

It is said that the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. It might be said with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is a history of their struggle against the state.

—Pierre Clastres, *La société contre l'état*

Zomia is a new name for virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan). It is an expanse of 2.5 million square kilometers containing about one hundred million minority peoples of truly bewildering ethnic and linguistic variety. Geographically, it is also known as the Southeast Asian mainland massif. Since this huge area is at the periphery of nine states and at the center of none, since it also bestrides the usual regional designations (Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia), and since what makes it interesting is its ecological variety as well as its relation to states, it represents a novel object of study, a kind of transnational Appalachia, and a new way to think of area studies.

My thesis is simple, suggestive, and controversial. Zomia is the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states

# An Introduction to Zomia

from *The Art of Not Being Governed*

James C. Scott



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nigh impossible to install an effective sovereignty over people who are constantly in motion, who have no permanent pattern of organization, no permanent address, whose leadership is ephemeral, whose subsistence patterns are pliable and fugitive, who have few permanent allegiances, and who are liable, over time, to shift their linguistic practices and their ethnic identity.

And this is just the point! The economic, political, and cultural organization of such people is, in large part, a strategic adaptation to avoid incorporation in state structures. These adaptations are all the more feasible in the mountainous hinterlands of state systems: that is to say, in places like Zomia.

*Here [Sumatra] I am the advocate of despotism. The strong arm of power is necessary to bring men together, and to concentrate them into societies.... Sumatra is, in great measure, peopled by innumerable petty tribes, subject to no general government.... At present people are as wandering in their habits as the birds of the air, and until they are congregated and organized under something like authority, nothing can be done with them.*[88]

In the early nineteenth century, as in the classical mainland states, Sir Stamford Raffles, quoted above, understood that the precondition of colonial rule was the concentration of population and sedentary agriculture. He required a nonfugitive people whose labor and production were legible and hence appropriable by the state. We turn our attention next, then, to an understanding of the logic and dynamics behind the creation of state spaces in mainland Southeast Asia.

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## **CHAPTER 1. Hills, Valleys, and States, An Introduction to Zomia**

I open with three diagnostic expressions of frustration. The first two are from would-be conquering administrators, determined to subdue a recalcitrant landscape and its fugitive, resistant inhabitants. The third, from a different continent, is from a would-be conqueror of souls, in some despair at the irreligion and heterodoxy that the landscape appears to encourage:

*Making maps is hard, but mapping Guizhou province especially so.... The land in southern Guizhou has fragmented and confused boundaries.... A department or a county may be split into several subsections, in many instances separated by other departments or counties.... There are also regions of no man's land where the Miao live intermixed with the Chinese....*

*Southern Guizhou has a multitude of mountain peaks. They are jumbled together, without any plains or marshes to space them out, or rivers or water courses to put limits to them. They are vexingly numerous and ill-disciplined.... Very few people dwell among them, and generally the peaks do not have names. Their configurations are difficult to discern clearly, ridges and summits seeming to be the same. Those who give an account of the arterial pattern of the mountains are thus obliged to speak at length. In some cases, to describe a few kilometers of ramifications needs a pile of documentation, and dealing with the main line of a day's march takes a sequence of chapters.*

*As to the confusion of the local patois, in the space of fifty kilometers a river may have fifty names and an encampment covering a kilometer and a half may have three designations. Such is the unreliability of the nomenclature.*[1]

*The hilly and jungly tracts were those in which the dacoits held out longest. Such were [sic] the country between Minbu and Thayetmyo and the terai [swampy lowland belt] at the foot of the Shan Hills and the Arakan and Chin Hills. Here pursuit was impossible. The tracts are narrow and tortuous and admirably suited for ambushes. Except by the regular paths there were hardly any means of approach; the jungle malaria was fatal to our troops; a column could only penetrate the jungle and move on. The villages are small and far between; they are generally compact and surrounded by dense, impenetrable jungle. The paths were either just broad enough for a cart, or very narrow, and, where they led through the jungle were overhung with brambles and thorny creepers. A good deal of the dry grass is burned in March, but as soon as the rains recommence the whole once more becomes impassible.*[2]

*The surface has been minutely trenched by winding streams. So numerous are the creeks that the topographical map of a single representative county of 373 square miles indicated 339 named streams, that is, nine streams for each ten square miles.*

*The valleys are for the most part “V”-shaped, with rarely more level space along the banks of a stream for a cabin and perhaps a garden patch.... The isolation occasioned by methods of travel so slow and difficult is intensified by several circumstances. For one thing, the routes are round-about. Travel is either down one branch along a creek and up another branch, or up a stream to a divide and down another stream on the further side of the ridge. This being the case, married women living within ten miles of their parents have passed a dozen years without going back to see them.[3]*

Behind each lament lies a particular project of rule: Han rule under the Qing, British rule within the Empire, and finally, the rule of orthodox Protestant Christianity in Appalachia. All would style themselves, unself-consciously, as bearers of order, progress, enlightenment, and civilization. All wished to extend the advantages of administrative discipline, associated with the state or organized religion, to areas previously ungoverned.

How might we best understand the fraught dialectical relations between such projects of rule and their agents, on the one hand, and zones of relative autonomy and their inhabitants, on the other? This relationship is particularly salient in mainland Southeast Asia, where it demarcates the greatest social cleavage that shapes much of the region's history: that between hill peoples and valley peoples or between upstream (hulu in the Malay world) and downstream (hilir) peoples.[4] In tracing this dialectic with some care, I believe it also traces a path to a novel historical understanding of the global process of state formation in the valleys and the peopling of the hills.

The encounter between expansionary states and self-governing peoples is hardly confined to Southeast Asia. It is echoed in the cultural and administrative process of “internal colonialism” that characterizes the formation of most modern Western nation-states; in the imperial projects of the Romans, the Hapsburgs, the Ottomans, the Han, and the British; in the subjugation of indigenous peoples in “white-settler” colonies such as the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and Algeria; in the dialectic between sedentary, town-dwelling Arabs and nomadic pastoralists that have characterized much of Middle Eastern history.[5] The precise shape of the encounters is, to be sure, unique to each case. Nevertheless, the ubiquity of the encounter between self-governing and state-governed peoples—variously styled as the raw and the cooked, the wild and the tamed, the hill/forest people and the valley/cleared-land people, upstream and downstream, the barbarian and the civilized, the backward and the modern, the free and the bound, the people without history and the people with history—provides us with many possibilities for comparative triangulation. We

history is on a different plane from state or dynastic history. For all their fluidity, they are the relatively constant features of the landscape, while the successful dynastic state is rare and ephemeral. The contingency of the “state” invites us to treat it less as a unity than as a “complex web of contractual mutualities.”[83] For when it does splinter, as Akin Rabibhadana observed about the early nineteenth-century Siamese state, “the component parts of the system tended to split off in order to save their own lives.”[84]

Making sense of innumerable small units, seemingly in constant movement, might seem impossible. It is surely more daunting than dynastic history, but we are not without guidance from those who have sought to understand comparable systems. In the case of Southeast Asia, there are many studies of social structure that seek to grasp the logic behind the fluidity. First, most famous, and most controversial among them is Edmund Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. Subsequent work along these lines in the highlands, not to mention studies of the Malay world, where shifting petty states, a mobile population, and a distinction between upstream and downstream, unruled and ruled populations also is at work, is richly suggestive. Beyond Southeast Asia, however, we may look again to the encounter between states and nomadic, stateless populations in the Middle East. The case for beginning with the elementary unit of the household and treating villages, tribes, and confederations as provisional and shaky alliances has also been used to brilliant effect for eighteenth-century North American society in the Great Lakes region by Richard White.[85] And, finally, we may profitably look back to Thucydides' Peloponnesian War, which describes a world of peoples, some with kings, some without, whose fickle loyalties and unreliable cohesion is a source of constant anxiety to the statesmen of each of the major antagonists: Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and Syracuse—each of them, in turn, a confederation.[86]

One challenge for a non-state-centric history of mainland Southeast Asia consists in specifying the conditions for the aggregation and disaggregation of its elementary units. The problem has been succinctly put by one observer of a somewhat comparable flux between states and their autonomous hinterlands: “There comes a time when one realizes that one is dealing, really, with molecules which sometimes unify in the form of a vague confederation, sometimes, just as easily, disaggregate. Even their names offer no consistency or certainty.”[87] If the fluidity of the molecules themselves is an inconvenience for anthropologists and historians, imagine the problem it poses for the dynastic official or would-be state-builder, the colonial official, and the modern state functionary. State rulers find it well

Bringing many such units together under central rule was exceptionally rare and normally short-lived. When the political confection it represented disintegrated, it tended to fragment into its constituent units: the petty statelets, small villages, hamlets, and lineages. New agglomerations might arise, orchestrated by a new and ambitious political entrepreneur, but they were always a contingent alliance of the same elementary units. The symbolic and ideological format for state-making was known and observed by ambitious local leaders with even the slightest pretense to wider power. State mimicry—what I have called cosmological bluster—was copied from the Chinese or Indic high forms, with rudimentary materials and in miniature, right down to the most petty village chiefs.

If larger political units were radically unstable, the elementary units themselves were hardly timeless blocks of building material. We must see these units themselves as in almost constant motion: dissolving, splitting, relocating, merging, and reconstituting. The households and individuals within a hamlet or lineage were themselves in motion over time. A settlement might remain in place over, say, half a century, but because of residents coming and leaving, their linguistic and ethnic identification might shift dramatically.[82] Here demography played a central role, the population density in Southeast Asia being, in 1600, one-sixth that of India and one-seventh that of China. The existence of an open frontier operated like an automatic brake on what the state could extract. Motivated by factors as disparate as epidemics, famines, taxes, corvée labor, conscription, factional conflict, religious schism, shame, scandal, and the desire to change one's luck, it was relatively simple for households and entire villages to move. Thus, over time, the membership of any elementary unit was in flux, as was the very existence of the unit itself. If there was an element of stability here, it resided in the ecology and geography of places favorable to human settlements. A well-watered plain situated on a navigable river or a trade route might occasionally be abandoned, but it was just as likely to be reinhabited when conditions permitted. Such locations were, of course, the typical cores of the negeri, the muang, the maín.

