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Zomia. It sounds like a skin disease or some alarming bacteria.

As it turns out, Zomia is a recently named space in Asia. As referred to in this article, Zomia encompasses the highlands of northeast India, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and southwest China. Within these countries resides a combined population of over 100 million individuals officially registered as ‘national minorities’ by each respective government.

For anthropologists who might have spent the last few years on a solitary digging trip to North Korea or foraging for tasty ontologies in Amazonia, let me start by teasing apart the term Zomia a little more, before I weigh in further on the Zomia debate. For a small population of 80,000 individuals on the hilly borderlands where Burma, India, and Bangladesh hug each other, Zomi is an endonym. The Zomi, however, neither called their land Zomia nor labelled themselves Zomians. Academic creativity played a part in designing this fresh tag: Dutch social scientist Willem van Schendel coined the term Zomia in 2002, adding the final ‘a’ to shape a space out of an ethnonym.

In his initial analysis of highland Asia, van Schendel (2002: 647) aimed to ‘explore how areas are imagined and how area knowledge is structured to construct area “heart-lands” as well as area “border-lands”’. He denounced the ‘geographies of ignorance’ on the ‘fringes of Southeast Asia’ resulting from global conventions dividing the Asian continent into the fixed subregions of South, East, Central, and Southeast. This administrative but also symbolic partition, he proposed, was performed to the detriment of the populations living in the artificially divided highland fringes, turning ancient shared cultural grounds into national peripheries and ultimately ‘an area of no concern’ (2002: 651).

Seven years later, Yale political scientist James C. Scott (2009) published his book The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia, focusing specifically on the part of high Asia extending south and eastwards from Tibet towards mainland Southeast Asia. Scott also called this Zomia. A degree of confusion thus developed as to what the name might cover exactly (Fig. 4).

Scott’s thesis had a swift impact on scholarly debates regarding this high region – and beyond. Scott studies the five centuries or so when, he says, the upland populations of Asia were fleeing the lowland powers surrounding them, which he reads as a rejection of domination and a will to dodge ‘being governed’. He also proposes that these ‘runaways’, or ‘barbarians by design’ (2009: 8), sought to ensure that the very notion of ‘the state’ along with inegalitarian social hierarchies did not emerge within. To Scott, these highlands became a major ‘zone of refuge, a “shatter zone”’ (ibid.: 143) where populations astutely practised forms of ‘non-confiscatable’ (ibid.: 196) ‘escape agriculture’ (ibid.: 187) based on root crops and swiddening, as well as practised nomadism. Encroached on by the increasing pace of states’ territorial control, Scott

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judgment to develop the popular, and members of the group who took refuge in the United States, France, and Australia at the end of the Vietnam War have contributed to promoting the Romanized Popular Alphabet versions: H'mong/Moob. Each Asian country in which H'mong live has its own ways(?) of writing the ethnonym.

4. In 1955, Linwood Barney and William Smalley, both linked to the American Bible Society, with the assistance of French Catholic missionary Yves Bertrais, designed the Romanized Popular Alphabet, offering a clear system of orthography to write the language with its eight tones compatible with standard English language typewriters and, later, keyboards and mobile phones.

5. For instance, at the Fourth Hmong Studies Consortium International Conference held in Chiang Mai in January of this year, a Hmong woman escorted by two dozen disciples all dressed alike pronounced the birth of a new ‘modern Hmong religion’ called Kav Meek.

6. At the 2016 Hmong studies conference, two Hmong speakers on the same panel each proposed a ‘new universal Hmong writing system’.

7. And by association, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s oft-quoted anecdote on writing and authority among the Nambykwa in Frises tropicales (1955: 352): ‘L’écriture avait donc fait son apparition chez les Nambykwa; mais non point, comme on aurait pu l’imaginer, au terme d’un apprentissage laborieux. Son symbole avait été emprunté sans que sa réalité demeurât étrangère. Et cela, en vue d’une fin sociologique possible qu’ont intellectuelle. Il ne s’agissait pas de connaître, de retenir ou de comprendre, mais d’acquérir la preuve et l’autorité d’un individu – ou d’une fonction – aux dépens d’autrui’. estimates that Zomia became in fact ‘the last great enclosure’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 40) was unrelentingly eroded by distance diminishing technologies (ibid.: 11) such as infrastructure, administrative annexation, in-migration of lowlanders, connection to the national electrical grid, or satellite coverage.

