen upon an opportunity that is not too difficult. For example,

when one is on his way back from an excursion and he sees cows left alone out of the caretaker's sight, he catches one and rides it back. But they do not make an effort to steal buffaloes. The people who continually steal buffaloes like it is their business are usually those who have just become *nakleng* or those who have been earning their living by stealing buffaloes for a long time but are not content to move up to robbery. So they keep stealing cattle like that.

105. What is the method for stealing cattle?

There are two ways of stealing cattle on the sly: stealing cattle that children take to the fields to graze in the daytime is one way, and breaking open the pen where the cattle are confined at night is the other.

Aside from stealing cattle that have wandered out of their owners' sight, there are two methods for stealing cattle that children have brought to the fields for grazing. These include driving [the badman's] own buffaloes into the buffalo herd that the children are looking after with the aim of having one or two of the children's buffaloes join [the badman's] own herd. If the children realize in time, then he lets them go.⁴⁸ If they do not realize in time, he drives them away for sale. This is the easy method. The other way is to find someone to act as an accomplice to trick the children looking after the buffaloes into going bathing or going to play somewhere out of sight. This way, the badman steals two or three buffaloes, whatever he can.

The method of stealing by cutting open the pen requires three or four comrades to go together at night. They lie in wait until they see the person guarding the buffaloes fall asleep. Then, they stealthily cut open the pen and steal whatever buffaloes they can. If the owner wakes up or finds out in time, they need to flee.

Stealing buffaloes requires perseverance in the face of difficulties in order to succeed. If the badmen get any, it is not usually a lot. So, once badmen have succeeded in committing a robbery, they rarely like to steal buffaloes anymore.

106. How do they sell the stolen buffaloes?

Once they have stolen the buffaloes and taken them out of the owner's area, they do not have to hurry too much. Sometimes, they sell them to *nakleng* in that other area. Sometimes they sell them to *nakleng* who are buyers of cattle that badmen rob.

⁴⁸ In other words, the targeted buffaloes are left behind and the attempted theft is abandoned.

107. What do those who buy stolen buffaloes do after buying them?

They buy them and then turn around and sell them. But they do not rush and usually do not send them far away like robbed cattle because there is a way for them to profit by collecting a ransom.

108. How is the cattle-ransoming method done?⁴⁹

The cattle-ransoming method is done as follows. If anyone's buffalo goes missing and the owner does not know where it has gone, he goes to a *nakleng* of that area and hires him to track it down. If the owner is a *nakleng*, he will go out and search for it himself. [The *nakleng*] asks around among other *nakleng* until he finds out that the buffalo has fallen into the hands of a particular buyer. So, he goes straight to that buyer and tells him that at that moment a particular person's buffalo has gone missing in this direction and the owner would like to redeem it. Does the buyer know where the buffalo is and whether it can be redeemed? The buyer, then, says evasively that he has heard that the buffalo has come this way, and he will ask around about it. How big of a redemption fee will the owner pay? When they agree on price, the *nakleng* returns to the owner and says that he has found out that the buffalo has gone to a particular sub-district. But he lies to the owner by not saying the real sub-district because he is afraid that the owner will go and redeem it himself and the *nakleng* will not get any profit. When the owner asks how much the redemption fee is, the *nakleng* tacks on about 20 or 30 baht for his own profit.⁵⁰

When the owner agrees to redeem the buffalo, if the *nakleng* does not trust the owner, he takes the money to redeem it himself. If he trusts the owner not to bring a case against him, he takes the owner with him to the buyer. The buyer still maintains his act, complaining that he has to plead with someone else first, and asks to put off [the redemption] for a day or half a day. But he takes the money, and whispers an order to his subordinate to take the buffalo and tie it up in a particular place in the forest, and he leaves as if to go beg [for the buffalo's return]. Then he comes back and instructs [the *nakleng* redeemer] to go in a particular direction to get the buffalo. The redeemer goes and finds the buffalo tied in the middle of a forest, so he unties it and leads it back.

When he gets near the owner's house, he has to release the buffalo again. Or, sometimes the *nakleng* leads the buffalo to a sub-district chief,

⁴⁹ Johnston discusses the buffalo ransom and withdrawal (see question 111) methods at some length, calling them "buffalo-napping" because of their similarity to kidnappings. Johnston, "Bandit, *Nakleng*, and Peasant," 92.