Fluid as they were, these elementary units were the only building blocks available to the would-be state-maker. In the absence of an ambitious strongman, or when the wider polity inevitably shattered, the “remains” were once again the elementary units. Is an intelligible history possible under such circumstances? I believe that it is, although it is surely not a dynastic history. The units in question do have a history, do observe a rough logic in formation, combination, and dissolution, and do exhibit a certain autonomy vis-à-vis dynastic or modern states. They have a history, but that

shall take advantage of these opportunities where we can.

### **A World of Peripheries**

In the written record—that is to say, from the beginning of grain-based, agrarian civilizations—the encounter we are examining can fairly be said to preoccupy rulers. But if we stand back and widen the historical lens still further, seeing the encounter in human rather than state-civilization terms, it is astonishing how recent and rapid the encounter has been. *Homo sapiens sapiens* has been around for something like two hundred thousand years, and only about sixty thousand, at the outside, in Southeast Asia. There the region's first small concentrations of sedentary populations appear not earlier than the first millennium before the common era (CE) and represent a mere smudge in the historical landscape—localized, tenuous, and evanescent. Until shortly before the common era, the very last 1 percent of human history, the social landscape consisted of elementary, self-governing, kinship units that might, occasionally, cooperate in hunting, feasting, skirmishing, trading, and peacemaking. It did not contain anything one could call a state.[6] In other words, living in the absence of state structures has been the standard human condition.

The founding of agrarian states, then, was the contingent event that created a distinction, hence a dialectic, between a settled, state-governed population and a frontier penumbra of less governed or virtually autonomous peoples. Until at least the early nineteenth century, the difficulties of transportation, the state of military technology, and, above all, demographic realities placed sharp limits on the reach of even the most ambitious states. Operating in a population density of only 5.5 persons per square kilometer in 1600 (compared with roughly 35 for India and China), a ruler's subjects in Southeast Asia had relatively easy access to a vast, land-rich frontier.[7] That frontier operated as a rough and ready homeostatic device; the more a state pressed its subjects, the fewer subjects it had. The frontier underwrote popular freedom. Richard O'Connor captures this dialectic nicely: “Once states appeared, adaptive conditions changed yet again—at least for farmers. At that moment, mobility allowed farmers to escape the impositions of states and their wars. I call this tertiary dispersion. The other two revolutions—agriculture and complex society—were secure but the state's domination of its peasantry was not, and so we find a strategy of ‘collecting people ... and establishing villages.’”[8]

### **The Last Enclosure**

Only the modern state, in both its colonial and its independent guises, has had the resources to realize a project of rule that was a mere glint in the eye

of its precolonial ancestor: namely to bring nonstate spaces and people to heel. This project in its broadest sense represents the last great enclosure movement in Southeast Asia. It has been pursued—albeit clumsily and with setbacks—consistently for at least the past century. Governments, whether colonial or independent, communist or neoliberal, populist or authoritarian, have embraced it fully. The headlong pursuit of this end by regimes otherwise starkly different suggests that such projects of administrative, economic, and cultural standardization are hard-wired into the architecture of the modern state itself.

Seen from the state center, this enclosure movement is, in part, an effort to integrate and monetize the people, lands, and resources of the periphery so that they become, to use the French term, rentable—auditable contributors to the gross national product and to foreign exchange. In truth, peripheral peoples had always been firmly linked economically to the lowlands and to world trade. In some cases, they appear to have provided most of the products valued in international commerce. Nevertheless, the attempt to fully incorporate them has been culturally styled as development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration. In practice, it has meant something else. The objective has been less to make them productive than to ensure that their economic activity was legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that were. Everywhere they could, states have obliged mobile, swidden cultivators to settle in permanent villages. They have tried to replace open common-property land tenure with closed common property: collective farms or, more especially, the individual freehold property of liberal economies. They have seized timber and mineral resources for the national patrimony. They have encouraged, whenever possible, cash, monocropping, plantation-style agriculture in place of the more biodiverse forms of cultivation that prevailed earlier. The term enclosure seems entirely appropriate for this process, mimicking as it does the English enclosures that, in the century after 1761, swallowed half of England's common arable land in favor of large-scale, private, commercial production.

The novel and revolutionary aspect of this great enclosure movement is apparent if we open our historical lens to its widest aperture. The very earliest states in China and Egypt—and later, Chandra-Gupta India, classical Greece, and republican Rome—were, in demographic terms, insignificant. They occupied a minuscule portion of the world's landscape, and their subjects were no more than a rounding error in the world's population figures. In mainland Southeast Asia, where the first states appear only around the middle of the first millennium of the common era, their mark on the land-

were often deployed in revolts against valley kingdoms. While the valley kingdom's hard power was a minute fraction of its expansive imperial imaginings, its reach as a market of physical or, especially, symbolic commodities was far greater.

What if we replaced these “imperial imaginings” with a view of Southeast Asian history as dominated by long periods of normative and normalized statelessness, punctuated by occasional, and usually brief, dynastic states that, when they dissolved, left in their wake a new deposit of imperial imaginings? In a critique of overly state-centric histories, Anthony Day points us in just this direction: “What would the history of Southeast Asia look like, however, if we were to take the turbulent relations between families as normative rather than a departure from the norm of the absolutist state which must ‘deal with disorder?’”[80]

### **The Elementary Units of Political Order**

Abandoning the tunnel vision of the court-state view, as urged by Day and O'Connor and actually pursued some considerable distance by Keith Taylor, we attempt an account of the elementary units of political order in mainland Southeast Asia.[81] I emphasize the term political order to avoid conveying the mistaken impression that outside the realm of the state lay mere disorder. Depending on the location and date, such units might range from nuclear families to segmentary lineages, bilateral kindreds, hamlets, larger villages, towns and their immediate hinterlands, and confederations of such towns. Confederations appear to constitute the most complex level of integration that had any stability at all. They consisted of small towns located on terrain favorable to wet-rice cultivation, with its concentration of population, together with an allied population in the adjacent hills. Alliances of such “wet-rice archipelagoes” were common, although they too were short-lived and their constituent members rarely surrendered their freedom of action. Traces of these patterns survive in place names throughout the entire region: Xishuang Banna (“twelve village rice fields”) in Yunnan, Sipsong Chutai (“twelve Tai lords”) along the Vietnamese-Laotian border and Negri Sembilan (“nine realms”) in western Malaysia, and Ko Myo (“nine towns”) in Burma's Shan states. In this respect, the largest quasi-permanent building blocks in the region were the Malay negeri/Negara, the Tai muang, and the Burmese maín (), each of which represented a potential fund of manpower and grain, located, in the most favorable cases, athwart a valuable trade route.

Assembling such potential nodes of power into a political and military alliance was itself a small, and usually evanescent, miracle of statecraft.

not to report facts.[75] If we take the cosmological bluster emanating from the court centers as indicative of facts on the ground, we risk, as Richard O'Connor has noted, "impos[ing] the imperial imaginings of a few great courts on the rest of the region." [76]

The independent nations of mainland Southeast Asia add a new layer of historical mystification. As the successor states, ethnically and geographically, to the classical kingdoms, they have their own interest in embellishing the glory, continuity, and beneficence of their ancestors. Furthermore, the histories of the classical states have been mined and distorted in the interest of identifying a protonation and a protonationalism that could be of use against contemporary enemies, both foreign and domestic. Thus early artifacts such as Dong Son drums (large bronze ceremonial objects dating from roughly 500 BCE to the beginning of the common era and found throughout highland Southeast Asia and southern China) or local uprisings have been appropriated as national and/or ethnic achievements when, at the time, such identities made no sense at all. The result is an historical fable that projects the nation and its dominant people backward, obscuring discontinuity, contingency, and fluid identities.[77] Such accounts serve, as Walter Benjamin reminded us, to naturalize the progression and necessity of the state in general and the nation-state in particular.[78]

The inadequacies of mandala, dynastic, capital-city, text-based histories are so manifest, even when read skeptically, that they are chiefly useful as self-interested descriptions and cosmological claims. During the greater part of the historical record, and especially in the uplands, there was no state or "hardly-a-state." What states there were tended to be personal creations that were tenuous and fragmented, and that seldom outlasted their founder by long. Their cosmological claims and ideological reach were far greater than their practical control over human labor and grain.[79]

Here it is crucial to distinguish the "hard" power of the state from its economic and symbolic influence, which was far wider. The precolonial state, when it came to extracting grain and labor from subject populations, could project its power only within a fairly small radius of the court, say, three hundred kilometers, and that undependably and only during the dry season. The economic reach of the precolonial state, on the other hand, was far wider but based on voluntary exchange. The higher the value and smaller the weight and volume of the commodity (think silk and precious gems as opposed to charcoal or grain), the greater the reach. The symbolic reach of the state—its regalia, titles, costumes, its cosmology—traveled far and wide as ideas that have left a deep impression in the hills, even as they

scape and its peoples is relatively trivial when compared with their oversized place in the history books. Small, moated, and walled centers together with their tributary villages, these little nodes of hierarchy and power were both unstable and geographically confined. To an eye not yet hypnotized by archeological remains and state-centric histories, the landscape would have seemed virtually all periphery and no centers. Nearly all the population and territory were outside their ambit.

