

## Adjusting Livelihood Structure in the Southeast Asian Massif<sup>1</sup>

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I have suggested elsewhere that what the peoples living in the Highlands of Asia, and in particular in the Southeast Asian Massif, possibly share most is a sense of being different from the majorities surrounding them, a sense of geographical remoteness, and a state of marginality and sometimes domination, all of which connected to a degree of cultural, political, and economic remoteness from Asia's main seats of power in the lowlands, the river deltas and the coastal zones (Michaud, 2006). Geographical remoteness becomes a sign of political separation and subordination for those peoples who through history are most likely to have been classified by the powers-that-be as inferior, dangerous, "uncivilized," "savage," "barbarian," or "raw." And to add to this complexity, their visual representation on an ethnolinguistic map would yield a highly fragmented cultural mosaic with contrasting colours rather than a legible picture in harmonized shades.

Yet, from a distance, when "jumping scale" as van Schendel (2002) proposed, this highland mosaic can form a distinctive and relatable picture, becoming a legitimate subject for academic research, though clearly an unusual one. In this chapter, I first paint a portrait of the highlands at the time of contact with European observers, in order then to better see the current trends in livelihoods adjustments influenced by the political and economic relationship tying together the highlanders with the modern state and the global market.

All twelve chapters in this book belong to van Schendel's greater Zomia. But seven of these belong more precisely to James C. Scott's smaller Zomia (Cederlöf, Turner, Li Yunxia, Horstmann, Galipeau, Yang, and Li Quanmin); therefore as we will see below, they also fit into the Southeast Asian Massif. While this chapter addresses more specifically the latter, inside which my field research has been taking place for 25 years, I believe that many of the general considerations developed below – but also a good number of field observations – can also apply, at least in part, to the other cultural terrain covered by the remaining authors, namely the Himalayan/Tibetan world (Shneiderman, Smyer Yü, Diemberger, and Drew). I write the following with this synergy in mind.

**Table 1 - SOUTHEAST ASIA MASSIF.**

Region	Total Population (N)	Total of Highland Minorities (N)	Highland Minorities by Region (%)	Highland Minorities in the SEAM (%)
Southwest China + Taiwan	495,057,080	60,775,378	12.27	60.2
Mainland Southeast Asia	252,644,049	27,392,382	10.84	27.1
Northeast India + Bangladesh	188,919,904	12,814,087	6.78	12.7
Southeast Asian Massif	--	100,981,847	10.78	100

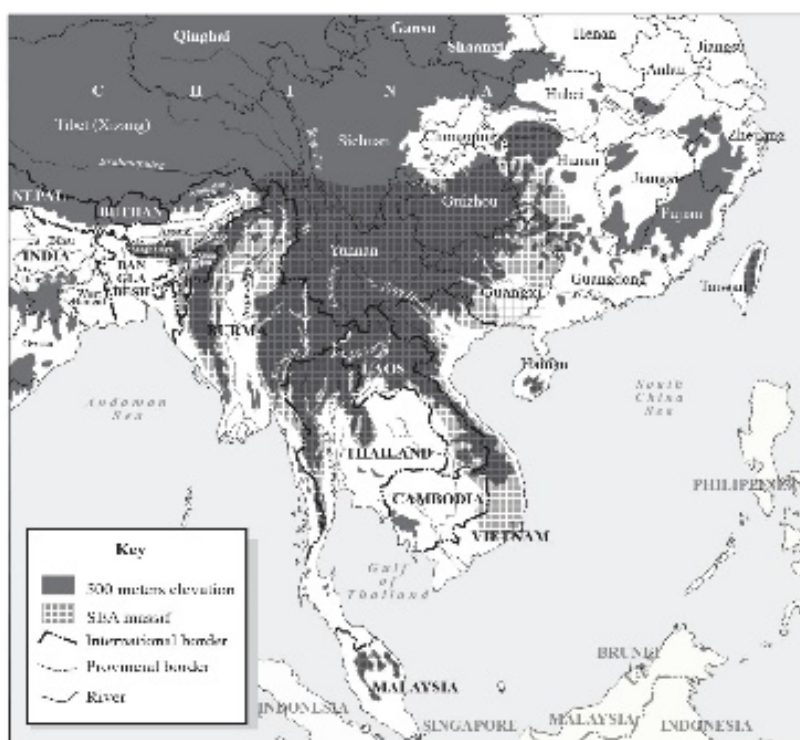
Source : Michaud, 2016a: 3.