⁵⁰ A buffalo was worth around 70-120 baht at the time. Dilok, *Siam's Rural Economy*, 147.

reporting to him that he found a lost buffalo and he does not know whose it is. He asks the sub-district chief to take it to the district [town] to make an announcement. The owner then brings the [buffalo] description certificate to the district as proof, and asks to reclaim it.⁵¹ But sometimes after the buffalo has been brought back and let loose beyond the [owner's] house, the owner pretends to find it. He reports to the sub-district chief that he found the missing buffalo wandering loose so he caught it and brought it back. This is the buffalo ransom method.

109. The buffalo ransom method seems to be very roundabout and tricky. I still do not clearly understand why it has to be done like that. For instance, when the owner gets the buffalo back, why does he have to let it loose again and make the announcement?

Because when the buffalo goes missing, the owner files an official missing-property report. If the scheme cannot be pulled off as described, he will be afraid that he will be suspected of working in cooperation [with the badmen] in the cattle-ransoming.

110. When the buyer is actually a friend of the *nakleng* redeemer, why do they not speak to each other candidly? Why does he have to lie, saying that the buffalo is with someone else, and why does he have to tie it up and have [the redeemer] go find it in the middle of the forest?

The buyer has to lie to the redeemer because otherwise he is afraid that he will not be able to negotiate as high a ransom as he wants. Moreover, sometimes the redeemer is a *nakleng* that the buyer is not very familiar with. So he has to set up the gambit like that. The reason for tying the buffalo in the middle of the forest is to prevent any witnesses from seeing that either the buyer or the *nakleng* redeemer has anything to do with transferring the buffalo to one another, and also to keep anyone from noticing that the buffalo was in the possession of the buyer.

111. How is the buffalo withdrawal method done?

It is similar to the ransoming method. The difference is only that the *nakleng* who goes to get the buffalo steals another person's buffalo or buys a stolen buffalo and exchanges it for the missing buffalo on behalf of the owner. By doing this, the *nakleng* withdrawer gets more profit and

⁵¹ The “description certificate,” or *tua phim rup phan* (ตัวพิมพ์รูปพรรณ), was issued to buffalo owners and technically required for all sales and transfers. We translate it here as “description certificate.” The system, however, was rather ineffective and often abused. See Matt Reeder, “Buffalo Crimes and Modernization in King Chulalongkorn’s Siam,” *Explorations: A Graduate Student Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10 (spring 2010): 45-46.

the person who exchanges the buffalo usually gets a better buffalo than the [stolen] one he bought. If not, he has to request additional money.

112. Can only stolen cattle be ransomed, or can robbed cattle also be ransomed?

Only stolen cattle can be ransomed. Robbed cattle have to be sent far away at once. There is no chance to ransom them.

113. With many people stealing one or two buffaloes at a time, will not the buffaloes of fellow *nakleng* sometimes get stolen?

It happens often because when children take buffaloes to the fields to graze, badmen rarely know whose buffaloes they are. But if a buffalo is stolen and then followed, and they find out that it belongs to another [nakleng], they return the buffalo along with an appropriate amount of money.

114. I have heard that badmen have a method to modify marks on a buffalo. Is that true or what?

Only the horns can be modified. That is, a buffalo's spread-out horns [เขาแกง] can be changed into curved horns [เขาอม]. A buffalo's curved horns can be changed into backward-bending horns [เขาบัด].⁵² A buffalo's backward-bending horns can be changed into curved horns. But a buffalo's curved horns cannot be modified into spread-out horns because the horns break when they are bent apart.

115. How is the modification done?

Coat the buffalo's head with dirt to protect it from the heat. Then apply fish oil all over the horns. Singe each horn with fire until it is soft. Then put on an iron sheath and bend it into the desired form.

116. How do badmen use the money they get from committing crimes?

We have never seen the money gained from robberies or other kinds of crimes used for any purposes other than drinking and gambling.⁵³ Just these two things. If badmen have any money on them, they go around treating each other and gambling until they run out. When they buy things, they only buy weapons, clothes, and cattle from other badmen. But they do not make purchases related to earning an honest living and leading a healthy life. This is the truth.

⁵² Thanks to Winai Pongsripian for suggesting that *khao bat* (เขาบัด) in the text probably meant *khao pat* (เขาปัด).

⁵³ “Drinking and gambling” is the implication of *kin kap len* (กินกับเล่น).

Since this conversation with a robber was first printed in 1903, I have observed the methods of other badmen. I have learned that they mostly use the above methods. Therefore, I think that the testimony that these badmen gave is the truth. The officials responsible for investigating, arresting, and interrogating bandits should keep this under consideration.