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Rural male leadership, religion and the environment in Thailand's mid-south, 1920s–1960s

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*By considering the historical significance of a southern Thai policeman, Khun Phantharakratchadet (1898–2006), I aim to shift historical writing away from the court, the aristocracy and the capital even though the social setting is not merely 'local' or 'peripheral' but an amalgam of elements found throughout the country. I also want to give credit to local historians often dismissed for being parochial, untheoretical and disposed to myth-making, and to show how tantric practices (*saiya-sat*), the arts of self-defence, policing, banditry and masculinity intersect in the career of this policeman, a native of the unique environment in the Songkhla lakes district.*

This paper takes up three themes that address religion, banditry, policing and the environment in the Thailand's mid-south from the late nineteenth century to the Second World War. Here the mid-south refers to Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung and Songkhla, and sometimes additionally Trang, which have been studied as a regional unit by local Thai historians, although the history of these provinces is necessarily intertwined with provinces to the north and south. The water world of the Songkhla lakes basin connecting Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung and Songkhla is the geographical setting for many of the events that took place. The fertile mid-south is an ethnically and religiously complex region where mainland and island Southeast Asia meet and form a distinctive cultural and economic zone.[1]

The first theme is the way rural society and the provinces have been treated by historians, both Thai and foreign. It is conventional wisdom that Thai historiography has experienced great difficulty in writing about the history of the peasantry, the countryside and the agricultural base of the country's economy with any degree of conviction. To the extent that attention has been paid to these matters, this particular

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1 See the Introduction section in *Thai south and Malay north: Ethnic interactions on a plural peninsula*, ed. Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

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sub-field in Thai historiography has long been dominated by economic historians.[2] There are exceptions of course, but a glance at the standard histories in English, particularly where society, agriculture and the peasantry form the backdrop for the elite politics that follows in later chapters, would bear out this generalisation.[3]

The meagre coverage of provincial history is partly a question of source material. The reforming government of the fifth Jakri king (r. 1868–1910) sought to centralise administration and record keeping. Its main interest in the provinces was to encourage and enforce conformity to the new Bangkok paradigm. Still, it took until the Second World War before some mechanisms to extract tax and appoint officials from the centre operated successfully in the provinces. Colonial governments elsewhere in Asia were more efficient in this regard, for they bequeathed an institutional memory, an archive, which has been exploited by subsequent generations of scholars to write about rural social relations and the peasantry. In Siam, what is now being called 'disguised' or 'camouflaged' colonialism (*ana-nikhom amphrang*) meant that the full apparatus of Western colonial administration never fell into place.[4] Conventional historiography has created an exceptional narrative of nation building that has become entrenched in academic as well as popular thinking.[5] The sovereignty retained by the Siamese monarch disguised the colonial conditions, although extraterritorial treaties, numerous Western advisers in key ministries, and indebtedness to the Western imperial powers and other measures seriously compromised that sovereignty. Record keeping only became more fulsome after the administrative reforms of the 1890s, so the archive left to posterity is not as detailed as it might otherwise have been under a colonial government. Land gazetteers, censuses, corvée lists (apart from Bangkok) and tax records hardly existed until the early twentieth century. If too much is made of the limitations of sources, however, important questions are never asked.

The dearth of archival material is problematic enough, but, in addition, the gaze of Thai political and social historians has been riveted almost exclusively on the elite. This perspective stems from the court's dominance of historical writing over many centuries, but it is also the legacy of the Old Left intellectuals of the late 1940s and early 1950s, who were urban-based intellectuals with limited understanding of the social and economic problems in the countryside. As a result of the political changes of the mid-1970s and the brief episodes of participatory government at the time, this bias began to be corrected as the New Left returned from the maquis and took up academic appointments in Bangkok and in the expanding provincial universities.

2 See, for example, Chatthip Nartsupha, *The Thai village economy in the past*, trans. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), and the many citations therein.

3 Barend Jan Terwiel, *Thailand's political history: From the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 to recent times*, 2nd edn (Bangkok: River Books, 2005) and David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A short history*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A history of Thailand*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 4 covers the countryside better, and their *Thailand: Economy and politics*, 2nd edn (Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) devotes the first 100 pages to the village and agrarian frontier society.

4 Thongchai Winichakul, 'Prawattisat thai baep rachachatniyom [Royal nationalist Thai history]', *Sinlapawatthanatham*, 23, 1 (2001): 58.

5 Maurizio Peleggi, *Thailand: The worldly kingdom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p. 8. For the development of this historiography, see ch. 4, 'Ideologies', and ch. 5, 'Modernities'.

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Local history and economic history flourished through the 1980s and 1990s.[6] But since then, the New Left intellectuals and academics, ripening with age into the Old New Left, have been preoccupied with righting the wrongs of the October 1976 massacre and with conjuring a way to put the ninth Jakri monarchy in its place. For these historians, the ruling class has continued to hold their attention, almost obsessively so. The countryside and provincial centres, to say nothing of districts and the sub-districts below them, have remained invisible to the gaze of these historians. Hong Lysa has offered a broad generalisation of this predicament, declaring that 'every self-respecting historical study in the English language, particularly those on the fifth reign, has since the late 1970s framed itself as a critique of the dominant royalist narrative'.[7]

Even for political scientists and political economists, moreover, Thailand along with the rest of the region has been pictured until very recently as largely agrarian and 'sunk in neotraditional torpor', in Ruth McVey's memorable phrase.[8] A case study that situates events in a local environmental setting would be one way of shifting key themes in modern Thai history away from the court, the aristocracy and the capital. I have found the work of local historians, often dismissed for being parochial, insufficiently theoretical and disposed to myth-making, to be particularly helpful on this score. They write about their homeland with passion and insight, sometimes stirring controversy in the process.

To approach the historiographical issue in another way, I want to pursue here a second theme, namely, the rural tough (*nak leng*) and the bandits (*jon*) with whom the *nak leng* consorted, sometimes in a relationship so close that the two were indistinguishable. James Ockey described the *nak leng* as 'a traditional Thai leadership figure for whom there has always been much admiration (a "tough" who is brave, bold and above all loyal to his friends)', while Yoshinori Nishizaki noted that *nak leng* has been rendered in English as 'rowdy', 'rascal', 'tough guy', 'rogue' and 'scoundrel'.[9] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker identify the *nak leng* as a new social type that emerged with the expansion of agriculture in the second half of the nineteenth century, following the treaties with the Western powers that opened new frontiers for commercial development.[10] The *nak leng* was protective of a village or district either native to him or adoptive, and he was generous to his followers and supportive of them. He was capable of ruthlessness if required, and this trait was augmented by special powers conferred by amulets, rites of initiation and disciplines of mind and body. The successful *nak leng* called upon supernatural powers as much as on his own physical strength. Because they were respected for their power locally, *nak*

6 Thongchai Winichakul, 'The changing landscape of the past: New histories in Thailand since 1973', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 26, 1 (1995): 110–14, and Peleggi, *Worldly kingdom*, p. 162.

7 Hong Lysa, 'Review of Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, law, and colonial modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 38, 1 (2007): 189.

8 *Money and power in provincial Thailand*, ed. Ruth McVey (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2000), p. 1.

9 James Ockey, 'The rise of local power in Thailand: Provincial crime, elections and the bureaucracy', in *Money and power*, ed. McVey, pp. 80–1; Yoshinori Nishizaki, 'The domination of a fussy strongman in provincial Thailand: The case of Banharn Silpa-archa in Suphanburi', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37, 2 (2006): 267.

10 Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and politics*, pp. 218–19.