Diminutive though these state centers were, they possessed a singular strategic and military advantage in their capacity to concentrate manpower and foodstuffs in one place. Irrigated rice agriculture on permanent fields was the key.[9] As a new political form, the padi state was an ingathering of previously stateless peoples. Some subjects were no doubt attracted to the possibilities for trade, wealth, and status available at the court centers, while others, almost certainly the majority, were captives and slaves seized in warfare or purchased from slave-raiders. The vast "barbarian" periphery of these small states was a vital resource in at least two respects. First, it was the source of hundreds of important trade goods and forest products necessary to the prosperity of the padi state. And second, it was the source of the most important trade good in circulation: the human captives who formed the working capital of any successful state. What we know of the classical states such as Egypt, Greece, and Rome, as well as the early Khmer, Thai, and Burmese states, suggests that most of their subjects were formally unfree: slaves, captives, and their descendants.

The enormous ungoverned periphery surrounding these minute states also represented a challenge and a threat. It was home to fugitive, mobile populations whose modes of subsistence—foraging, hunting, shifting cultivation, fishing, and pastoralism—were fundamentally intractable to state appropriation. The very diversity, fluidity, and mobility of their livelihoods meant that for an agrarian state adapted to sedentary agriculture, this ungoverned landscape and its people were fiscally sterile. Unless they wished to trade, their production was inaccessible for yet another reason. Whereas the early states were nearly everywhere the creature of arable plains and plateaus, much of the more numerous ungoverned population lived, from a state perspective, in geographically difficult terrain: mountains, marshland, swamps, arid steppes, and deserts. Even if, as was rarely the case, their products were in principle appropriable, they were effectively out of range owing to dispersal and the difficulties of transportation. The two zones were ecologically complementary and therefore natural trading partners, but such trade could rarely be coerced; it took the form of volun-

tary exchange.

For early state elites, the periphery—seen frequently as the realm of “barbarian tribes”—was also a potential threat. Rarely—but memorably, in the case of the Mongols and the Huns and Osman and his conquering band—a militarized pastoral people might overrun the state and destroy it or rule in its place. More commonly, nonstate peoples found it convenient to raid the settlements of sedentary farming communities subject to the state, sometimes exacting systematic tribute from them in the manner of states. Just as states encouraged sedentary agriculture for its “easy pickings,” so, too, did raiders find it attractive as a site of appropriation.

The main, long-run threat of the ungoverned periphery, however, was that it represented a constant temptation, a constant alternative to life within the state. Founders of a new state often seized arable land from its previous occupants, who might then either be incorporated or choose to move away. Those who fled became, one might say, the first refugees from state power, joining others outside the state’s reach. When and if the state’s reach expanded, still others faced the same dilemma.

At a time when the state seems pervasive and inescapable, it is easy to forget that for much of history, living within or outside the state—or in an intermediate zone—was a choice, one that might be revised as the circumstances warranted. A wealthy and peaceful state center might attract a growing population that found its advantages rewarding. This, of course, fits the standard civilizational narrative of rude barbarians mesmerized by the prosperity made possible by the king’s peace and justice—a narrative shared by most of the world’s salvational religions, not to mention Thomas Hobbes.

This narrative ignores two capital facts. First, as we have noted, it appears that much, if not most, of the population of the early states was unfree; they were subjects under duress. The second fact, most inconvenient for the standard narrative of civilization, is that it was very common for state subjects to run away. Living within the state meant, virtually by definition, taxes, conscription, corvée labor, and, for most, a condition of servitude; these conditions were at the core of the state’s strategic and military advantages. When these burdens became overwhelming, subjects moved with alacrity to the periphery or to another state. Under premodern conditions, the crowding of population, domesticated animals, and the heavy reliance on a single grain had consequences for both human and crop health that made famines and epidemics more likely. And finally, the early

physical evidence. The same is the case for sedentary agricultural settlements, characteristic of state centers. While they are not necessarily any more complex than foraging or swiddening societies, they are far denser—in the case of irrigated rice, one hundred times denser—than foraging societies, and hence they leave far more concentrated rubble in the form of middens, artifacts, building materials, and architectural ruins.[71] The larger the pile of rubble you leave behind, the larger your place in the historical record! The more dispersed, mobile, egalitarian societies regardless of their sophistication and trading networks, and despite being often more populous, are relatively invisible in the historical record because they spread their debris more widely.[72]

The same logic applies with a vengeance once it comes to the written record. Much of what we know about the classical states of Southeast Asia comes from the stone inscriptions and, later, paper trails they left behind in the form of land grants, memorials, tax and corvée records, religious donations, and court chronicles.[73] The thicker the paper trail you leave behind, the larger your place in the historical record. With the written record, the distortions also multiply. The traditional words in Burmese and Thai for history, *yazawin* and *phonesavadan*, respectively, both literally mean “the history of rulers” or “chronicle of kings.” It becomes difficult, in this context, to reconstruct the life-world of nonelites, even if they are located at the court center. They typically appear in the record as statistical abstractions: so many laborers, so many conscripts, taxpayers, *padi* planters, so many bearers of tribute. Rarely do they appear as historical actors, and when they do, as in the case of a suppressed revolt, you can be sure that something has gone terribly wrong. The job of peasants, you might say, is to stay out of the archives.

Hegemonic histories centered on courts and capital cities introduce other distortions as well. They are, forcibly, histories of “state spaces”; they neglect or ignore altogether both “nonstate spaces” beyond their reach and the long periods of dynastic decline or collapse when there is hardly a state at all. In a truly evenhanded, year-by-year, chronology of precolonial, mainland Southeast Asian states, most of the pages would be blank. Are we to pretend, along with the official chronicles, that because there was no dynasty in control, there was no history? Beyond the problem of blank pages, however, the nature of the official histories of the court center systematically exaggerates the power, the coherence, and the majesty of the dynasty. [74] The court documents that survive are largely tax and land records on the one hand and hymns of praise, assertions of power, and claims to legitimacy on the other; the latter are meant to persuade and to amplify power,

and variable radius of the court center, and generally unable systematically to extract resources (including manpower) from a substantial population. Indeed, interregna, far from being uncommon, were more protracted than regna, and, before the colonial period, a welter of petty principalities allowed much of the population to shift their residences and loyalties to their advantage or to move to a zone of no sovereignty or of mutually canceling sovereignties.

Where and when they did exist, the states of mainland Southeast Asia lurched from solicitous measures designed to attract subjects to those designed to capture them and extract as much grain and labor as possible. Manpower was the key. Even in those cases where the bulk of the crown's revenue derived from trade, that revenue was ultimately dependent on the state's ability to mobilize the manpower to hold and defend an advantageous position along trade routes.[67] The state was tyrannical, but episodically so. Physical flight, the bedrock of popular freedom, was the principal check on state power. As we shall see in some detail, subjects who were sorely tried by conscription, forced labor, and taxes would typically move away to the hills or to a neighboring kingdom rather than revolt. Given the vagaries of war, succession struggles, crop failures, and monarchical delusions of grandeur, such crises of state-building were unpredictable but, sooner or later, inevitable.

Earlier debates over the writing of Southeast Asian history were about how the history of states should be written—not about whether states should have been the center of attention in the first place. Thus scholars criticized Georges Coedes's *Indianized States of Southeast Asia* for missing the purposeful importation and adaptation of Indian cosmology in the court centers of Southeast Asia.[68] To the distortions of Indian-centric histories were added, later, Eurocentric colonial histories in which the local societies were observed from “the deck of a ship, the ramparts of the fortress, the high gallery of the trading house.”[69] The call was subsequently issued for an “autonomous” history of Southeast Asia that might avoid both distortions.[70] And yet until very recently indeed, virtually all the responses to that call have themselves been histories, however learned and original, of the Southeast Asian state.

Why this should be so, why the histories of states should have so persistently insinuated themselves in the place that might have been occupied by a history of peoples, merits reflection. The reason, in a nutshell, I believe, is that state centers, even the tenuous and evanescent Indic-style classical states, are the political units that leave the most concentrated volume of

states were warmaking machines as well, producing hemorrhages of subjects fleeing conscription, invasion, and plunder. Thus the early state extruded populations as readily as it absorbed them, and when, as was often the case, it collapsed altogether as the result of war, drought, epidemic, or civil strife over succession, its populations were disorged. States were, by no means, a once-and-for-all creation. Innumerable archeological finds of state centers that briefly flourished and were then eclipsed by warfare, epidemics, famine, or ecological collapse depict a long history of state formation and collapse rather than permanence. For long periods people moved in and out of states, and “stateness” was, itself, often cyclical and reversible.[10]

This pattern of state-making and state-unmaking produced, over time, a periphery that was composed as much of refugees as of peoples who had never been state subjects. Much of the periphery of states became a zone of refuge or “shatter zone,” where the human shards of state formation and rivalry accumulated willy nilly, creating regions of bewildering ethnic and linguistic complexity. State expansion and collapse often had a ratchet effect as well, with fleeing subjects driving other peoples ahead of them seeking safety and new territory. Much of the Southeast Asian massif is, in effect, a shatter zone. The reputation of the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan as a “museum of human races” reflects this history of migration. Shatter zones are found wherever the expansion of states, empires, slave-trading, and wars, as well as natural disasters, have driven large numbers of people to seek refuge in out-of-the-way places: in Amazonia, in highland Latin America (with the notable exception of the Andes, with their arable highland plateaus and states), in that corridor of highland Africa safe from slave-raiding, in the Balkans and the Caucasus. The diagnostic characteristics of shatter zones are their relative geographical inaccessibility and the enormous diversity of tongues and cultures.