Scott’s stance has been criticized for its generalizations and methodological shortcuts. To start with, there is the naming confusion, though one can hardly blame Scott for falling for a tag as captivating as Zomia. The publisher of the French edition of Scott’s book (Seuil, 2013) even titled it ZOMIA in 3-inch-tall red letters (and intriguingly, assigned a feminine gender to it). But more to the heart of the matter, anthropologists have blamed Scott for over-simplifying situations on the ground that are more intricate than his template suggests. Typically, their protests start with something like ‘Yes, but in the case of my people’, going on to stress distinctions, particularisms, and singularities that challenge the general model. Historians, in turn, have criticized Scott for his rather selective use of historical facts. Victor Lieberman (2010: 336) said that the book’s ‘evidential base is often too weak to support its theoretical superstructure’. One particularly sore point raised by many is that ‘the state’ had long sprouted in the heart of Zomia in the form of a variety of thriving endogenous feudal kingdoms, such as the Dian, Nanzhao, Dalí, and Ahom kingdoms; the Yi, Dong and Zhuang feudal organizations; and the Sip Song Panna and Sip Song Chau Tai muang, to name just a few.

In 2006, in the first edition of my Historical dictionary of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif, I presented the land and societies of precisely that same space (duly acknowledged by Scott, 2009: xv). With the publication of The art, I thus felt compelled to edit a special issue of the Journal of Global History (Michaud 2010) encompassing Zomia plus the ‘Southeast Asian Massif’ (Michaud 2016) which the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the ‘friction of terrain’ (ibid.: 4) — the loss or abandonment of literacy’ (ibid.: 224). In this chapter, Scott starts from the premise that ‘a diagnostic feature of the condition of barbarism is, for lowland elites, nonliteracy’ (ibid.: 220). He adds: ‘There is no place in any of the standard civilizational narratives for the loss or abandonment of literacy’ (ibid.: 224).

Here, Scott means to say that the absence of literacy among certain societies could result from a preference rather than a deficiency. True, the possibility that non-literate peoples may simply shun becoming literate holds a degree of plausibility that many anthropologists familiar with oral societies might recognize. But stating that people may consciously have abandoned literacy out of strategic the book’s merits: ‘Scott’s central achievement, then, is to bring hill peoples into the mainstream of regional history by uncovering their relation to lowland states and societies… Scott has rescued hill peoples from assumptions of stasis, primitivism, essentialism, and isolation. He has given them voice, agency, and rationality’. James C. Scott has performed a geography of acknowledgement as it were, echoing in upland Asia the feat of his earlier works (1985, 1990) in which he reassessed subjugated peasants, slaves, and runaways as careful tacticians.

Chapter 6½

Harold Brookfield (2011: 489) declared that: ‘James Scott’s The art of not being governed is likely to rival Leach’s Political Systems of Highland Burma’ for the distinction of being the most influential title on history and society in the uplands of Southeast Asia’. Clearly, there is enough food for thought here to nurture a worthwhile anthropological debate. To avoid reiterating what has already been said however, I would like to propose a reading involving perhaps the most controversial chapter of Scott’s and — in comparison with the rest of the book — the one mostly left aside by critics.

Scott acknowledges that the most fragile part of his book might be Chapter 6½, titled ‘Orality, writing, and texts’, a 17-page side trip he hesitated even to include (Scott 2009: 230). In this chapter, Scott starts from the premise that ‘a diagnostic feature of the condition of barbarism is, for lowland elites, nonliteracy’ (ibid.: 220). He adds: ‘There is no place in any of the standard civilizational narratives for the loss or abandonment of literacy’ (ibid.: 224).

But what if many peoples, on a long view, are not preliterate, but post-literate? What if, as a consequence of flight, of changes in social structure and subsistence routines, they left texts and writing behind? And what if, to raise the most radical possibility, there was an active or strategic dimension to this abandonment of the world of texts and literacy? (ibid.: 220, emphasis in original)

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in a materially different setting, one imagines that their oral histories will diverge accordingly. As the different oral traditions drift imperceptibly apart, there can be no reference point – which a shared written text would provide – by which to gauge how far and in what ways each tradition had diverged from the once common account. Because oral traditions survive only through retelling, they accumulate interpretations as they are transmitted. Each telling forcibly reflects current interests, current power relations, and current views of neighboring societies and kin groups. (ibid.: 230-31)

From this, Scott proceeds to his intended conclusion: that tactically speaking, ‘relatively powerless hill peoples … may well find it to their advantage to avoid written traditions and fixed texts, or even to abandon them altogether, in order to maximize their room for cultural maneuver’ (ibid.: 235).