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leng were used by Thai governments from the late nineteenth century for administrative purposes and for informal policing where the wit of government was weak.

In what sense were *nak leng*, who engaged in cattle rustling and other kinds of theft, criminals or bandits? Were their activities political? Here and there in the fragmentary history of the countryside over the past century a case might be made for the rural tough guys and bandits responding to government measures in a manner that might be described as insurgent, but the evidence for insurgency, some of which I consider below, is wispy and unconvincing. The fact that the government both before and after the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 turned to *nak leng* to assert central authority, or at best to claim that authority, weakens the notion that violence on the part of local tough guys amounted to insurgency. *Nak leng* were a political resource that could be exploited by legitimate government as well as by the lawless.

The third theme, closely related to the second and implicit in the observations that social scientists have made about the *nak leng* social type, is masculinity or manliness in Thai culture as it is expressed in leaders, both elected and appointed, who hold authority at all levels, in the provinces as well as on the national stage. Scholars such as David Johnston, Ockey and Nishizaki mention the manly bearing of *nak leng* but stop short of interrogating what this manliness means, and what it might imply in wider social and political settings.[11] A few years ago, in the course of lamenting the lack of attention to this topic, the Thai anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa wondered aloud just what Thai masculinity entailed.[12] Dr Pattana explored several lines of inquiry through case studies of Thai boxers and the people who sponsored and trained them. As a careful scholar working within the word-limit of a journal article, he declined to push his questioning further. He did not explicitly link the masculine performances of Thai boxers to *nak leng*, but he offered some tantalising hints of where such an inquiry might lead. The *nak leng*, a masculine figure who once exercised authority in rural areas, might help us understand something about hegemonic masculinity in Thai public life today.

Lawman Khun Phantharakratchadet (1898–2006)

A suitable subject through which to pursue these themes is the life of Khun Phantharakratchadet and his exploits in the provinces of the mid-south where he was most at home. A highly decorated Thai policeman who was born in Nakhon Si Thammarat in 1898, Khun Phan spent most of his career in the southern and central provinces suppressing banditry, a career that has encouraged journalists and his numerous biographers to regale him as a fabled lawman.[13] Lawman is a translation of

11 James Ockey, for example, in 'Thai society and patterns of political leadership', *Asian Survey*, 36, 4 (1996): 350, says that 'the *nakleng* is often on the wrong side of the law and closely associated with manliness'.

12 Pattana Kitiarsa, '"Lives of hunting dogs": *Muai Thai* and the politics of Thai masculinities', *South East Asia Research*, 13, 1 (2005): 58.

13 The date of Khun Phan's birth was registered incorrectly as 1903, according to Wira Saengphet, *Phumpanya kanprappram khorng phor lor tor tor Khun Phantharak ratchadet* [The local wisdom of Khun Phantharakratchadet in maintaining law and order] (Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund, 2001), p. 55. As a result, biographers offer no fewer than five different birth dates for him. For present purposes, I accept the 1898 date given in Khun Phan's cremation volume, *Anusorn nai ngan phraratchathan phloeng sop phon tamruat tri Khun Phantharak ratchadet* (Bangkok, 22 Feb. 2007).

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mue prap, not to be confused with *mue pun*, meaning hired gun or assassin, an alliterative twinning that makes Thai so much fun to hear. From the late 1920s until the early 1960s Khun Phan captured bandits, sometimes peaceably and sometimes lethally. He was capable of wooing his prey and persuading them to depart the district, or come over to the government side, but his willingness to use a weapon was as well known as his negotiating skill. In the time-honoured practice of Southeast Asian rulers, he was not shy about using deadly force if circumstances required. By one count, he had 60 'kills' to his name; by another count he had 62.[14] A striking photograph shows him sitting proudly with his 'regalia': a ceremonial sword across his lap, which he had acquired from the ruling family in Phichit; and thrust into his waistband a *keris*, one of many in his collection, possibly the one he confiscated from a particularly cruel bandit he captured in 1938 in Narathiwat on the border with Malaysia.[15] His gaze into the camera shows that he is not innocent of his powers.[16]

In 1930 Khun Phan was commissioned as a sub-lieutenant, and in the twilight of the absolute monarchy he received the noble title of *khun* from King Prajadhipok in 1931 while he was still in his early thirties.[17] The longer he lived, and he lived until 2006, the rarer was his possession of that honour as those of his generation who had received it passed away. The conferral of noble ranks ceased with the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Khun Phan's final promotion was to major general in 1960; he retired from the police force in 1964.

Towards the end of his life, Khun Phan became famous for his role in the foundation and promotion of the fabulously lucrative Jatukhamramthep amulet cult, which lasted from 2001 until Khun Phan's death in 2006. An instance of the commercialised Buddhism (*phuttha phanit*) that proliferated during the economic boom in the late 1980s, the Jatukhamramthep cult drew on Buddhist prosperity religions of the boom times.[18] Such amulets or talismans belong to a set of auspicious images deemed to attract wealth, good fortune, the appreciation of assets, or cash. Some of these images are explicitly Buddhist or display distinctively Buddhist elements, while others such as a lucky fish (*pla tapian*), fish traps or turtles are more secular.[19] Indeed, these talismans are to be found in all cultures, as a little book with Nepalese,

14 Chalong Soontravanich, 'The regionalization of local Buddhist saints: Amulets and crime and violence in post-World War II Thai society', unpublished paper, Nov. 2004; Wira, '*The local wisdom of Khun Phan*', appendix 7, pp. 185–7, gives a detailed chronology of the bandits killed by Khun Phan and the officers in his posses.

15 Okha Buri, *Thot rahat khun phantharakrathadet mue prap khamang wet* [Deciphering Khunphantha rakratchadet: The lawman with Vedic powers] (Bangkok: Utthayan Khwamru, 2007), p. 60.

16 I am indebted to Amrita Malhi of the Mainland Southeast Asia Writing Group at the Australian National University for this observation.

17 *Anusorn nai ngan phraratchathan*, p. 37, and Wira, '*The local wisdom of Khun Phan*', p. 57.

18 See Pattana Kitiarsa, 'Buddha phanit: Thailand's prosperity religion and its commodifying tactics', in his edited volume, *Religious commodifications in Asia: Marketing gods* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

19 A recent, comprehensive manual with illustrations is Thotsaphon Jangphanitchakun, *Khruang rang maha setthi bucha laew ruai* [Talismans for the very wealthy: Pay homage and be rich!] (Bangkok: Khomma Publishing, 2006; 3rd printing). A companion manual with special chants is Thotsaphon Jangphanitchakun, *Khatha maha setthi bucha laew ruai* [Incantations for the very wealthy: Pay homage and be rich!] (Bangkok: Khomma Publishing, 2006).

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Peruvian, Hindu, Judeo-Christian and native-American examples makes clear.[20] Tucked away in restaurants and shop houses in Thailand and in Thai-owned establishments abroad may be found the omnipresent Nang Kwak, the small figure of a woman beckoning to passers-by to come inside, make a purchase and thereby boost the day's takings. The magnetic powers of such images obey what may be called 'laws of attraction', to borrow from the title of one pop psychology manual.[21] Thai gurus with a dash of overseas training in America build small reputations in marketing these manuals that guarantee profit and success if their regimens are strictly followed.