Note that this account of the periphery is sharply at odds with the official story most civilizations tell about themselves. According to that tale, a backward, naïve, and perhaps barbaric people are gradually incorporated into an advanced, superior, and more prosperous society and culture. If, instead, many of these ungoverned barbarians had, at one time or another, elected, as a political choice, to take their distance from the state, a new element of political agency enters the picture. Many, perhaps most, inhabitants of the ungoverned margins are not remnants of an earlier social formation, left behind, or, as some lowland folk accounts in Southeast Asia have it, “our living ancestors.” The situation of populations that have deliberately placed themselves at the state's periphery has occasionally been

termed, infelicitously, secondary primitivism. Their subsistence routines, their social organization, their physical dispersal, and many elements of their culture, far from being the archaic traits of a people left behind, are purposefully crafted both to thwart incorporation into nearby states and to minimize the likelihood that statelike concentrations of power will arise among them. State evasion and state prevention permeate their practices and, often, their ideology as well. They are, in other words, a “state effect.” They are “barbarians by design.” They continue to conduct a brisk and mutually advantageous trade with lowland centers while steering clear of being politically captured.

Once we entertain the possibility that the “barbarians” are not just “there” as a residue but may well have chosen their location, their subsistence practices, and their social structure to maintain their autonomy, the standard civilizational story of social evolution collapses utterly. The temporal, civilizational series—from foraging to swiddening (or to pastoralism), to sedentary grain cultivation, to irrigated wet-rice farming—and its near-twin, the series from roving forest bands to small clearings, to hamlets, to villages, to towns, to court centers: these are the underpinning of the valley state’s sense of superiority. What if the presumptive “stages” of these series were, in fact, an array of social options, each of which represented a distinctive positioning vis-à-vis the state? And what if, over considerable periods of time, many groups have moved strategically among these options toward more presumptively “primitive” forms in order to keep the state at arm’s length? On this view, the civilizational discourse of the valley states—and not a few earlier theorists of social evolution—is not much more than a self-inflating way of confounding the status of state-subject with civilization and that of self-governing peoples with primitivism.

The logic of the argument made throughout this book would essentially reverse this logic. Most, if not all, the characteristics that appear to stigmatize hill peoples—their location at the margins, their physical mobility, their swidden agriculture, their flexible social structure, their religious heterodoxy, their egalitarianism, and even the nonliterate, oral cultures—far from being the mark of primitives left behind by civilization, are better seen on a long view as adaptations designed to evade both state capture and state formation. They are, in other words, political adaptations of non-state peoples to a world of states that are, at once, attractive and threatening.

### **Creating Subjects**

Avoiding the state was, until the past few centuries, a real option. A thou-

tance as the most significant complex catchment zone for refugees from state-making projects in the valleys. The inhabitants of this zone have come, or remained, here largely because it lies beyond the reach of the state. Here, the geographical expression Southeast Asia, as conventionally understood as stopping at the borders of Southeast Asian nations, is again an impediment to our understanding. Over the past two millennia, Zomia has been peopled by countless migrations of populations from well beyond its borders—many of them onetime sedentary cultivators. They have fled west and southward from Han, and occasionally Tibetan, rule (the Tai, the Yao/Mien, the Hmong/Miao, the Lahu, and the Akha/Hani) or northward from Thai and Burman rule. Their geographic location is a political, cultural, and, often, military decision.

I argue further that hill peoples cannot be understood in isolation, say, as tribes, but only relationally and positionally vis-à-vis valley kingdoms. Ethnic distinctions and identity in the hills are not only quite variable over time but also usually encode a group’s relative position vis-à-vis state authority. There are, I would hazard, hardly “tribes” at all, except in this limited relational sense of the word. The subsistence practices, the choice of crops to grow, are, by the same token, selected largely with an eye to how they facilitate or thwart state appropriation. Finally, as noted earlier, even the social structures and residence patterns in the hills may be usefully viewed as political choices vis-à-vis state power. Certain egalitarian social structures reflect, I believe, a Southeast Asian variant of Berber practice: “Divide that ye be not ruled.”[65] Far from being sociological and cultural givens, lineage practices, genealogical reckoning, local leadership patterns, household structures, and perhaps even the degrees of literacy have been calibrated to prevent (and in rare cases to facilitate) incorporation in the state.[66] A bold case along these lines is subject to many qualifications and exceptions. I venture it, nevertheless, not simply to be provocative but because it seems so much more in keeping with the evidence than the older traditions of relatively self-contained hill tribes left behind by civilization and progress.

### **Toward an Anarchist History of Mainland Southeast Asia**

What blocks a clear view of the peoples of mainland Southeast Asia for most of their history is the state: classical, colonial, and independent. While a state-centric view of, say, the past fifty years might be justified, it represents a gross distortion of earlier periods. The earlier the period, the greater the distortion. For most of its history, Southeast Asia has been marked by the relative absence even of valley states. Where they arose, they tended to be remarkably short-lived, comparatively weak outside a small

Gellner's analysis of Berber-Arab relations is also noteworthy as a long overdue corrective to what might be called "the view from the valley" or "the view from the state center." On that view the "barbarian periphery" is a diminishing remnant, drawn sooner or later and at varying speeds into the light of Arab civilization. In Southeast Asia and the Maghreb this view gains credibility because, in the past century, the ungoverned periphery has increasingly been occupied by the modern nation-state. Up until then, however, the view from the valley—the idea of a luminous and magnetic center aligning and drawing in peripheral peoples like so many iron filings—is, at the very least, half wrong. Up until then a life outside the state was both more available and more attractive. Oscillation rather than one-way traffic was the rule. If the account elaborated here emphasizes state avoidance, it is not because that is the whole truth. Rather, it is the largely untold story that has unfortunately had no legitimate place in the hegemonic narrative of civilization, despite its historical importance.

This model of symbiosis and opposition, of political choice and geographical facilitation, is, roughly speaking, applicable to the historical relationship between hill peoples and valley states in mainland Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, as in the Maghreb, the distinction between the "governed" and the "ungoverned" is an apparent social fact, but it is even more firmly installed in linguistic usage and popular consciousness. Depending on the particular cultural context, the connotations of the pairs "cooked" and "raw," "tame" and "wild," "valley people" and "hill people" carry the same weight as *makhazen* and *siba*—that is to say, "governed" and "ungoverned." The linkage between being civilized and being a subject of the state is so taken for granted that the terms subject peoples on the one hand or self-governing peoples on the other capture the essential difference.

The classical states of Southeast Asia were, as in the Middle East, ringed by relatively free communities: by nonstate spaces and peoples. Such autonomous peoples lived not only in the hills but also in the marshes, swamps, mangrove coasts, and labyrinthine waterways of estuarial regions. This marginal population represented, at one and the same time, an indispensable trading partner of valley kingdoms, a zone of refuge from state power, a zone of relative equality and physical mobility, a source of slaves and subjects for valley states, and an ecocultural identity that was nearly a mirror image of lowland identities. Thus, while our attention here is trained on the uplands of Zomia, we are, more generally, concerned with the relationship between state spaces and extrastate spaces. The focus on Zomia as a vast interstate massif, in particular, arises simply because of its impor-

sand years ago most people lived outside state structures, under loose-knit empires or in situations of fragmented sovereignty.[11] Today it is an option that is fast vanishing. To appreciate how the room for maneuver has been drastically curtailed in the past millennium, a radically schematic and simplified fast-forward history of the balance of power between stateless peoples and states may be helpful.

The permanent association of the state and sedentary agriculture is at the center of this story.[12] Fixed-field grain agriculture has been promoted by the state and has been, historically, the foundation of its power. In turn, sedentary agriculture leads to property rights in land, the patriarchal family enterprise, and an emphasis, also encouraged by the state, on large families. Grain farming is, in this respect, inherently expansionary, generating, when not checked by disease or famine, a surplus population, which is obliged to move and colonize new lands. By any long-run perspective, then, it is grain agriculture that is "nomadic" and aggressive, constantly reproducing copies of itself, while, as Hugh Brody aptly notes, foragers and hunters, relying on a single area and demographically far more stable, seem by comparison "profoundly settled." [13]

The massive expansion of European power, via colonialism and whiteman colonies, represented a vast expansion of sedentary agriculture. In the "neo-Europes" such as North America, Australia, Argentina, and New Zealand, Europeans reproduced, as far as possible, the agriculture with which they were familiar. In colonies with preexisting states based on sedentary agriculture, the Europeans replaced the indigenous overlords as sovereigns, collecting taxes and encouraging agriculture as had their predecessors, but more effectively. All other subsistence patterns, except when they provided valuable trade goods (for example, furs), were, fiscally speaking, considered sterile. Thus foragers, hunters, shifting-cultivators, and pastoralists were bypassed and ignored or driven from potentially arable farmland into territories considered wastelands. Nevertheless, as late as the end of the eighteenth century, though they were no longer a majority of the world's population, nonstate peoples still occupied the greater part of the world's land mass—forest lands, rugged mountains, steppes, deserts, polar regions, marshes, and inaccessibly remote zones. Such regions were still a potential refuge for those who had reason to flee the state.

These stateless peoples were not, by and large, easily drawn into the fiscally legible economy of wage labor and sedentary agriculture. On this definition, "civilization" held little attraction for them when they could have all the advantages of trade without the drudgery, subordination, and immo-

bility of state subjects. The widespread resistance of stateless peoples led directly to what might be called the golden age of slavery along the littoral of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and in Southeast Asia.[14] From the perspective adopted here, populations were forcibly removed en masse from settings where their production and labor were illegible and inappropriate and were relocated in colonies and plantations where they could be made to grow cash crops (tea, cotton, sugar, indigo, coffee) which might contribute to the profits of landowners and the fiscal power of the state.[15] This first step of enclosure required forms of capture and bondage designed to relocate them from nonstate spaces where they were generally more autonomous (and healthy!) to places where their labor could be appropriated.