**Hmong as Zomians?**

Let’s see. One of the several Asian upland societies Scott recruits to make his case are the Hmong.* Claiming a degree of familiarity with this group, I will draw on it to test Scott’s argument.

In a nutshell, the Hmong are an acephalous, lineage-based society numbering approximately 4.5 million in Asia, where they reside in six of the countries sharing Scott’s Zomia. Their point of origin lies somewhere in southwest China, where 60 per cent still live, while migratory movements south into mainland Southeast Asia occurred over the last three centuries (now totalling 1.7 million), with a significant diasporic movement to the West after 1975 involving around 300,000 individuals.

Feeding into Scott’s thesis, there are stories of a lost or stolen script in Hmong mythology (Enwall 1994: 45-58; Tapp 1989: 124-72, 2010: 96). However, no Hmong endogenous script has ever been noted by any Western witness since the beginning of observations of the group *in situ*, and no written document in any Asian archive has been destroyed. Thus, the evidence is missing to prove a hypothesis of ‘regression’ from the literate to non-literate condition for the Hmong.

This absence of a script – be it their own or borrowed – has been so complete that upon encountering the Hmong at the turn of the 20th century, Christian missionaries such as François Savina (1916) and Samuel Pollard (1919) thought it imperative to devise ways to write the Hmong language(s). To summarize a complex situation, let us simply say that a baffling variety of scripts have been invented to write Hmong – 14 prior to 1990 according to Smalley et al. (1990: 149; see also Duffy 2007: Appendix 3) and growing – some Romanized, some ideographic, and some Pali/Brahmi-based. Barney and Smalley’s Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) is the most popular, having taken off in the West thanks to its early adoption by Christianized Hmong in Laos, where the vast majority of diasporic Hmong in the West come from.

The script travelled with them, and now thanks to CDs, DVDs, the internet and social media, it has come full circle to infuse literate Hmong society back in Asia. However, despite this success, RPA still remains alien to the majority of Hmong speakers in Zomia who are either illiterate or despite this success, RPA still remains alien to the majority of Hmong speakers in Zomia who are either illiterate or illiterate or have been directed at school to write their language in the national script. To this day, though RPA tends to act as a bridge script, there is no standard version of written Hmong acknowledged by a majority of speakers, and the language is also short of both a single authoritative dictionary and grammar.

A century of linguistic efforts to rein in and rationalize Hmong language has been hampered by objective factors such as the existence of several sublanguages within the Hmong/Mong/Miao subfamily, with each of the occasional dictionaries and grammars addressing one, or at most two, particular dialectal forms while ignoring the rest. This is a complex issue. Barbara Niederer (2004) shows that the proto-history of Hmongic languages is still in debate, the only certainty being that Hmong languages are to be paired with Yao (Mien) languages in a Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien) language family.

On the ground meanwhile, there is an absence of a strong centralizing movement within the group handing power and decision-making leverage to a particular segment inside their society, an elite capable of enforcing the adoption of one such language and script. Diversity reigns from one country to the next – as well as between provinces, valleys, villages, and even within the walls of individual households – due to the constant blend caused by clan exogamy.

So, does this disorder surrounding language and script standardization make the Hmong a Zomian society in Scott’s sense?

**Acephality and orality as core Zomian characteristics.**

In Chapter 6½, James C. Scott (2009: 220) claims:

If widening and dispersal are subsistence strategies that impede appropriation; if social fragmentation and acephaly hinder state incorporation; then, by the same token, the absence of writing and texts provides a freedom of maneuver in history, genealogy, and legibility that frustrates state routines. If widening and egalitarian, mobile settlement represent elusive ‘jellyfish’ economic and social forms, orality may be seen as a similarly fugitive jellyfish variant of culture.

The idea that some societies, through time, waver in their will to adopt the manners of more socially stratified neighbours – including adopting literacy – is not new. Edmund Leach (1954), with his *gumsa-gumlao* oscillation, reasoned that the Kachin of Burma were doing something of the sort in the mid-20th century on a recurrent basis. Scott himself mentions Greek and Roman antiquity and Chinese imperial history as having yielded such cases in the course of wars of expansion and conquests. In Zomia, he surmises, there must have been cases of vanquished societies who saw wisdom in fleeing while “[l]eaving behind the lowland centres meant stripping down the complexity of social structure in the interest of mobility” (Scott 2009: 226).
To see this abandonment of forms of state-linked social organization and possibly writing as the result of a (conscious?) strategy of global refusal confesses agency to the subjects of such oscillation. Leach himself suggested that the Kachin knew what they were doing in tangoing in this way with the Shan. But he did not suggest that they were altogether refusing the more complex ways of the Shan. The Kachin simply adopted them tactically – Sahlins (1999) would say they indigenized them and Merry (2006) that they vernacularized them.