The origins of the Jatukhamramthep amulet began in the mid-1980s when the Ministry of Interior decreed that every major town centre (*muang*) in Thailand should have a shrine for its city pillar. Like human beings, Thai *muang* are animate; each one has a protective spirit that dwells in the city pillar, the 'navel' of the town.[22] As a local notable with specialist knowledge about auspicious things, times and places, Khun Phan was approached by provincial dignitaries in Nakhon Si Thammarat for advice on renovations of the city pillar shrine where the guardian deity of Nakhon Si Thammarat resided. After due deliberation, Khun Phan designated a spirit appropriate to inhabit the shrine and conjured a name for the deity from images on two door panels in the ancient stupa at Wat Mahathat.[23] The Jatukhamramthep amulet, named after the spirit, was cast sometime later in 2001 at Wat Nang Praya, just outside of the town centre where a famed female spirit resided. On two occasions in 2001 and 2002 Khun Phan was personally present for the consecration rites that charged the Jatukhamramthep amulet. By the time of his death, the Jatukhamramthep cult had become a vast, highly remunerative industry for the monasteries throughout the country that cast replicas or 'series' (*run*) of the amulet. At Khun Phan's cremation in February 2007, attended by 200,000 people including the crown prince of Thailand, the circulation of a medallion stamped with Khun Phan's image nearly caused a riot. Mourners scrambled to collect the powerful medallion they had been led to expect as a gift from Khun Phan's family.[24]

When Khun Phan was consulted about the tutelary deity in 1987, he was already an octogenarian, having been retired for nearly a quarter of a century and living on borrowed time, or so one might think. In fact, he lived on for nearly two more decades. To understand why he was called upon to give advice and lend his name to the city pillar refurbishment, we have to look back to his youth, to his training as a police cadet in the late 1920s, and to his experience as a provincial police officer in the

20 Jaturawit, *Patihan khruang rang tang daen* [Miraculous talismans of foreign lands] (Bangkok: Biphlat Phaplitching, 2008).

21 See Wisit Siphibun, *Phalang neramit* [Laws of attraction] (Bangkok: Fisik Sentoe, 2008), now in its sixth printing. The pseudo-scientific nature of the enterprise may be gauged from the publisher's name, Physics Centre.

22 Woralak Phongsuksawat, *Lakmuang lakchai haeng ratcha-anajak* [City pillars: The victory pillars of the kingdom] (Bangkok: Ban Nangsue Kosin, 2008), p. 70.

23 The story of the amulet's creation is told in 'Nan Tapi' [pseud.], *Rachan haeng thale tai jatukhamramthep* [King of the southern ocean: The Jatukhamrapthep] (Bangkok: Komen Ek, 2007), pp. 11–17 as well as in Nawamin [pseud.], *Patihan ong jatukhamramthep* [The miracle of the Jatukhamramthep] (Bangkok: My Bangkok Publishing House, 2007), pp. 24–36.

24 Nawamin, '*The miracle of the Jatukhamramthep*', pp. 73–92.

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ensuing decades. Khun Phan's reputation as a provincial police officer with an enviable arrest record was easily translated into a brief political career when he was elected as a member of parliament in the Democrat Party in the national elections of February 1969.[25] Yet his local popularity and the folksy pictures of him at the end of his life presiding at religious rites in the white garments of an ascetic or Brahman priest should not lull us into forgetting that he was nearing the end of a very eventful life, at times a violent life, and it was not just outstanding police work in rural Thailand that earned him his reputation. From an early age Khun Phan had also cultivated physical and mental regimens that disciplined and toughened his body as well as his mind.

Khun Phan's lifelong interest in Thai traditional medicine may have run in the family; on his maternal side, his grandfather had been a healer for the local ruling family in the province. Khun Phan received his early education in his hometown Nakhon Si Thammarat, though his secondary schooling was interrupted by three years of illness with yaws, a debilitating and potentially disfiguring disease before the arrival of penicillin.[26] To my mind, this serious childhood illness as well as Khun Phan's slight stature almost certainly motivated him to strengthen his body, something he would attend to by means of sports, physical regimens and herbal therapies. After he recovered from yaws, his family sent him to Bangkok to finish his secondary schooling at Wat Benchamaphophit, a royal monastery built by King Chulalongkorn, where he excelled in sports and physical culture, especially boxing. He then entered the police academy at Nakhon Pathom where his boxing talents were quickly recognised and where he was soon appointed an instructor. He also became a skilled swordsman, able to perform the Thai sword dance, *krabi krabong*. By the time he graduated from the police academy in 1929 Khun Phan was adept in the traditional Thai martial arts.

In these early years Khun Phan had already developed a passion for the practices of the secret and sometimes dark arts of what the Thai people called *saiyasat*. This is the Thai equivalent of tantrism, although scholars of Thai religion shy away from using the term, because the Thais themselves do not use it. Whereas *mantra* (Thai *mon*, 'chants', 'spells') and *yantra* (Thai *yan*, 'cabalistic writing') made their way from hybrid Pali–Sanskrit into Thai language, the term *tantra* did not. Instead, the term *saiyasat* is used, sometimes translated as 'magic'.[27] These *saiyasat* practices run parallel to many Buddhist practices, or perhaps it would be better to say that *saiyasat* is enmeshed in Buddhist practices. The instructors or guru of *saiyasat*

25 *Bangkok Post*, 13 Feb. 1969. One of the few biographers to mention Khun Phan's brief career as a member of parliament is Chalong Jeyakhom, *Phor lor tor tor khun phantharakrathadet* [Police major general Khun Phantharakratchadet] (Kanchanaburi: Rom Fa Sayam, n.d.), p. 201.

26 Among the few biographers to mention Khun Phan's bout with yaws, or any childhood illness for that matter, is Samphan Kongsamut, *Rayo kaji phor lor tor tor khun phantharakrathadet* ['Little raja': Police major general Khun Phantharakratchadet] (Bangkok: Thammachat Press, 1996), p. 45.

27 Pattana Kitiarsa, 'Magic monks and spirit mediums in the politics of Thai popular religion', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6, 2 (2005): 211. A useful gloss of *saiyasat* and its various elements is in Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, 'The spirits, the stars, and Thai politics', pp. 8–11, a lecture given at the Siam Society, 2 Dec. 2008, and available on *New Mandala*: http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/pasuk-and-baker-on-spirits-stars-and-politics.pdf (last accessed on 4 Oct. 2010).

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practices may be monks, or men who have been monks. Often the lineage of teachers can be traced back to Brahmans who shared with Buddhist monks a ritual language, a hybrid of Thai, Pali, Sanskrit and Khmer. The co-existence of Brahmanical and Buddhist signifiers with the participation of monks and Brahmans in the same rituals is common.[28] Members of Brahmanic lineages served the royal court in Ayudhya, and later in Bangkok, where they performed coronation ceremonies and rituals for life passages. There were also men who performed ritual services in the countryside whom we might call popular Brahmans. Khun Phan was just such a popular Brahman, in practice if not in name. Though he was a policeman by vocation and by nature, Khun Phan shared something with figures found elsewhere in the Southeast Asian landscape such as the Indonesian *dukun* or shaman, the Malay *bomoh* or spirit medium, and the Filipino *babaylan*, male and female sorcerers dating back to pre-Spanish times.