The final two stages of this massive enclosure movement belong, in the case of Europe, to the nineteenth century and, in the case of Southeast Asia, largely to the late twentieth century. They mark such a radical shift in the relationship between states and their peripheries that they fall largely outside the story I tell here. In this last period, “enclosure” has meant not so much shifting people from stateless zones to areas of state control but rather colonizing the periphery itself and transforming it into a fully governed, fiscally fertile zone. Its immanent logic, unlikely ever to be fully realized, is the complete elimination of nonstate spaces. This truly imperial project, made possible only by distance-demolishing technologies (all-weather roads, bridges, railroads, airplanes, modern weapons, telegraph, telephone, and now modern information technologies including global positioning systems), is so novel and its dynamics so different that my analysis here makes no further sense in Southeast Asia for the period after, say, 1950. Modern conceptions of national sovereignty and the resource needs of mature capitalism have brought that final enclosure into view.

The hegemony, in this past century, of the nation-state as the standard and nearly exclusive unit of sovereignty has proven profoundly inimical to non-state peoples. State power, in this conception, is the state’s monopoly of coercive force that must, in principle, be fully projected to the very edge of its territory, where it meets, again in principle, another sovereign power projecting its command to its own adjacent frontier. Gone, in principle, are the large areas of no sovereignty or mutually canceling weak sovereignties. Gone too, of course, are peoples under no particular sovereignty. As a practical matter, most nation-states have tried, insofar as they had the means, to give substance to this vision, establishing armed border posts, moving loyal populations to the frontier and relocating or driving away “disloyal” populations, clearing frontier lands for sedentary agriculture, building

written in terms of the opposition between the land of makhazen (the pale) and the land of siba (beyond the pale). Siba could be defined as “institutional dissidence,” though it has sometimes been translated as “anarchy.” In practice, siba means “ungoverned,” a zone of political autonomy and independence, while makhazen means “governed,” subordinated to the state. Political autonomy was, Gellner insists, a choice, not a given.

To those groups that have self-consciously elected to move or to stay beyond the pale, Gellner applies the term marginal tribalism to emphasize that their marginality is a political stance:

*Such tribesmen know the possibility ... of being incorporated in a more centralized state.... Indeed, they may have deliberately rejected and violently resisted the alternative. The tribes of the High Atlas are of this kind. Until the advent of the modern state, they were dissident and self-consciously so.... “Marginal” tribalism ... [is] the type of tribal society which exists at the edge of nontribal societies. It arises from the fact that the inconveniences of submission make it attractive to withdraw from political authority and the balance of power, the nature of the mountainous or desert terrain make it feasible. Such tribalism is politically marginal. It knows what it rejects.*

In the Maghreb, as in Zomia, the distinction between a zone of state rule and a marginal, autonomous zone was geographical and ecological as well as political. There is a “rough tie-up between high-ground, Berber speech and political dissidence,” such that “gorges and mountains were a clear dividing line between the land of the government (bled el-makhazen) and the land of dissidence (bled-es-siba).”[64]

The Berber case is instructive for two reasons. First, Gellner makes it abundantly clear that the demarcation line between Arab and Berber is not, essentially, one of civilization, let alone religion. Instead, it is a political line distinguishing the subjects of a state from those outside its control. Assuming, as Gellner does, historical movement back and forth across this divide, what becomes intriguing is that a distinction in political status is ethnically coded as if it were a fundamental difference in kinds of people and not a political choice. It means that all those who had reason to flee state power, for whatever reason, were, in a sense, tribalizing themselves. Ethnicity and tribe began, by definition, where sovereignty and taxes ended. The ethnic zone was feared and stigmatized by state rhetoric precisely because it was beyond its grasp and therefore an example of defiance and an ever-present temptation to those who might wish to evade the state.

man history: what we were like before we discovered wet-rice agriculture, learned to write, developed the arts of civilization, and adopted Buddhism. While this “just-so” story treats valley cultures as later, and higher, achievements of civilization, raised from the muck of tribalism, as it were, it grossly distorts the historical record. Valley states and hill peoples are, instead, constituted in each other’s shadow, both reciprocal and contemporaneous. Hill societies have always been in touch with imperial states in the valleys directly or via maritime trade routes. Valley states, by the same token, have always been in touch with the nonstate periphery—what Deleuze and Guattari call “the local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of state power.” Such states are, in fact, “inconceivable independent of that relationship.”[59]

Precisely the same case has been made about the relationship between itinerant peoples—including pastoral nomads—and states. Thus Pierre Clastres argues persuasively that the so-called primitive Amerindian societies of South America were not ancient societies that had failed to invent settled agriculture or state forms but rather previously sedentary cultivators who abandoned agriculture and fixed villages in response to the effects of the Conquest: both disease-induced demographic collapse and colonial forced labor.[60] Their movement and subsistence techniques were designed to ward off incorporation into the state. On the steppes of Central Asia the most ancient nomads, Griaznov has shown, were former sedentary cultivators who similarly left cultivation behind for political and demographic reasons.[61] Lattimore reached the same conclusion, insisting that pastoral nomadism arose after farming and drew in sedentary cultivators at the edge of the grasslands who “had detached themselves from farming communities.”[62] Far from being successive stages in social evolution, such states and nomadic peoples are twins, born more or less at the same time and joined in a sometimes rancorous but unavoidable embrace.

This pattern of paired symbiosis and opposition is a staple of Middle Eastern history and anthropology. In the Maghreb it takes the form of structural opposition between Arabs and Berbers. Ernest Gellner’s classic *Saints of the Atlas* captures the dynamic I have in mind. Gellner, too, emphasized that the political autonomy and tribalism of the Berber population in the High Atlas is “not a tribalism ‘prior to government’ but a political and partial rejection of a particular government combined with some acceptance of a wider culture and its ethic.”[63] Sharing elements of a larger culture and a faith in Islam, such tribal opposition is explicitly political and deliberately so. Until very recently, Gellner claims, Moroccan history could be

roads to the borders, and registering hitherto fugitive peoples.

On the heels of this notion of sovereignty came the realization that these neglected and seemingly useless territories to which stateless peoples had been relegated were suddenly of great value to the economies of mature capitalism.[16] They contained valuable resources—oil, iron ore, copper, lead, timber, uranium, bauxite, the rare metals essential to the aerospace and electronics industries, hydroelectric sites, bioprospecting and conservation areas—that might in many cases be the linchpin of state revenue. Places that long ago might have been desirable for their deposits of silver, gold, and gems, not to mention slaves, became the object of a new gold rush. All the more reason to project state power to the nethermost reaches of these ungoverned regions and bring their inhabitants under firm control.

Occupying and controlling the margins of the state implied a cultural policy as well. Much of the periphery along national borders of mainland Southeast Asia is inhabited by peoples linguistically and culturally distinct from the populations that dominate the state cores. Alarming, they spill promiscuously across national frontiers, generating multiple identities and possible foci of irredentism or secession. Weak valley states have permitted, or rather tolerated, a certain degree of autonomy when they had little choice. Where they could, however, all states in the region have tried to bring such peoples under their routine administration, to encourage and, more rarely, to insist upon linguistic, cultural, and religious alignment with the majority population at the state core. This meant, in Thailand, encouraging, say, the Lahu to become Thai-speaking, literate, Buddhist subjects of the monarchy. In Burma it meant encouraging, say, the Karen to become Burmese-speaking Buddhists loyal to the military junta.[17]

Parallel to policies of economic, administrative, and cultural absorption has been the policy, driven by both demographic pressure and self-conscious design, of engulfment. Huge numbers of land-hungry majorities from the plains have moved, or been moved, to the hills. There, they replicate valley settlement patterns and sedentary agriculture, and, over time, they demographically dominate the dispersed, less numerous hill peoples. The combination of forced settlement and engulfment is nicely illustrated by a series of Vietnamese mobilization campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s: “Campaign to Sedentarize the Nomads,” “Campaign for Fixed Cultivation and Fixed Residence,” “Storm the Hills Campaign,” and “Clear the Hills by Torchlight Campaign.”[18]

Culturally, this reduction and standardization of relatively autonomous, self-governing communities is a process of long historical lineage. It is an integral theme of the historical consciousness of each of the large mainland Southeast Asian states. In the Vietnamese official national narrative, the “march to the south”—to the Mekong and the trans-Bassac Deltas—inaccurate though it is as a description of the historical process, vies with the wars of national liberation for pride of place.[19] Burmese and Thai history are no less marked by the movement of population from their more northern historical cores of Mandalay, Ayutthaya, and what is now Hanoi into the Irrawaddy, Chao Praya, and Mekong river deltas, respectively. The great cosmopolitan, maritime cities of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Rangoon, and Bangkok that grew to serve this onetime frontier, delta, hinterland have come, demographically, to dominate the earlier inland capitals.

