

NOTE

A DESCRIPTION OF THE MRABRI CAMP

by

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On Wednesday, January 23, 1963, we left Ban Meo Khunsathan, Tambon Santha, Amphoe Na Noi, Changwat Nan at noon. After walking in a south-west direction for about half an hour we came to a place in recent forest where a Meo hut had formerly stood typically built on a platform dug into the hill. Now only the platform remained. On this platform, seven meters long and 2.5 meters broad we saw the ashes and burnt wood of five fires in a row, 1.5 meters apart. Our Mrabri guide told us that this was the resting place of the group which had left our camp the night before at dark. They had slept two by two in the spaces between the fires, he explained. There were four beds between the five fires, each for two. The first and the last bed contained a few leaves as cushion, the heads pointing to the hill, the feet to the valley. (See situation sketch 2)

After leaving this temporary resting place we walked on for about two hours to a high ridge in almost impenetrable jungle. From there we descended, always facing south, a slope of an inclination about 60° and about 100 meters high. As we clambered down holding on from tree to tree, bamboo to bamboo, shrub to shrub, we could hear the fierce barking of five or more dogs in the valley below. When we finally arrived in the valley at 4 P.M. we saw smoke rising at various places between the bamboo thickets. We went towards one of these smoky bamboos and saw the first permanent camp of the Mrabri tribe ever seen by a European (See situation sketches 1 and 2) The place was quite similar to the one we had seen a few hours ago: There were fires in rows and beds in between, a few windbreaks made of palm branches were erected at the left or right of the resting place, the head of the beds always near the mountain, the foot pointing to the valley. There were bamboos above the headparts and trees on which sometimes the Mrabri had leaned their wind-breaks or bamboo water containers.

To the north of the camp was the steep slope of the hill and to the south a dense bamboo thicket thus making it almost inaccessible. There were six resting-places on the site belonging to separate families or groups according to our Mrabri guide. In several resting-places fires were burning, indicating that inhabitants must have left the camp together with their dogs a few minutes before, retreating into the jungle. This was the Mrabri policy, as they had told us before: anticipating defeat, they would not defend their camp. They are superior to others only when running away or hiding out in the jungle.

The easternmost resting place was a very elaborate one. (No. 1) There were windbreaks to the east, four beds of single sheets of bark, another four beds of interwoven palm branches. One central bed had a small recent earthen wall around the head portion. On the hillside there was a dense bamboo thicket. On the valley side a windbreak was erected on wooden poles. Six large bamboo water containers four full of water, leaned on the bamboo-thicket. Three fires were burning, two more camp fires had been used recently, probably the night before as ashes, charcoal and blackened wooden sticks were still fresh. The place was designed for eight people but could have been used by more.

The second resting place (No. 2) had not been used recently as a long bamboo branch with drying leaves was over it. There were five camp fires, all containing cold ashes but none with halfburnt wood or the like. The bushes on the north side contained dry palm branches and must therefore have once formed a very effective windbreak. There were no bamboo water containers around.

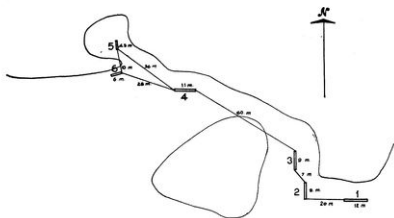
The third resting place (No. 3) had windbreaks affixed to wooden poles on the north side. There were two bamboo flasks leaning against trees on the hillside. Two of five camp fires had recently been used, three contained only old ashes. One bed consisted of dry, one of fresher leaves. The place could hold eight people but only four had been sleeping there recently. These three resting places were relatively near to each other.

After a distance of sixty meters we came to a second group of three resting places. The first in this group (No. 4) was the biggest of the whole camp. Four of seven fires were burning or smoking. Only one

*Dwelling Places of Akhrai on Doi Thong from field sketch by
Dr. Christian Yelder.*

MOUNTAIN (DOI THONG)

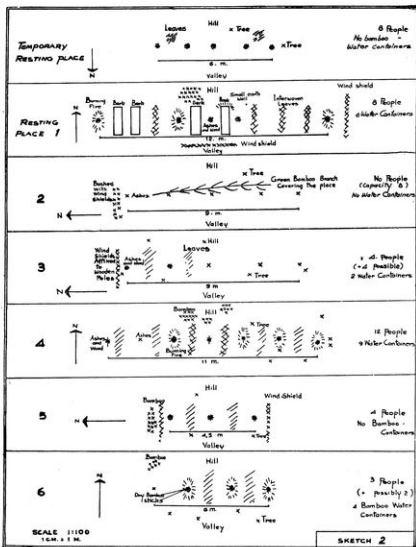
(VIRGIN FOREST, BAMBOO)



VALLEY
(DENSE BAMBOO JUNGLE)

SCALE 1:100
(1 CM = 10 M.)

1-6 = 6 Dwelling Places



camp fire had not been used for some time. There were nine bamboo water containers standing around. Four of them were bound together and had obviously just been brought from some stream in the valley. The two central beds contained a layer of well woven palm branches. The other four beds had only dry and fresh leaves. The bamboo on the hillside to the north was quite thick. In eastern direction there were several trees near to the fires and the beds. The place could be used by 12 people. It belonged to the group of the oldest Mrabri in the tribe.

The next resting place (No. 5) faced east. There were two walls of windbreaks left and right, the northern one enforced by a high bamboo thicket. Three fires must have been extinguished only recently as they were now cold although half-burnt wooden sticks were still there.

The last resting-place (No. 6) had four camp fires with three rather high fires flaming up. There were three beds but only two of them had been used. This place belonged to a Mrabri whose mother and son had been brought to our camp the day before. Now the old woman and the child had fled into the jungle. The man, our guide, invited us to his place and there we got his flute in exchange for some cloth for his boy. He also invited a few of his friends who gradually came over. They lay down between the fires to show how they sleep at night. We also tried to lie down but the heat was too great for anybody wearing clothes.

The fires glow all night and the firewood is laid alongside the beds warming the whole body from head to toe. The woman we had examined the day before had her entire back covered with a large burn now healed. It seems dangerous to sleep so near the fire on not completely fresh leaves! The central bed was used by father and son, the eastern one by the old mother. The wife of the man was dead, he told us. Therefore the western bed was not used; dry bamboo-sticks laying on it and stretching over to the fire. There were four bamboo containers, two containing water, leaning on trees around the place.

The whole camp stretched over a distance of 160 meters between the first and the last resting-place. It was all surrounded by dense bamboo and virgin forest. In the forest we found many holes in the ground where roots had been dug up as food. A bamboo container of food had

been found near one of the fires, half burnt. The contents had been eaten after cooking.

In the six resting places there were altogether twenty beds in use, nine of them single and 11 double, bringing the number of people actually living in the camp up to 31. The camp could accommodate and had accommodated another 14 people as there were 7 sleeping places between older ashes. The tribe might contain about 45 individuals. We had met 22 men the day before in our camp, plus one woman and one child. Consequently there must be a certain surplus of men in the tribe.

As we had met a group of nine Mrabri in August 1962 about 40 Km. north of this present camp it seems as if they migrate in families or smaller groups throughout the year, coming together only in the cold season when the many fires of the common camp must help them endure the cold; each individual group could hardly fight separately.