The knowledge that popular Brahmans employed in their rituals and passed on to their heirs and disciples is referred to as *athanphawet*, the Atharva Veda, or the fourth Veda. In ancient India, this Veda was a kind of proto-tantric hymnal of ancient prayers devoted to black and white healing rites and everyday practices and beliefs concerning house and home, agriculture, cattle, marriage, trade and village politics.[29] The Atharva Veda consists of spells to embolden companions and allies; curses to hurl at enemies; magic formulas that defend against weapons or ward off calamity; potions and herbal remedies to cure or prevent illness; and charms to attract lovers or supporters. Sorcerers, magicians and healers all flourished in this world, sometimes in the same person. Although there is frequent mention of the Atharva Veda in the different kinds of knowledge available to Thai adepts, the actual texts, either in Sanksrit, Thai or Khmer, have never been discovered in Thailand, but *saiyasat* covers a similar range.[30] Referring to these rituals and practices as Atharva Veda gave them cachet by allowing them to be downloaded on demand from what Sheldon Pollock calls the Sanskrit cosmopolis. They were available to anyone with the requisite linguistic and ritualistic skills. In the district of Mount Khanun, adjacent to Khun Phan's native province of Nakhon Si Thammarat, the monastery of Wat Khao Or, 'the Shaolin of Phatthalung', was widely known for its training and indoctrination in the *athanphawet*, or the arts of *saiyasat*.

After a brief posting in Songkhla province, Khun Phan was transferred to Phatthalung in 1930 where he lost no time in visiting Wat Khao Or and submitting himself to the monastery's regimen and rituals. He ingested raw sesame oil, black sticky rice, and participated in other initiation rites, including immersion in an herbal bath in the Wat Khao Or tank.[31] When Khun Phan went through the rituals, the bath was taken in a boat at the top of the hill. Later, a cement bath was constructed in the

28 Peter Skilling, 'King, *sangha* and Brahmans: Ideology, ritual and power in pre-modern Siam', in *Buddhism, power and political order*, ed. Ian Harris (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 185–6.

29 Maurice Bloomfield, *The Atharvaveda* (Strassburg: Verlag Von Karl J. Trübner, 1899), pp. 5–7.

30 Justin McDaniel, personal communication, 1 July 2008. I have translated Thai terms for *sastra* and *vidhya* as 'knowledge'.

31 The initiation rite is described in detail in Ran Niranam, *Jom witthaya yut phutthakkhom Khao Or saolin haeng muang Phatthalung* [The Khao Or masters of the science of struggle and Buddhist incantations: The shaolin of Phatthalung] (Bangkok: Wasi Khri-echan, 2007), pp. 90–5.

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cave at the base of the hill. The bath was made up of a heady brew of 108 different kinds of medicinal herbs that treated or prevented just about every disease in the Thai medical register. The bound bundle of palm leaf manuscripts, the manual containing the list of ingredients for the herbal bath, is one of Wat Khao Or's most valued possessions and graces the cover of *Khao Or: Siam's Academy of Vedic Knowledge*, where the details of the recipe are given.[32] In the publication of this handbook knowledge one wonders if some vital or potent ingredients might have been held back by the master teachers in order to maintain their patent on the recipe.

Some of the herbs, such as *hang jorakhe*, were said to protect against bullets and sharp objects such as spears, knives, machetes and sickles, the weapons of choice employed by bandits, thieves and cattle rustlers for which the area was renowned. Indeed, *jorakhe* is aloe vera, a styptic used for small cuts and the treatment of burns, and believed to have antibacterial properties.[33] This and other substances gave *nak leng* and bandits as well as the police officers who hunted them the reputation of being men with 'toughened skin' (*nang niew*), a suitable subtitle for a pirated book about Khun Phan.[34] An elusive silvery substance of mercury-like appearance called *lek lai* (fluid iron), harvested with care deep in the limestone caves of the south, was inserted under the skin and afforded similar protection against bladed weapons.[35] For police and soldiers, as well as the bandits, arming oneself with powers of invulnerability (*yu yong khong kraphan*) was as important as carrying a knife, a machete or a gun. In view of the ritual services that Khun Phan was later to perform in his hometown for the Jatukhamramthep amulet, it should be noted that the herbs imparting powers of invulnerability are also among the special ingredients in amulets which are charged by means of rites and mantras; culture fused with nature to give the amulets their special powers.

The motivation behind Khun Phan's strenuous efforts to be posted to Pattalung where he could avail himself of the secret knowledge dispensed at Wat Khao Or is unclear to me. Perhaps he wanted to take advantage of this knowledge so that he could use it in his future career, rather like Phra Borisut Silajan, the head monastic official in Trang, who explained that he ordained as a novice in 1892 in order to learn spells and chants. He would then disrobe, take up the bandit life and use his newfound powers to protect his kinfolk.[36] In a similar vein, perhaps Khun Phan simply wanted to acquire the powers also enjoyed by the *nak leng* living in the villages and the bandits who roamed the region at will. Armed with these special powers, he could, *nak leng* against *nak leng*, match their strength. Khun Phan was not an ordinary lawman, but a *nak leng* lawman (*nak leng mue prap*).

32 Wet Worawit, *Khao Or witthayalai saiwet haeng sayam* [Khao Or: Siam's academy of Vedic knowledge] (Bangkok: Romfa Sayam, n.d.).

33 Jean Mulholland, *Medicine, magic and evil spirits* (Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1987), pp. 137–9.

34 Samphan, whose book '*Little raja*' was pirated, tells the story on p. 11.

35 Daeng Kaosaen *et al.*, *Lek lai mi jing* [Fluid iron exists!] (Nonthaburi: Butsarakham Publishing, 2006).

36 Mana Khunweechuay, 'Chum jon haeng lum nam thalesap songkhla phor sor 2437–2465 [Bandit gangs of the Songkhla lakes basin]', (M.A. thesis, Sinlapakorn University, 2003), p. 126.

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The environment and the geopolitics of the mid-south

Wat Khao Or is in Mount Khanun District in the province of Phatthalung, which lies between Songkhla to the south and Nakhon Si Thammarat to the north. The western border of the province follows the ridge of a steep north–south mountain range, and the eastern border of Phatthalung cuts through a string of inland lakes that stretches north from Songkhla town for about 100 kilometres. To the east of this border, the Satingpra Peninsula, a finger of land belonging to Songkhla, separates Phatthalung from the Gulf of Thailand, and the shared border of Songkhla and Phatthalung runs through the largest of the inland lakes. With access to the Gulf of Thailand confined to natural waterways and canals through Songkhla territory, the provincial centre of Phatthalung is now truly landlocked.

The southern Thai environmental historian Mana Khunweechuay has drawn attention to the fact that 200 years ago all of this terrain was under water, and it was possible to travel by boat along this waterway up to Pakphanang on the coast just south of Nakhon Si Thammarat town.[37] At that time Phatthalung was by no means landlocked but a small port polity on the coast of a bay sheltered from the Gulf of Thailand by Tantalem Island, a geographical feature that appears clearly on John Crawfurd's map drawn during his mission to Siam and Cochin China in 1828.[38] For much of the nineteenth century, it was possible to travel unimpeded through the bay from Songkhla all the way to Pakphanang in Nakhon Si Thammarat. In the second half of the nineteenth century the bay began to silt up with sediment deposited by run-off from the mountain range to the west. The process accelerated as forest land was cleared for agriculture, the railway and roads until three distinct lakes formed with the smallest, Thale Noi, at the northern end of the string of lakes. A canal now connects the smaller lake to the larger inland lake. Even today, the lakes are very shallow with a depth ranging from 1.5–2.5 metres.[39] Salinity in the system varies greatly, increasing from north to south because the lakes drain into the sea at the southern end at Songkhla harbour. The Satingpra peninsula, a 'strange coastal feature', as Wolf Donner put it because of this surprising geography, is still known today in the mid-south as Big Island (*ko yai*), bearing witness to its ancient history as a separate landmass.[40]

By the end of the nineteenth century, much of the basin at the northern end of the lakes was covered in a mosquito-infested swamp forest (*pa phru*). What remains of this habitat is preserved today as wildlife refuges in Phru Khuan Khreng and Phru

37 Ibid., p. 21.

38 John Crawfurd, *Journal of an embassy from the governor-general of India to the courts of Siam and Cochin China* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967; Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints).