Internal colonialism, broadly understood, aptly describes this process. It involved the absorption, displacement, and/or extermination of the previous inhabitants. It involved a botanical colonization in which the landscape was transformed—by deforestation, drainage, irrigation, and levees—to accommodate crops, settlement patterns, and systems of administration familiar to the state and to the colonists. One way of appreciating the effect of this colonization is to view it as a massive reduction of vernaculars of all kinds: of vernacular languages, minority peoples, vernacular cultivation techniques, vernacular land tenure systems, vernacular hunting, gathering, and forestry techniques, vernacular religion, and so on. The attempt to bring the periphery into line is read by representatives of the sponsoring state as providing civilization and progress—where progress is, in turn, read as the intrusive propagation of the linguistic, agricultural, and religious practices of the dominant ethnic group: the Han, the Kinh, the Burman, the Thai.[20]

The remaining self-governing peoples and spaces of mainland Southeast Asia are much diminished. We shall, for the most part, concentrate on the so-called hill peoples (often mistakenly called tribes) of mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Burma. While I will clarify what I mean by the awkward term nonstate spaces, it is not simply a synonym for hills or for higher altitudes. States, being associated with concentrated grain production, typically arise where there is a substantial expanse of arable land. In mainland Southeast Asia, this agro-ecology is generally at low elevations, allowing us to speak of “valley states” and “hill peoples.” Where, as in the Andes, most easily cultivable land under traditional conditions is located at

come to the hills over the past two millennia. This flight was not only from the Burman, Tai, and Siamese states but also, and most especially, from the Han Empire during the expansionary phases of the Tang, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, when its forces and settlers pressed into southwest China. In the hills they might have moved several times subsequently, pressed by other, stronger fugitives or threatened by a new state expansion, or in search of new land and autonomy. Their location and many of their economic and cultural practices could again fairly be termed a state effect. This picture is radically at odds with older prevailing assumptions of a primeval population in the hills abandoned by those who moved downhill and developed civilizations.

By the same token, the valley centers of wet-rice cultivation may profitably be seen as constituting a hill effect in the following ways. The valley states are, of course, new structures historically speaking, dating back to roughly the middle of the first millennium CE. They were formed from an earlier ingathering of diverse peoples, some of whom may have adopted fixed-field agriculture, but who were, by definition, not previously part of an established state.[57] The very earliest mandala states were less engines of military conquest than cultural spaces available to all those who wished to conform to their religious, linguistic, and cultural formats, whatever their origin.[58] Perhaps because such identities were newly conected from many cultural shards, the resulting valley self-representations were at pains to distinguish their culture from populations outside the state. Thus if hill society could be termed a state effect, valley culture could be seen as a hill effect.

Most of the terms that we would translate as crude, unrefined, barbaric, and, in the Chinese case, raw refer directly to those who live in the hills and forests. “Forest dweller” or “hill person” is shorthand for “uncivilized.” Thus, despite a centuries-old, brisk traffic in people, goods, and culture across the very permeable membrane between the hills and valleys, it is striking how stark and durable the cultural divide remains in lived experience. Valley and hill peoples generally have an essentialist understanding of the differences between them that appears to be at odds with the historical evidence over the long run.

How can we make sense of this paradox? Perhaps the first step is to emphasize that the relationship between valley states and hill society is not just symbiotic but also both contemporaneous and quasi-oppositional. In older understandings of hill “tribes,” not to mention popular folklore today, they are considered to be the historical remnants of an earlier stage of hu-

or less intimate association—in this case, social organisms. The term does not specify, nor do I wish to do so here, whether this mutual dependence is antagonistic, or even parasitic, or whether it is mutually beneficial, “synergistic.”

It is not possible to write a coherent history of the hills that is not in constant dialogue with lowland centers; nor is it possible to write a coherent history of lowland centers that ignores its hilly periphery. By and large, most students of hill societies have been sensitive to this dialectic, stressing the deep history of symbolic, economic, and human traffic between the two societies. The same typically cannot be said of work—even the most distinguished—on lowland centers.[56] The pattern is hardly surprising. Treatment of lowland cultures and societies as self-contained entities (for example, “Thai civilization,” “Chinese culture”) replicates the unreflective structure of scholarship and, in doing so, adopts the hermetic view of culture that lowland elites themselves wish to project. The fact is that hill and valley societies have to be read against each other to make any sense. I attempt just such a reading here.

Writing an account of valley population centers without including the hills would be like writing a history of colonial New England and the Middle Atlantic States without considering the American frontier. It would be like writing a history of antebellum slavery in the United States while leaving out the freedmen and the lure of freedom in Canada. In each case, an external frontier conditioned, bounded, and in many respects constituted what was possible at the center. Accounts of lowland states that miss this dimension do not merely “leave out” the hills; they ignore a set of boundary conditions and exchanges that make the center what it is.

The constant movement back and forth between the valleys and the hills—its causes, its patterns, its consequences—will preoccupy us. Many valley people are, as it were, “ex-hill people,” and many hill people are “ex-valley people.” Nor did movement in one direction or the other preclude subsequent moves. Depending on the circumstances, groups have disengaged themselves from a state and then, later, sought to affiliate themselves (or been seized by!) the same or another state. A century or two later, they might again be found outside that state’s grasp, perhaps because they had moved away or perhaps because the state in question had itself collapsed. Such shifts were often accompanied by a shift in ethnic identity, broadly understood. I will argue for a radically “constructionist” understanding of the so-called hill tribes of mainland Southeast Asia. They are best understood, at least as a first approximation, as a fugitive population that has

high elevations, it is the other way around. The states were in the hills and nonstate spaces were downhill in the humid lowlands. Thus the key variable is not so much elevation per se as the possibility for concentrated grain production. Nonstate space, by contrast, points to locations where, owing largely to geographical obstacles, the state has particular difficulty in establishing and maintaining its authority. A Ming emperor had something like this in mind when he described the southwest provinces of his kingdom: “The roads are long and dangerous, the mountains and rivers present great obstacles, and the customs and practices differ.”[21] But swamps, marshes, mangrove coasts, deserts, volcanic margins, and even the open sea, like the ever growing and changing deltas of Southeast Asia’s great rivers, all function in much the same way. Thus it is difficult or inaccessible terrain, regardless of elevation, that presents great obstacles to state control. As we shall see at great length, such places have often served as havens of refuge for peoples resisting or fleeing the state.

### **The Great Mountain Kingdom; or, “Zomia”; or, The Marches of Mainland Southeast Asia**

One of the largest remaining nonstate spaces in the world, if not the largest, is the vast expanse of uplands, variously termed the Southeast Asian massif and, more recently, Zomia.[22] This great mountain realm on the marches of mainland Southeast Asia, China, India, and Bangladesh sprawls across roughly 2.5 million square kilometers—an area roughly the size of Europe. As one of the first scholars to identify the massif and its peoples as a single object of study, Jean Michaud has traced its extent: “From north to south, it includes southern and western Sichuan, all of Guizhou and Yunnan, western and northern Guangxi, western Guangdong, most of northern Burma with an adjacent segment of extreme [north]eastern India, the north and west of Thailand, practically all of Laos above the Mekong Valley, northern and central Vietnam along the Annam Cordillera, and the north and eastern fringes of Cambodia.”[23]

Rough calculations would put Zomia minority populations alone at around eighty million to one hundred million.[24] Its peoples are fragmented into hundreds of ethnic identities and at least five language families that defy any simple classification.

Lying at altitudes from two hundred or three hundred meters above sea level to more than four thousand meters, Zomia could be thought of as a Southeast Asian Appalachia, were it not for the fact that it sprawls across eight nation-states. A better analogy would be Switzerland, a mountain kingdom at the periphery of Germany, France, and Italy that itself became

a nation-state. Borrowing Ernest Gellner's felicitous phrase referring to the Berbers of the High Atlas Mountains, this huge hilly zone might be seen as a "pervasive Switzerland without cuckoo clocks." [25] Far from being a hilly nation, however, this upland belt lies on the marches, far from the main population centers of the nations it traverses. [26] Zomia is marginal in almost every respect. It lies at a great distance from the main centers of economic activity; it bestrides a contact zone between eight nation-states and several religious traditions and cosmologies. [27]

Scholarship organized historically around the classical states and their cultural cores and, more recently, around the nation-state is singularly ill-equipped to examine this upland belt as a whole. Willem van Schendel is one of a handful of pioneers who have argued that these cumulative nation-state "shards" merit consideration as a distinctive region. He has gone so far as to give it the dignity of a name of its own: Zomia, a term for highlander common to several related Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the India-Bangladesh-Burma border area. [28] More precisely, Zo is a relational term meaning "remote" and hence carries the connotation of living in the hills; Mi means "people." As is the case elsewhere in Southeast Asia Mi-zo or Zo-mi designated a remote hill people, while at the same time the ethnic label applies to a geographical niche. [29] Although van Schendel proposes a bold expansion of Zomia's boundaries to Afghanistan and beyond, I will confine my use of the term to the hilly areas eastward, beginning with the Naga and Mizo hills in northern India and Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Zomia, at first glance, would seem an unlikely candidate for consideration as a distinctive region. The premise for calling a geographical area a region is typically that it shares important cultural features that mark it off from adjacent areas. In this fashion, Fernand Braudel was able to show that the coastal societies around the Mediterranean Sea constituted a region, owing to their long and intense commercial and cultural connections. [30] Despite political and religious chasms between, say, Venice and Istanbul, they were integral parts of a recognizable world of exchange and mutual influence. Anthony Reid has made a similar, and in many respects, more powerful claim for the Sunda Shelf littoral in maritime Southeast Asia, where trade and migration were, if anything, easier than in the Mediterranean. [31] The principle behind region-making in each case is that, for the pre-modern world, water, especially if it is calm, joins people, whereas mountains, especially if they are high and rugged, divide people. As late as 1740 it took no more time to sail from Southampton to the Cape of Good Hope than to travel by stagecoach from London to Edinburgh.

to delineate an upland, remote zone of West Africa that was relatively safe from the five hundred-year-long worldwide slave-raiding and trade that caught tens of millions of in its toils. [54] This zone of refuge grew in population despite the difficulties of the terrain and the necessity for new subsistence routines. Many of those who failed to evade the slave raids in Africa, once transplanted to the New World, promptly escaped and created fugitive slave (maroon) settlements wherever slavery was practiced: the famous highland "cockpit" of Jamaica; Palmares in Brazil, a maroon community of some twenty thousand inhabitants; and Surinam, the largest maroon population in the hemisphere, are only three illustrations. Were we to include smaller scale "refugia" such as marshes, swamps, and deltas, the list would multiply many-fold. To mention only a few, the great marsh on the lower Euphrates (drained under Saddam Hussein's rule) was for two thousand years a refuge from state control. So, on a smaller scale, were the storied Great Dismal Swamp on the North Carolina-Virginia border, the Pripet Marshes in Poland, now on the Belarus-Ukraine border, and the Pontian Marshes near Rome (drained finally by Mussolini) known as zones of refuge from the state. The list of such refugia is at least as long as the list of coercive labor schemes that inevitably spawn them.