Scott, in fact, describes a project to refuse state formation and stick, temporarily or for the long term, to a more egaliitarian society, as being one of ‘the manifest advantages of flexibility and adaptation that an oral tradition has over a written tradition’ (Scott 2009: 226). He adds: ‘Oral communication, even by “official” univocals, is by definition limited to the size of the face-to-face audience assembled to hear it … Oral culture exists and is sustained only through each unique performance at a particular time and place for an interested audience’ (ibid.: 230).

Scott has a very good point: one consequence of the Hmong egaliitarian social organization is that no one in particular speaks for the whole group (or subgroup, or clan, or lineage), and therefore anyone is entitled to speak publicly if they so wish. A striking outcome of this freedom can be seen on the internet today, with a plethora of websites set up by Hmong individuals (rarely groups), living chiefly in the USA, making authoritative yet often unscientific or contradictory pronouncements on a variety of topics including history, religion, culture, language, and script.4 The pitfall for outside observers would be to misunderstand Hmong power structure and believe such self-styled authority too readily, while in reality, the speakers know very well that they do not represent anyone but themselves.

In such circumstances, quite conveniently, the truth is indiscernible, and no one is more vulnerable to manipulation than the state itself – cultural subversion is in the nature of intercultural relations. Indeed, the very cultural elements that best support Scott’s argument come to the fore in Chapter 6½: that is, Zomia all share a form of social organization based on orality and egalitarianism. The objection mentioned above – that the Zomia space has also, over centuries, given birth to a number of endogenous states and feudal regimes – would not counter Scott’s central claims nearly as powerfully if his thesis was framed around a cultural core instead of a geographical or a historical one.

From a cultural angle, Scott’s idea of societies refusing to abandon exclusive orality for a civilization based on text observable in a more unifying, overarching scheme. Scott sensed this when, in Chapter 6½, he selected examples outside Zomia to sustain his point. Among these, Pierre Clastres’ work stands out. In his short essay ‘Society against the state’ (1974: xvi): ‘Involving the assimilation of the foreign in the logics of the familiar – a change in the contexts of the foreign forms or forces, which also changes their values – cultural subversion is in the nature of intercultural relations’. Indeed, the very cultural elements that best support Scott’s argument end up looking severely wounded. I propose that a shift from topographic determinism to an analysis putting forward sociocultural differentiation might be beneficial; otherwise, one is left with serious reservations regarding the relevance of any physical approach to Zomia. Moreover, if state and non-state societies turn out to be equally endogenous in Zomia, what then is the added value of Scott’s argument for understanding this region and its population?

In spite of such uncertainties, I believe that Scott’s intuitions remain germane when approached from a cultural angle, and that it can still make a solid case for a Zomia-type analysis. Marshall Sahlins spoke of the resistance of culture as opposed to a culture of resistance. He explained (1999: xvi): ‘Involving the assimilation of the foreign in the logics of the familiar – a change in the contexts of the foreign forms or forces, which also changes their values – cultural subversion is in the nature of intercultural relations’. Indeed, the very cultural elements that best support Scott’s argument end up looking severely wounded. I propose that a shift from topographic determinism to an analysis putting forward sociocultural differentiation might be beneficial; otherwise, one is left with serious reservations regarding the relevance of any physical approach to Zomia. Moreover, if state and non-state societies turn out to be equally endogenous in Zomia, what then is the added value of Scott’s argument for understanding this region and its population? In spite of such uncertainties, I believe that Scott’s intuitions remain germane when approached from a cultural angle, and that it can still make a solid case for a Zomia-type analysis. Marshall Sahlins spoke of the resistance of culture as opposed to a culture of resistance. He explained (1999: xvi): ‘Involving the assimilation of the foreign in the logics of the familiar – a change in the contexts of the foreign forms or forces, which also changes their values – cultural subversion is in the nature of intercultural relations’. Indeed, the very cultural elements that best support Scott’s argument come to the fore in Chapter 6½: that is, Zomias all share a form of social organization based on orality and egalitarianism. The objection mentioned above – that the Zomia space has also, over centuries, given birth to a number of endogenous states and feudal regimes – would not counter Scott’s central claims nearly as powerfully if his thesis was framed around a cultural core instead of a geographical or a historical one.