39 Thetsako *et al.*, 'Thalesap songkhla [The songkhla lakes]', in *Saranukrom watthanatham phak tai* [The encyclopaedia of southern Thai culture] (Bangkok: Munnithi Saranukrom Watthanatham Thai, 1999), vol. 7, p. 3058. On the silting up of the bay and the formation of the peninsula, see p. 3062, discussed in English at http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2009/07/08/review-of-southern-thai-encyclopedia/ (last accessed on 4 Oct. 2010).

40 Wolf Donner, *The five faces of Thailand: An economic geography* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1978), p. 417. See also supplementary pages, Map 2 of 1897 which still shows Satingpra as a landmass distinct from the mainland. I am indebted to Jakkrit Sangkhamanee, a member of the Mainland Southeast Asia Writing Group at the Australian National University and a native of Songkhla, for the local reference to Satingpra as 'Big Island'.

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Khuan Khi Sian.[41] Fish and waterfowl were abundant, as were diverse land animal species, including the pygmy elephant.[42] In the late seventeenth century, Phatthalung produced low-grade cotton which found its way by sea to Nagasaki along with birds' nests, tin and sea cucumber. Until the first half of the twentieth century, this region of immense biodiversity was also harvested for bamboo, therapeutic herbs (*samun phrai*), animal hides and tusk ivory.[43] The forest people collected bamboo, resins, rubber sap, honey and rattan which they bartered for rice with cultivators on the plains.

Yet this abundance of food and natural resources supported a very small population. Even with the opening of the southern railroad line in 1907, the area was underpopulated and remote, and as late as the 1950s, it was still being settled. Until after the Second World War, parts of Phatthalung were known as refuges for bandits, as places where stolen goods such as boats and cattle could be stashed, and as ideal locations for the production of moonshine.[44] The limestone hills that dot the plain contain cave complexes that served as hideaways for fugitives from the law. When I lived in Krabi on the west coast of the peninsula in the early 1960s, a bus journey southward to Songkhla through Trang and Phatthalung entailed a hair-raising ride on a poorly maintained road that wound its way across the sparsely populated mountain range whose plunging ravines were densely clad with rainforest. Nowadays the range is known locally as the mountain of 'folded clothes' (*phap pha*).

The topography and the environment made it difficult for a distant royal centre to rule Phatthalung, but throughout the nineteenth century, the province was also subject to the constantly shifting geopolitics of the mid-south. Since the Ayudhya period Phatthalung, Songkhla and the large bay south of Ligor had marked the outer edge of Thai Buddhist paramountcy in the south.[45] Beyond lay the Muslim kingdom and entrepot of Pattani, and beyond Pattani lay the northern Malay states that Siam governed indirectly and fitfully as tributaries. From the beginning of the Jakri dynasty in 1782 the south was vulnerable to Burmese armed incursions on the peninsula, a situation exacerbated by simultaneous British encroachment on the western side of the peninsula farther south. Because of the distance and the rugged terrain, the Siamese court at Bangkok could govern the mid-south and the far south in name only. To exercise its will, it had little choice but to rely on local proxies such as Nakhon Si Thammarat, although this policy could be risky if the incumbent ruler or *jao muang* of Nakhon Si Thammarat was strong enough to establish his own autonomy. This was the case for the early half of the nineteenth century when the powerful *jao muang* known as Noi governed and actively pursued Siamese expansion in the Malay states beyond Kedah.[46] The Bangkok court moved to counter Nakhon Si Thammarat's regional hegemony by placing Songkhla directly under its control,

41 *Lesap rao* [Our lakes], ed. Wiwat Suthiwiphakorn (Songkhla: Songkhla Ratchaphat University and Prince of Songkla University, Oct. 2007), vol. 1, pp. 101–3.

42 Mana, 'Bandit gangs', p. 35.

43 Ibid., pp. 27, 29.

44 Ibid., pp. 25–8, 36.

45 Ibid., pp. 37–9.

46 Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thai–Malay relations: Traditional intra-regional relations from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 66.

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thereby depriving Nakhon of a prosperous and strategically located dependency. This measure was also aimed at putting a stop to feuding between Songkhla and Nakhon over the supervision of the Malay principalities.[47] Between 1893 and 1899 when the reform plan was implemented, Songkhla was designated the centre of the southern administrative circle of provinces (*monthon*), because it could keep a watchful eye on the seven small Malay polities in the deep south.[48] Phatthalung fell in between the two larger centres, a favoured space that gave its ruling families room to manoeuvre until the turn of the twentieth century.[49]

Given the rigours of living in this lightly governed frontier with its natural hazards and lawlessness, the local population tended to be independent-minded and prone to look to each other for assistance rather than to the central government. Local officials appointed by Bangkok could rule according to their own lights, a style of government found throughout the kingdom that the reforms of the 1890s were determined to rectify. In 1894 the provincial judges in Phatthalung operated no fewer than six gaols that contained 240 men and 60 women. The gaols were effectively status symbols testifying to the social standing and importance of the judges. At the same time, the incarcerated men and women provided a supply of labour that the judges could use as domestic servants or construction workers, or could hire out to cultivate rice land.[50] During the fifth reign the demand for labour increased with the emancipation of slaves and the release of freemen and -women (*phrai*) from corvée duties. Given the paltry salary provided by the central government, local officials took advantage of such opportunities to gain income by using the perquisites of office to supplement their salary.

One of the intended consequences of the new administrative framework, known as the *thesaphiban* system, was that appointments at the local level were made from Bangkok. An edict was promulgated in 1899 requiring the formal appointment by the central government of headmen and circle headmen; commune elders had already been given coercive powers by an Act of 1897.[51] The central government was attempting to tighten its grip on the periphery. But sometimes the appointees from the centre did not have local support, and the provincial ruling elites resented the imposition of central authority and the appointments made on their behalf.[52] In other cases, the newly created positions were filled by local toughs or *nak leng* who had the confidence of loyal supporters and family networks even while engaging in behaviour that came close to banditry in the eyes of neighbouring villagers who were their victims. The inhospitable, sparsely populated and remote terrain was itself a force that resisted Bangkok control.

47 This is Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's observation in Luang Udomsombat, *Rama III and the Siamese expedition to Kedah in 1839: The dispatches of Luang Udomsombat*, ed. Justin Corfield, trans. Cyril Skinner (Clayton, Vic.: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1993), p. 16.

48 Mana, 'Bandit gangs', p. 46. Appendix III in Tej Bunnag, *The provincial administration of Siam, 1892–1915* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977) makes clear that while the *monthon* was named 'Nakhon Si Thammarat', the administrative centre was at Songkhla.