Hill societies in mainland Southeast Asia, then, for all their riotous heterogeneity, have certain characteristics in common, and most of these characteristics distinguish them sharply from their valley neighbors. They encode a pattern of historic flight and hence a position of opposition if not resistance. If it is this historical, structural relation that we hope to illuminate, then it makes no sense whatever to confine ourselves to a nation-state framework. For much of the period we wish to examine there was no nation-state and, when it did come into being late in the game, many hill people continued to conduct their cross-border lives as if the state didn't exist. The concept of "Zomia" marks an attempt to explore a new genre of "area" studies, in which the justification for designating the area has nothing to do with national boundaries (for example, Laos) or strategic conceptions (for example, Southeast Asia) but is rather based on certain ecological regularities and structural relationships that do not hesitate to cross national frontiers. If we have our way, the example of "Zomia studies" will inspire others to follow this experiment elsewhere and improve on it.

### **The Symbiotic History of Hills and Valleys**

Histories of the classical lowland court-states, taken in isolation, risk being unintelligible or vastly misleading. Lowland states (mandala or modern) have always existed in symbiosis with hill society. [55] By symbiosis, I mean to invoke the biological metaphor of two organisms living together in more

zone or flight zone to which those wishing to evade or to escape bondage fled. These regions of refuge constituted a direct “state effect.” Zomia simply happens to be, owing largely to the precocious early expansion of the Chinese state, one of the most extensive and oldest zones of refuge. Such regions are, however, inevitable by-products of coercive state-making and are found on every continent. A few of them will figure as comparative cases in what follows, but here I want to enumerate several examples to suggest how common they are.

The forced-labor characteristic of Spanish colonization in the New World provoked the widespread flight of native peoples out of range, often to hilly or arid places where they could live unmolested.[50] Such areas were marked by great linguistic and ethnic diversity and occasionally by a simplification of social structure and subsistence routines—foraging, shifting cultivation—to increase mobility. The process was repeated in the Spanish Philippines, where, it is claimed, the cordillera of northern Luzon was populated almost entirely by lowland Filipinos fleeing Malay slave raids and the Spanish *reducciones*. [51] As peoples adapted to hill ecology, a process of ethnogenesis followed, after which highland Filipinos were later misrepresented as the descendants of separate, prehistoric migrations to the island.

The Cossacks on Russia’s many frontiers represent another striking example of the process. They were, at the outset, nothing more and nothing less than runaway serfs from all over European Russia who accumulated at the frontier.[52] They became, depending on their location, different Cossack “hosts”: the Don (for the Don River basin) Cossacks, the Azov (Sea) Cossacks, and so on. There at the frontier, copying the horseback habits of their Tatar neighbors and sharing a common open-land pasture, they became “a people,” later used by the tsars, the Ottomans, and the Poles as cavalry. The history of the Roma and Sinti (Gypsies) in late-seventeenth-century Europe provides a further striking example.[53] Along with other stigmatized itinerant peoples, they were subject to two forms of penal labor: galley slavery in the Mediterranean basin and, in the northeast, forced conscription as soldiers or military porters in Prussia-Brandenburg. As a result they accumulated in a narrow band of territory that came to be known as the “outlaw corridor,” the one location between the catchment areas of these twin, mortal dangers.

Inasmuch as the captivity and bondage associated with early state-making generate, in their wake, flight and zones of refuge, slavery as a labor system produced many “Zomias” large and small. It is possible, in this context,

On these grounds, hilly Zomia would seem to be a “negative” region. Variety, more than uniformity, is its trademark. In the space of a hundred kilometers in the hills one can find more cultural variation—in language, dress, settlement pattern, ethnic identification, economic activity, and religious practices—than one would ever find in the lowland river valleys. Zomia may not quite attain the prodigious cultural variety of deeply fissured New Guinea, but its complex ethnic and linguistic mosaic has presented a bewildering puzzle for ethnographers and historians, not to mention would-be rulers. Scholarly work on the area has been as fragmented and isolated as the terrain itself seemed to be.[32]

I will argue not only that Zomia qualifies as a region in the strong sense of the term, but also that it is impossible to provide a satisfactory account of the valley states without understanding the central role played by Zomia in their formation and collapse. The dialectic or coevolution of hill and valley, as antagonistic but deeply connected spaces, is, I believe, the essential point of departure for making sense of historical change in Southeast Asia.

Most of what the hills share as physical and social spaces marks them off fairly sharply from the more populous lowland centers. The population of the hills is far more dispersed and culturally diverse than that of the valleys. It is as if the difficulties of terrain and relative isolation have, over many centuries, encouraged a kind of “speciation” of languages, dialects, dress, and cultural practices. The relative availability of forest resources and open, if steep, land has also allowed far more diverse subsistence practices than in the valleys, where wet-rice monocropping often prevails. Swiddening (or slash-and-burn agriculture), which requires more land and requires clearing new fields and occasionally shifting settlement sites, is far more common in the hills.

As a general rule, social structure in the hills is both more flexible and more egalitarian than in the hierarchical, codified valley societies. Hybrid identities, movement, and the social fluidity that characterizes many frontier societies are common. Early colonial officials, taking an inventory of their new possessions in the hills, were confused to encounter hamlets with several “peoples” living side by side: hill people who spoke three or four languages and both individuals and groups whose ethnic identity had shifted, sometimes within a single generation. Aspiring to Linnaean specificity in the classification of peoples as well as flora, territorial administrators were constantly frustrated by the bewildering flux of peoples who refused to stay put. There was, however, one principle of location that brought some

order to this apparent anarchy of identity, and that was its relation to altitude.[33] As Edmund Leach originally suggested, once one looks at Zomia not from a high-altitude balloon but, rather, horizontally, in terms of lateral slices through the topography, a certain order emerges.[34] In any given landscape, particular groups often settled within a narrow range of altitudes to exploit the agro-economic possibilities of that particular niche. Thus, for example, the Hmong have tended to settle at very high altitudes (between one thousand and eighteen hundred meters) and to plant maize, opium, and millet that will thrive at that elevation. If from a high-altitude balloon or on a map they appear to be a random scattering of small blotches, this is because they have occupied the mountaintops and left the midslopes and intervening valleys to other groups.

Specialization by altitude and niche within the hills leads to scattering. And yet long-distance travel, marriage alliances, similar subsistence patterns, and cultural continuity help foster coherent identities across considerable distances. The “Akha” along the Yunnan-Thai border and the “Hani” in the upper reaches of the Red River in northern Vietnam are recognizably the same culture, though separated by more than a thousand kilometers. They typically have more in common with each another than either group has with valley people a mere thirty or forty miles away. Zomia is thus knitted together as a region not by a political unity, which it utterly lacks, but by comparable patterns of diverse hill agriculture, dispersal and mobility, and rough egalitarianism, which, not incidentally, includes a relatively higher status for women than in the valleys.[35]

The signal, distinguishing trait of Zomia, vis-à-vis the lowland regions it borders, is that it is relatively stateless. Historically, of course, there have been states in the hills where a substantial fertile plateau and/or a key node in the overland trade routes made it possible. Nan Chao, Kengtung, Nan, and Lan-na were among the best known.[36] They are the exceptions that prove the rule. While state-making projects have abounded in the hills, it is fair to say that few have come to fruition. Those would-be kingdoms that did manage to defy the odds did so only for a relatively brief, crisis-strewn period.

Such episodes aside, the hills, unlike the valleys, have paid neither taxes to monarchs nor regular tithes to a permanent religious establishment. They have constituted a relatively free, stateless population of foragers and hill farmers. Zomia’s situation at the frontiers of lowland state centers has contributed to its relative isolation and the autonomy that such isolation favors. Lying athwart state borders where multiple competing sovereign-

There, in regions beyond the states’ immediate writ and, thus, at some remove from taxes, corvée labor, conscription, and the more than occasional epidemics and crop failures associated with population concentration and monocropping, such groups found relative freedom and safety. There, they practiced what I will call escape agriculture: forms of cultivation designed to thwart state appropriation. Even their social structure could fairly be called escape social structure inasmuch as it was designed to aid dispersal and autonomy and to ward off political subordination.

The tremendous linguistic and ethnic fluidity in the hills is itself a crucial social resource for adapting to changing constellations of power, inasmuch as it facilitates remarkable feats of identity shape-shifting. Zomians are not as a rule only linguistically and ethnically amphibious; they are, in their strong inclination to follow charismatic figures who arise among them, capable of nearly instantaneous social change, abandoning their fields and houses to join or form a new community at the behest of a trusted prophet. Their capacity to “turn on a dime” represents the ultimate in escape social structure. Illiteracy in the hills can, more speculatively, be interpreted in the same fashion. Virtually all hill peoples have legends claiming that they once had writing and either lost it or that it was stolen from them. Given the considerable advantages in plasticity of oral over written histories and genealogies, it is at least conceivable to see the loss of literacy and of written texts as a more or less deliberate adaptation to statelessness.