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Fig. 7. Religious resilience: Hmong shamanic ritual in preparation for the New Year in which a piglet is sacrificed and the paper altar is burned and renewed. Sa Pa District, Lao Cai Province, Vietnam, 2016.

Fig. 8. Resilience of the oral tradition: once a week, Hmong men gather at the periodic market in Meo Vac, Ha Giang Province, Vietnam, to share a drink, socialize face to face and exchange views on the latest news, 2016.

Fig. 9. In Zomia, the Yi are a rare case, having produced an indigenous script, originally pictographic and still partially in use today. Naxi Dongba Culture Museum, Lijiang City and Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China.

Fig. 10. Hmong Pahawh, one of several recent alternative alphabets, and one much less manageable for standard keyboards. http://www.getlinkyoutube.com/watch?v=7pDZ1FSSQQ

Fig. 11. Communist propaganda imagery intended for minority viewers. Lao Cai city, Vietnam, 2016.


van Schendel, W. 2002. Turnor, S. et al. 2015. Marxism and


victims of their own primitivism in the midst of a modernized world, but instead compose with it and make sure that what comes from the outside is duly synchronized with their own worldviews. As Wouters (2012: 60) put it: ‘Scott’s account of deliberate state evasion is in line with a widespread theoretical disposition in the anthropological literature on state and resistance’.

It appears that Scott might have confined himself unnecessarily to the case study he was working on, possibly for fear of being confronted for his overly macroscopic stance. Had Scott developed his Zomia proposition into a kinship-based societies argument, his conclusions would have been less embedded within one specific locale and less subjected to a confined historical framework. Instead, as if it were an afterthought when the book neared completion, Scott tried to disentangle himself from his prospective critics by claiming that his core hypotheses were no longer valid after World War II (ibid.: xiii). The state won, he claims; the friction of terrain has been reduced to shreds by relentless distance demolishing technologies, frontier societies are now being educated in national languages, and the world’s last great enclosure has come to its predictable end. In a recent conversation (March 2016), he further proposed to me:

The biggest post-war shift throughout Southeast Asia and China, it seems to me, is ‘engulfment’ of the hills by moving land-hungry, demographically crowded, valley peoples, usually with state-help and capitalist financing for plantations, mining – making ‘hill peoples’ a minority in the hills and at the frontiers. For the state this engulfment also amounts to substituting a presumptively ‘loyal’ population for a culturally/politically alien population and substituting a population that produces cash crops, foreign exchange, and taxes for a population which, from the state’s perspective, is fiscally sterile.

This might very well be the case if we are thinking of Zomia as a place. But it becomes significantly less so if we look at it from a cultural perspective. Marginal peoples have always displeased the state and topography is only one dimension of that marginality; culture is a more fundamental element of division. My experience tells me that beyond a particular locale, it is still as difficult as ever to get verifiable historical information out of Hmong informants anywhere; the design of a common writing system is still impaired by individualism, linguistic fragmentation and irreducible plurinationality; and learning Hmong vernacular(s) is still an uphill battle for anyone looking at this culture from the outside.

As for who ‘the Hmong’ might be exactly, competing endogenous voices are constantly heard, none sounding the day. Meanwhile, as former Hmong refugees in the USA become academics, politicians, doctors, and scientists, many are reaching back to the 95 per cent of their group who never left Asia, to empower them behind the state’s back with information about themselves not tainted by immediate national interests – though clearly passing on the diaspora’s political and religious subjectivities. What I mean to say here is that migrating beyond the locale of Zomia does not mean to have significantly altered the core of Hmong culture in the diaspora, and the subversive dimension of their habitus and agency appears to travel remarkably well. And this in itself is remarkable.

Larry Patruin, in a review of Scott’s The art of not being governed, declared that the book inspired him ‘to investigate more deeply the types of societies examined by Scott’ (2011: 335, emphasis added). It all makes sense. If Zomia is not so much a place as it is a stance, a state of mind, and a life project (Blaser 2004: 26; Ortner 2006) traversing along as non-literate and kinship-based social organizations migrate, the particular place the subjects live in might turn out not to be that foundational after all.