49 Mana, 'Bandit gangs', p. 40.

50 Ibid., p. 132.

51 Bunnag, *The provincial administration of Siam*, pp. 122–5.

52 Mana, 'Bandit gangs', p. 50.

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Southern Thai bandit culture

The mid-south had been known for its banditry for a long time. When Khaw Sim Bee na Ranong arrived as the new governor of Trang in 1910, he was told that a man wanting to marry a local woman had to approach her parents who inevitably asked two questions. Did the suitor know how to perform the *nora*, a southern Thai dance? Was he good at stealing cattle? A man who could answer in the affirmative to these two questions confirmed to the future parents-in-law that he was capable of mobilising supporters and protecting the lives and property of his future bride, their own and extended family and the community at large, thus making him a promising prospective husband. This anecdote, repeated so often that it became burnished as a local truth, aims to make a point about *nak leng* as part of the social fabric.[53] Local historians, such as Pramuan Manirote, have taken details such as this one and built a picture of an endemic bandit culture in the three southern provinces on the shores of the Songkhla lakes. The danger of wild animals and other hazards of frontier life called for rugged men who could protect their families and communities. The southern provinces of Trang and Phatthalung fiercely resisted the authority of the central government, and this reputation later fed into a history of insurgency that lasted until the demise of the Communist Party of Thailand in the early 1980s.[54]

Various factors have been put forward to explain the bandit culture in Phatthalung and Songkhla. Overlapping jurisdictions between the two provinces created confusion about which officials had responsibility for detecting and arresting criminals.[55] Specie came into wider use in the fourth reign, and increasing affluence in Songkhla attracted thieves from Phatthalung. During periods of drought the land was not so productive, and people turned to crime to supplement family incomes. The many waterways – rivers, canals and the Songkhla lakes – facilitated the movement of people, including bandits. The problem with some of these explanations for banditry, such as increasing affluence and economic hardship, is that they are contradictory, or they explain both banditry and its absence. Yet another explanation for a regionally specific disposition towards banditry in the mid-south is that village settlement in the southern part of the country was markedly different from the north, where the founding of kingdoms and major centres is enshrouded with the mystique of Buddhist prophecies, the arrival of the Buddha's relics or the visits of famous *rishi*. By contrast, in the south, we find a history of village settlement based on resourcefulness and rugged independence not beholden to religious piety or Buddhist legend.[56]

53 Pramuan Manirote, 'Jon phatthalung korani tamnan jon haeng tambon dawn sai [Phatthalung bandits: Bandit legends of Dawnsai sub-district]', *Thaksin khadi*, 4, 1 (1994): 58–9.

54 This assumption of linearity from banditry in 1900 to insurgency in the 1960s needs to be scrutinised. For such an extrapolation of earlier banditry and *nak leng*, see *Bon senthang phu banthat tamnan kan tor su duai kamlang awut khong prachachon phatthalung trang satun* [On Phu Banthat way: A history of the armed struggle of the Phatthalung, Trang and Satun people] (Bangkok: Khrongkan Chapho Kit Phu Banthat, 2001), p. 74.

55 Sangop Songmuang, 'Sut narai', *Thaksin khadi*, 4, 1 (1994): 32–4.

56 Chatthip Nartsupha and Phunsak Chanikornpradit, *Setthakit muban phak tai fang tawan-ok nai adit* [The southern Thai village economy of the east coast in the past] (Bangkok: Sangsan Publications, 1997), pp. 72–3, which takes this point from Nidhi Aeusrivongse, *Chat thai muang thai baeprian lae anusawari*

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At least some of the banditry in the south was an expression of resistance to the tightening of Bangkok's rule over remote provinces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The most well-known case of a bandit whose reputation as a local leader rested on such resistance was Rung Dawnsai from the Dawnsai sub-district in Phatthalung, and his deputy Dam Huaphrae, who objected to paying the poll tax and other taxes.[57] Rather like a proto-system of governance, the bandit gang devised a code of conduct and in mock imitation of the aristocratic ranking system conferred on each other the noble rank of *khun* as a badge of equality within the gang.[58] The weapon of choice was the machete (*phra*), a large-bladed farm implement. Rites were conducted to empower swords, guns and knives and to confer invulnerability on those who wielded them, and astrological calculations helped to decide when and where the bandits would strike.[59] Tutelary deities of homes and villages needed to be appeased to let the bandits pass freely to do their business. Rites were conducted on specially consecrated land much as monastic ordination is allowed only on land free of usufructuary rights.[60]

Mana Khunweechuay, the southern Thai historian, also argues that conditions particular to the south favoured banditry. Jaophraya Yommarat, the governor of the Nakhon Si Thammarat provincial circle, reported that banditry would greatly diminish if the officials could control the casinos, opium dens and cockfighting, although this sounds more like the huffy comment of a Bangkok official rather than an astute observation about the local culture. Southerners were also quick to anger and seek revenge if they felt dishonoured. The endemic *nak leng* culture with its rough justice meant that mutual support groups formed quickly to defend territory and settle local disputes.[61]

Khun Phan, the southern Thai lawman, was dispatched to catch lawbreakers (*jon*), not *nak leng*, and the accounts of his exploits never fail to mention that he apprehended *jon*. *Nak leng*, meaning local toughs willing and able to solve disputes by fisticuffs if necessary, is a sociological term. The classic work on this topic was published almost 30 years ago by Johnston, who wrote a doctoral dissertation on the rice economy in Thailand from 1880–1930 based on agricultural development in the Rangsit district north of Bangkok.[62] In this deftly composed essay, Johnston covered

[Thai nation, Thai land: Textbooks and monuments] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995), especially ch. 2 on the concept of the people's state from southern Thai literary sources.

57 Pramuan, 'Phatthalung bandits', p. 62; Ran Niranam, '*The Khao Or masters of the science of struggle*', pp. 152–69; Lom Phengkaeo, 'Chum jon dawnsai rung dawnsai lae dam huaphrae [The Dawnsai bandit gang: Rung Dawnsai and Dam Huaphrae]', *Thaksin khadi*, 4, 1 (1994): 40–53.

58 Mana, 'Bandit gangs', p. 142, and Pramuan, 'Phatthalung bandits', p. 66. Rung was called Khun Phat, and Dam was called Khun Atsadong Phraiwan; Lom Phengkaeo, 'The Dawnsai bandit gang', p. 42. Much of the evidence for the Rung Dawnsai and Dam Huaphrae gang comes from oral sources.

59 As George Quinn has shown, Indonesian thieves also made use of manuals of divination and spells in planning a heist; Craig J. Reynolds, 'Thai manual knowledge: Theory and practice', in *Seditious histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian pasts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), p. 217.

60 Mana, 'Bandit gangs', p. 143.

61 Ibid., pp. 109–10. Jaophraya Yommarat's tenure in this position lasted from 1896–1906.

62 David B. Johnston, 'Bandit, *nakleng*, and peasant in rural Thai society', pp. 90–101 in *Contributions to Asian Studies* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), vol. 15, Special Issue, *Royalty and commoners: Essays in Thai administrative, economic, and social history*. See also Peerasak Chaidaisuk, *Chat sua wai lai* [Once a tiger, always a tiger] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2008).

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definitions, relationships between bandits, *nak leng* and villagers, and the interplay between banditry and different levels of government authority. More recently, political scientists, economists and historians have seen continuities between the *nak leng* and the *jao phor* or provincial bosses, sometimes Chinese and sometimes not, who exercise power at the local level through their connections with politicians and government officials. *Nak leng* gave rise to local bosses, *jao phor* ('godfathers'), who flourished with the rapid growth of the provincial economy and who could deliver votes to national politicians. Like the *nak leng*, the *jao phor* are willing to use coercion and even violence to achieve their ends.[63] Nishizaki has cautioned that not all provincial bosses can be lumped into the *nak leng* category with its connotations of violence, brutality, belligerence, hedonism and lawbreaking.[64] Following Thak Chaloemtiarana, who pinned the *nak leng* label on Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, Ockey suggested that Sarit exploited the most authoritarian aspects of the *nak leng* in the way he governed, thereby making possible a new type of *nak leng*, a politician who distributes his largesse to supporters and constituents through charitable foundations or access to government contracts and resources.[65]