The argument, in short, is that the history of hill peoples is best understood as a history not of archaic remnants but of “runaways” from state-making processes in the lowlands: a largely “maroon” society, providing that we take a very long historical view. Many of the agricultural and social practices of hill peoples can be best understood as techniques to make good this evasion, while maintaining the economic advantages of the lowland connection.

The concentration of people and production at a single location required some form of unfree labor when population was sparse, as it was in Southeast Asia. All Southeast Asian states were slaving states, without exception, some of them until well into the twentieth century. Wars in precolonial Southeast Asia were less about territory than about the seizure of as many captives as possible who were then resettled at the core of the winner’s territory. They were not distinctive in this respect. After all, in Periclean Athens, the population of slaves outnumbered full citizens by five to one.

The effect of all state-making projects of this kind was to create a shatter

## Zones of Refuge

There is strong evidence that Zomia is not simply a region of resistance to valley states, but a region of refuge as well.[46] By “refuge,” I mean to imply that much of the population in the hills has, for more than a millennium and a half, come there to evade the manifold afflictions of state-making projects in the valleys. Far from being “left behind” by the progress of civilization in the valleys, they have, over long periods of time, chosen to place themselves out of the reach of the state. Jean Michaud notes, in this connection, that what he calls nomadism in the hills can be “an escape or survival strategy” and sees the unprecedented series of massive rebellions in the latter half of the nineteenth century in central and southwest China as having pushed the millions of refugees streaming south into the more remote highlands. He is sympathetic to the view adopted here that Zomia is best seen historically as a region of refuge from states, most especially the Han state. “It is probably fair to say,” he concludes, “that the highland populations who migrated from China to the ... highlands over the past five centuries were, at least in part, pushed from their homelands by aggression from more powerful neighbors, including especially Han expansion.”[47]

Detailed and unambiguous documentary evidence of the conflicts generated by Han expansion and the migratory flights it provoked is abundant from the early Ming Dynasty (1368) onward, becoming even more abundant under the Qing. Earlier documentation is harder to come by and more ambiguous, owing to the great fluidity of ethnic and political labels. The general pattern, however, seems to be as follows: as the reach of the Chinese state grew, peoples at the point of expansion were either absorbed (becoming, in time, Han) or moved away, often after a failed revolt. Those who left became, at least for a time, distinct societies that could be said to have “selfmarginalized” by migration.[48] As the process was repeated again and again, culturally complex zones of refuge sprang up in the hinterlands of the state. “The history of the various non-state peoples of this region” can, Fiskesjö believes, be written as the bifurcation between those who had long been in the hills (for example, the Wa people) and those who sought refuge there: “Among those who left [the zone of Chinese state power], we find many Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic formations (Lahu, Hani, Akha, etc.) as well as Miao or Hmong speakers, and other peoples ... described as ‘hill tribes out of China’ with a ‘heritage of defeat’ that has led many of them during the past few centuries, into the northern parts of the modern states of Thailand, Burma, Laos, and Vietnam where many of them are still regarded as newcomers.”[49]

ties about one another has itself afforded its peoples certain advantages for smuggling, contraband, opium production, and the “small border powers” that negotiate a tenuous, high-wire act of quasi-independence.[37]

A stronger and, I believe, more accurate political description is that the hill populations of Zomia have actively resisted incorporation into the framework of the classical state, the colonial state, and the independent nation-state. Beyond merely taking advantage of their geographical isolation from centers of state power, much of Zomia has “resisted the projects of nation-building and state-making of the states to which it belonged.”[38] This resistance came especially to light after the creation of independent states after World War II, when Zomia became the site of secessionist movements, indigenous rights struggles, millennial rebellions, regionalist agitation, and armed opposition to lowland states. But it is a resistance with deeper roots. In the precolonial period, the resistance can be seen in a cultural refusal of lowland patterns and in the flight of lowlanders seeking refuge in the hills.

During the colonial era, the autonomy of the hills, politically and culturally, was underwritten by the Europeans for whom a separately administered hill zone was a makeweight against the lowland majorities resentful of colonial rule. One effect of this classic divide-and-rule policy is that, with a few exceptions, hill peoples typically played little or no role—or an antagonistic one—in the anticolonial movements. They remained, at best, marginal to the nationalist narrative or, at worst, were seen as a fifth column threatening that independence. It is partly for such reasons that the post-colonial lowland states have sought fully to exercise authority in the hills: by military occupation, by campaigns against shifting cultivation, by forced settlements, by promoting the migration of lowlanders to the hills, by efforts at religious conversion, by space-conquering roads, bridges, and telephone lines, and by development schemes that project government administration and lowland cultural styles into the hills.

The hills, however, are not simply a space of political resistance but also a zone of cultural refusal. If it were merely a matter of political authority, one might expect the hill society to resemble valley society culturally except for their altitude and the dispersed settlement that the terrain favors. But the hill populations do not generally resemble the valley centers culturally, religiously, or linguistically. This cultural chasm between the mountains and the plains has been claimed as something of a historical constant in Europe as well, until quite recently. Fernand Braudel acknowledged the political autonomy of the hills when he approvingly quoted Baron de Tott

to the effect that “the steepest places have always been the asylum of liberty.” But he carried the argument much further, asserting the existence of an unbridgeable cultural gap between plains and mountains. He wrote: “The mountains are as a rule a world apart from civilizations which are an urban and lowland achievement. Their history is to have none, to remain always on the fringes of the great waves of civilization, even the longest and most persistent, which may spread over great distances in the horizontal plane but are powerless to move vertically when faced with an obstacle of several hundred meters.”[39] Braudel was, in turn, only echoing a much older view captured by the great fourteenth-century Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun, who noted that “Arabs can gain control only over flat territory” and do not pursue tribes that hide in the mountains.[40] Compare Braudel’s bold assertion that civilizations can’t climb hills to a nearly identical assertion made by Oliver Wolters, quoting Paul Wheatley, about precolonial Southeast Asia: “Many people lived in the distant highlands and were beyond the reach of the centers where records survive. The mandalas [court centers of civilization and power] were a phenomenon of the lowlands and even there, geographical conditions encouraged under-government. Paul Wheatley puts it well when he notes that ‘the Sanskrit tongue was stilled to silence at 500 meters.’”[41]

Scholars of Southeast Asia have been struck again and again by the sharp limits the terrain, particularly altitude, has placed on cultural or political influence. Paul Mus, writing of Vietnam and echoing Wheatley, noted of the spread of the Vietnamese and their culture that “this ethnic adventure stopped at the foot of the high country’s buttresses.”[42] Owen Lattimore, best known for his studies of China’s northern frontier, also remarked that Indian and Chinese civilizations, like those cited by Braudel, traveled well across the plains but ran out of breath when they encountered rugged hills: “This kind of stratification extends far beyond China itself into the Indochinese peninsula, Thailand and Burma with the influence of the ancient high civilizations reaching far out over the lower levels where concentrated agriculture and big cities are to be found, but not up into the higher altitudes.”[43]

Though Zomia is exceptionally diverse linguistically, the languages spoken in the hills are, as a rule, distinct from those spoken in the plains. Kinship structures, at least formally, also distinguish the hills from the lowlands. This is in part what Edmund Leach had in mind when he characterized hill society as following a “Chinese model” while lowland society followed an “Indian” or Sanskrit model.[44]

Hill societies are, as a rule, systematically different from valley societies. Hill people tend to be animists, or, in the twentieth century, Christians, who do not follow the “great tradition” salvation religions of lowland peoples (Buddhism and Islam in particular). Where, as occasionally happens, they do come to embrace the “world religion” of their valley neighbors, they are likely to do so with a degree of heterodoxy and millenarian fervor that valley elites find more threatening than reassuring. Hill societies do produce a surplus, but they do not use that surplus to support kings and monks. The absence of large, permanent, surplus-absorbing religious and political establishments makes for a sociological pyramid in the hills that is rather flat and local when compared with that of valley societies. Distinctions of status and wealth abound in the hills, as in the valleys. The difference is that in the valleys they tend to be supralocal and enduring, while in the hills they are both unstable and geographically confined.

This characterization obscures a great deal of variation in the political structure of hill societies. The variation is not by any means simply a function of “ethnicity,” although some hill peoples, such as the Lahu, Khmu, and Akha, seem strongly egalitarian and decentralized. It is just as common, however, to encounter groups that defy such generalizations. Among Karen, Kachin, Chin, Hmong, Yao/Mien, and Wa, for example, there seem to be both relatively hierarchical subgroups and relatively decentralized, egalitarian subgroups. What is most striking and important is that the degree of hierarchy and centralization is not constant over time. The variation, so far as I can make out, depends largely on a kind of imitative state-making. That is, it is either a kind of short-term war alliance or a sort of “booty-capitalism” for slave-raiding and extracting tribute from lowland communities. Where hill groups are in a tributary relationship with a valley kingdom—which does not imply political incorporation or, necessarily, inferiority—it may be an expedient to control a lucrative trade route or to safeguard privileged access to valuable markets. Their political structures are, with extremely rare exceptions, imitative in the sense that while they may have the trappings and rhetoric of monarchy, they lack the substance: a taxpaying subject population or direct control over their constituent units, let alone a standing army. Hill polities are, almost invariably, redistributive, competitive feasting systems held together by the benefits they are able to disburse. When they occasionally appear to be relatively centralized, they resemble what Barfield has called the “shadow-empires” of nomadic pastoralists, a predatory periphery designed to monopolize trading and raiding advantages at the edge of an empire. They are also typically parasitic in the sense that when their host-empires collapse, so do they.[45]