But this debate among political scientists about the evolution of *jao pho* from *nak leng* and the relevance of these terms to describe provincial or national politicians obscures older meanings of the term. The few references to *nak leng* in the Three Seals Law Code, which the Bangkok court inherited from Ayudhya times, associate *nak leng* with gambling dens and their proprietors and, almost inevitably, with disputes over the payment of gambling debts. Jean Baptiste Pallegoix's 1854 dictionary glosses *nak leng* as 'professional gambler', and Dan Beach Bradley's dictionary of 1873 concurs, specifically mentioning wagers on cockfighting.[66] A four-part typology of *nak leng* by the southern Thai scholar Suthiwong Phongphaibun draws out the hedonistic, hooligan qualities of the figure, and his fourth type stresses the magnanimity, dignity, loyalty to supporters and capacity for building alliances that made these men natural local leaders as circle and village headmen.[67]

Nak leng can thus apply as an attribute or style of behaviour that is performed as occasion requires. Indeed, Khun Phan, the famed lawman himself, was credited with the *nak leng* value of magnanimity with which he treated some of the bandits he captured.[68] McVey has made a fine distinction between *nak leng* and local tough, and

63 Sombat Chantornvong, 'Local godfathers in Thai politics', in *Money and power*, ed. McVey, p. 55.
64 This is the main argument in Yoshinori Nishizaki, 'The domination of a fussy strongman', a study of Banharn Silpa-archa whose provincial power base is in Suphanburi to the west of Bangkok.
65 James Ockey, 'From *nakleng* to *jaopho*: Traditional and modern patrons', ch. 4 in his *Making democracy: Leadership, class, gender, and political participation in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
66 Pramuan, 'Phatthalung bandits', p. 88; Jean Baptiste Pallegoix, *Dictionarium linguae thai sive siamensis interpretatione latina, gallica et anglica illustratum* (Farnborough: Gregg International, 1972 [1854]), p. 458, also glosses *nak leng* as 'rascal', 'vagrant'; Dan Beach Bradley, *Siamese vernacular dictionary* (Bangkok: Khurusapha Press, 1971 [1873]), p. 781.
67 Suthiwong Phongphaibun, '*Nak leng*', in *Saranukrom watthanatham phak tai* [The encyclopaedia of southern Thai culture] (Bangkok: Munnithi Saranukrom Watthanatham Thai, 1999), vol. 4, pp. 3673–5. For further discussion of *nak leng* in the south, see also http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2009/07/08/review-of-southern-thai-encyclopedia/ and http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2010/03/12/review-of-peerasak/ (last accessed on 4 Oct. 2010).
68 Samphan, '*Little raja*', p. 219.

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argues that 'real leaders gained their prominence through shrewdness and manipulation rather than muscle'.[69] These are the skills that Suthiwong embraces in his fourth type, which has perhaps receded from local and national politics in Thailand today. My own impression is that *nak leng* could be tough if circumstances required, and that this willingness to use force and the threat of force as well as their shrewdness and powers of manipulation enhanced their reputation rather than disqualified them as local leaders. Certainly, Khun Phan with his 60 'kills' was willing to use force. Fear could be as effective as loyalty and respect in getting things done; fear may have been integral to building loyalty and respect. In any case, the flood of small arms into Thailand after the Second World War had made policing a very dangerous business. By 1950 there were over half a million firearms registered with the government, including submachine guns, automatic pistols, hand grenades, grenade launchers and various kinds of explosives.[70]

In contrast to *nak leng*, *jon*, the Pali–Sanskrit word *cora* translated as 'bandit' or 'brigand', is a legal term for which there are many references in the old law code.[71] In fact, *jon* and *nak leng* were permeable categories. In frontier areas and remote districts where the hand of government was light, villagers relied on *nak leng* to protect them from thieves who would steal their cattle and other possessions. It was useful to have one or two *nak leng* around to deter petty theft and cattle rustling and to demonstrate that the village could defend itself. By no means were all *nak leng* criminals. Some enjoyed the respect and trust of the ruling class as well as the reputation of local hero and native protector of the less fortunate. The confusion of categories is clear from Prince Damrong's account of meeting a bandit known as Jon Jan in Nakhon Pathom to the southeast of the capital where the prince sought respite from his official duties. In the course of interviewing Jon Jan to find out how the thief went about his business, Damrong discovered that a successful robbery almost always had an insider, either a servant or disgruntled family member, who tipped off the thieves about the best time to strike. So impressed was Damrong with Jon Jan's familiarity with the *modus operandi* of successful robbers that he hired the man to guard his bungalow while he was away on official duties in Bangkok. Twenty years later Jon Jan finally retired, having loyally discharged his duties.[72]

The functions performed by *nak leng* in Siam's mid-south and other regions of the country during this period resemble in many respects the career of the *jago* under the Dutch in the second half of the nineteenth century on Java. *Jago* refers literally to 'fighting cock' but carries a broader meaning of brawler and daredevil when applied to men.[73] The conflicts between *jago* had much to do with protecting territory, supporters and one's own personal honour and prestige. The numerous references in Thai writing to the importance of dignity (*saksi*), and the humiliation of losing it or seeing

69 *Money and power*, ed. McVey, p. 8.

70 Chalong Soontravanich, 'Small arms, romance, and crime and violence in post WW II Thai society', *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu (Southeast Asian Studies)*, 43, 1 (2005): 30–1.

71 Thomas William Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali–English dictionary* (London: Luzac & Company, 1966), p. 273.

72 Damrong Rajanubhab, *Nithan borannakhadi* [Tales of old] (Bangkok: Bannakit, 1963), part 11, pp. 216–30.

73 Henk Schulte Nordholt, 'The jago in the shadow: Crime and "order" in the colonial state in Java', *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 25, 1 (1991): 75.

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it tarnished (*min sak si*), are relevant here. *Jago* also shared with *nak leng* certain supernatural powers, such as invulnerability. The Indonesian term *kekebalan* describes these powers as well as the ability to get things done through connections with people higher up.[74] Moreover, like the *nak leng*, the *jago* performed the task of maintaining a modicum of law and order at the local level in the absence of the infrastructure of modern government. In this sense, the *jago* was not a marginal figure at all but indispensable to the stability of the Dutch colonial government.[75] Given the exigencies of colonial government, it would not be surprising to find figures similar to the *nak leng* and the *jago* in Burma, Cambodia, southern Vietnam and Laos: men who were proud of their manliness and their ability to protect their women; who were empowered by their supporters and loyal to them; who were charged with special powers acquired by magic rites, physical regimens and herbal therapies; and who enjoyed the reputation of living bravely on a dangerous frontier.[76]

Thai *machismo*

In 1930 in a very physical struggle, Khun Phan and two associates captured a southern bandit, Sua Sang, renowned in the area for his cruelty and willingness to kill. Sua Sang had escaped from a Trang gaol and found refuge in Mount Khanun District, Phatthalung, where his major wife, Mrs Mik, lived. At 4 a.m. the police team began the operation, lying in wait for Sua Sang near Mrs Mik's home. At daylight they exchanged gunfire with Sua Sang, who had chained up the son of the local blacksmith suspected of betraying the bandit's location to the police and whom he intended to kill. In fact, it was the blacksmith's nephew who had tipped off the police. So notorious was Sua Sang that there was no shortage of local people willing to turn him in even with the knowledge that his retribution for this treacherous betrayal could be fatal for them. In the gun fight Khun Phan narrowly missed being shot, saved only by a magic sign on his hat and a talisman (*takrut*) on the front of his shirt over his breast. 'I was proud that the magic powers were with me that day,' he boasted. After chasing Sua Sang into a forest near Mrs Mik's house, Khun Phan found himself in hand-to-hand combat in which he had to call upon his training as a boxer. He tried one move after another from his bag of tricks, but Sua Sang put up a fierce defence. Fighting like dogs, they bit each other, a tactic called 'the dog trick', and in the end the 40-year-old bandit came out second best. Khun Phan's teeth were younger and sharper and drew a steady stream of blood when he bit into Sua Sang's shoulder. In the course of the struggle Khun Phan grabbed Sua Sang's testicles, but they slipped out of his grasp. The two men were slipping and sliding over each other 'as if covered in Vaseline'. On the second try, Khun Phan extended his foot and pinned Sua Sang's genitals to the ground with his toes to subdue him. Sua Sang was wearing a sarong tied loosely in the style of the Phatthalung *nak leng*, so

74 Ibid., p. 76.

75 Ibid., p. 78; Henk Schulte Nordholt and Margreet van Till, 'Colonial criminals in Java, 1870–1910', in *Figures of criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and colonial Vietnam*, ed. Vincente L. Rafael (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1999), p. 68.

76 Reynaldo C. Ileto explored some of these commonalities in his 'Religion and anticolonial movements', in *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), vol. 2, part 1, pp. 193–244.

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his manhood was readily accessible to Khun Phan's desperate tactics.[77] The point of the story is the humiliation Khun Phan inflicted on Sua Sang in capturing him by his manhood.

Told with great glee and bravado by Khun Phan, this story offers insight into the male world that Khun Phan inhabited and returns us to the question of what Khun Phan's life and exploits might tell us about Thai masculinity in the mid-south. The world of the *nak leng*, the bandits, and the policemen who hunted them was a world in which the men, whether adversaries or allies, needed to demonstrate their prowess. The physical struggles that ensued in these contests could cause injury, and they could be life threatening. In their willingness to take extreme risks, the men were constantly testing and measuring their prowess rather like bulls fighting in the ring, a sport popular with local people in the mid-south.[78] The bullfights rotate through the districts on weekends in connection with local festivals, and the *nak leng* owners and patrons gamble for high stakes on the outcome. Before the fights, the bulls receive magic rites (*saiyasat*) empowering them to triumph in their struggle to gore and otherwise wear down their opponents. Much of the information on pedigrees and desirable characteristics in the purpose-bred bulls comes from a manual published in 1934 that originated in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Khun Phan's hometown and one of the hubs of the sport historically.[79] In the earthy language of the southern countryside, a man who declines to enter his bull in a fight for fear of losing the competition is said by the other owners to be 'a bull with no balls' (*wua lot*).[80] Mocking the lack of manliness in a cowardly bull owner is an expression of Thai *machismo*.

The religious dimensions of Thai *machismo* need to be emphasised here.[81] Despite the fact that the Buddha is portrayed in sculpture and painting as asexual, the maleness of the Buddha is evident in the early history of the religion. Every text that tells the story of the Buddha 'incorporates discourses of masculinity'.[82] Potency in Theravada Buddhism, in the archaic sense of might, strength and command, is an attribute of the Buddha because of his supernatural or supranormal powers.[83] In this context, the avid discussions that take place among male friends about Buddhist amulets and their special powers and valuations connect Buddhism

77 Khun Phan published this account in a magazine in August 1979, which is reproduced in Samphan, '*Little raja*', pp. 62–73. Khun Phan states that he was over 20 years old, but the incident took place in July 1930, which would have made him aged 32 years. Here and elsewhere, Khun Phan tended to underestimate his age.

78 Akhom Dechathongkham, *Hua chuak wua chon* [Tethered heads, fighting bulls] (Bangkok: Thailand Research Foundation, 2000); David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the making: Cultural concepts of masculinity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 121, suggests that the expendability of men may help explain the constant emphasis on risk-taking as evidence of manliness.

79 See http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2009/07/08/review-of-southern-thai-encyclopedia/ (last accessed on 4 Oct. 2010).

80 Wiwat Phanthawutikhanon, 'Review of Akhom Thongkham, *Tethered heads, fighting bulls*', *Sarakhadi*, 16, 189 (2000): 79.

81 *Machismo* is a 'bellwether term' in discussions of Latin American sexuality, and I introduce it here as a first approximation for what I am driving at; *Changing men and masculinities in Latin America*, ed. Matthew C. Guttman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 18.

82 John Powers, *A bull of a man: Images of masculinity, sex, and the body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

83 Craig J. Reynolds, 'Power', in *Critical terms for the study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 216–17.

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and the attributes of amulets to Thai *machismo*.[84] Buddhist amulets are a male thing. Women may possess them, but they are gifts from fathers, brothers and uncles to their daughters, sisters and nieces. The value of amulets to men may be illustrated in other episodes. After apprehending a daring bandit in the south, Khun Phan's associates returned without the amulets of their prisoner that had fallen into the river during capture. Khun Phan required his men to return to the scene of the capture, fish the amulets out of the river, and bring them to the police station. In another incident, the local police divided up the amulets of a captured prisoner among themselves only to have them confiscated by their commanding officer.[85] The policemen wanted to possess these objects to enhance their own powers as much as to deprive lawbreakers of these supernatural weapons.

It cannot be denied that male prerogative looms large in Thai ritual and public life. Throughout the country, masculine prowess is validated in male peer groups, such as the drinking circle, and in the demonstration of sexual prowess, whether through the acquisition of secondary wives or visits to brothels.[86] One might include in these male peer activities the cohorts of men who follow cockfights or bullfights and gamble heavily on the outcomes of the matches as well as the bandit gangs and the groups of *nak leng* hanging out at the casinos with chains of amulets and *tak-rut* dangling around their necks. Tattooing is common among these men, maleness being a minimal requirement for a tattooist in many Tai cultures.[87] Male homosociality, discussed here at the local level in the lives of the *nak leng*, bandits and the police who tracked them down, has analogies at the national level among soldiers and policeman who work in the security establishment.[88]

This intriguing amalgam of policing, banditry, local leadership, sacred objects with special powers and Thai *machismo* is not a peripheral culture, nor is it an exclusively rural or local culture, in spite of the case for regional distinctiveness made by southern Thai scholars. Rather, this intriguing amalgam links rural Thailand to urban Thailand, which are not worlds apart as often depicted, but are constituent of each other. There is 'much urban in the rural, and even more rural in the urban', as Duncan McCargo has recently pointed out in his discussion of the violent politics in the capital since early 2006.[89] Nothing could reinforce this point more tellingly than the career and personality of Khun Phan as he apprehended bandits, advocating by word and deed that the ability to get things done is enormously enhanced by a reputation for loyalty, access to sources of supernatural power as well as the powers of nature, and the willingness to fight with tooth and claw if human life is at stake.

84 In this section I am indebted to Tamthai Dilokvidhyarat of the Mainland Southeast Asia Writing Group at the Australian National University for relevant discussion.
85 Samphan, '*Little raja*', pp. 121–2.
86 Mary Beth Mills, *Thai women in the global labor force: Consuming desires, contested selves* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 96–7.
87 Nicola Tannenbaum, 'Tattoos: Invulnerability and power in Shan cosmology', *American Ethnologist*, 14, 4 (1987): 700, makes this case for the Shan in northern Thailand.
88 Homosocial is defined here as 'the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex'; Jean Lipman-Blumen, 'Toward a homosocial theory of sex roles: An explanation of the sex segregation of social institutions', *Signs*, 1, 3 (1976): 16, Special Issue, *Women and the workplace: The implications of occupational segregation.*
89 Duncan McCargo, 'Thai politics as reality TV', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 68, 1 (2009): 17.

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