<sup>1</sup> This chapter stems, in a much shortened version, from my 2016a *Introduction: Seeing the Forest for the Trees: Scale, Magnitude, and Range in the Southeast Asian Massif*.

## 1- Locating the subjects

The human groups living in the Southeast Asian Massif tend to dwell in regions situated above roughly 300 meters in elevation, although this figure may vary significantly, especially when considering urban settings. The Massif covers approximately 2.5 million square kilometres, or the size of Western Europe. From west to east, it includes most of the Seven Sister states of Northeast India (the southern uplands of Assam, south and east Arunachal Pradesh, most of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, and the eastern part of Tripura), eastern Bangladesh (the Chittagong Hill Tracts), the eastern edge of Tibet along with southern Sichuan, a section of Chongqing and Hubei, western Hunan, all of Guizhou and Yunnan, most of Guangxi, western Guangdong, the hinterlands of the islands of Hainan and Taiwan, the vast hills surrounding Burma's central plain (mostly the Ethnic States), the north and west of Thailand along the border with Burma, central Peninsular Malaysia, all of Laos above the Mekong valley, south-central Vietnam along the Annam Cordillera plus the northern uplands wrapping around the Red River Delta, and the eastern fringe of Cambodia (Michaud et al., 2016). Apart from the two islands and upland Malaya, it constitutes one immense continuous massif, a cluster of adjacent mountains and high valleys, and also a terrain of remarkable physical and climatic diversity.

MAP X - AREA OF INTEREST



Source : Michaud et al., 2016: xxi.

In the Massif, China's southwestern region is of particular interest. It forms a huge and complex assortment of mountain ranges, high plateaus and valleys encompassing the

geographic and demographic core of the Massif. The province of Yunnan lies at its heart. As 60 percent of all indigenous inhabitants of the Southeast Asian Massif dwell in Southwest China (Table 1), one might expect this area to have commandeered the lion's share of academic surveys of these highland societies, but such is not the case. Communist averseness to outside observers and the modern Chinese state's political project of simplifying ethnic distinctions within its borders have hindered in-depth investigations of the region's ethnic makeup. Compared with much more intensively studied regions in Mainland Southeast Asia and Northeast India, reliable data and independent research can be difficult to come by in China (Harrell, 1996). Due to a long history of dealing with the ever-increasing presence of a strongly centralized state, Southwest China often defies scholarly logic and its dynamic endogenous history, with its complex political, religious, linguistic, economic, and biophysical particularities, is only partly understood and acknowledged to date (Herman, 2007; Swain, 2002; Yang, 2009).

## **2- Foundations of highland social structures**

Nevertheless, all over the Massif, we can still assert that the rapid pace of global modernization has subjected groups in that unusual social space to drastically different forms of pressure than the ones that had previously shaped their societies. Faced with the relative paucity of endogenous historical records, to better appreciate the distinctiveness of highland societies and the unique factors that have affected their adaptation to modernity, it helps to consider their recent past. Records exist showing how they have appeared to the outside world at the time of European colonization, roughly one-and-a-half centuries ago.

### *2.1 Ancient feudal groups*

Societies of the Southeast Asian Massif that occupied areas above the lowlands but below the highest, most isolated mountains, be it in Assam, Vietnam or Guangxi for instance, were in fairly regular contact with the lowland powers, their ideas and their economies. Many among what I will call here midland groups eventually drifted into joining regional feudal, hierarchical social organizations.<sup>2</sup> At the time of the intensification of European contact around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it was noted that a section of the Assamese under the Ahom of Northeast India (13<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century CE) had been highly differentiated between a dominant elite controlling the land and the means of production, and the peasants labouring for them. In Yunnan, the Naxi, Bai, Dai and Yi operated along the same pattern after the kingdoms of Dian (4<sup>th</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), Nanzhao (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century CE) and Dali (10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century CE) had flourished. Elsewhere, in the Daliangshan Mountains of Sichuan, the Nuosu Yi had a complex slave-owning caste system. The Tujia and Dong in Guizhou, the Zhuang in Guangxi as well as the Thái and Tày in Vietnam plus the Shan in Burma had also set up polities of a feudal nature.

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<sup>2</sup> Historians are debating whether the notion of feudalism can apply to social formations outside the European Middle-Ages. I use the term here, as Condominas explained (1976: 39+), only to make a useful distinction between societies with internal social differentiation based on ownership and control of power on the one hand, and the landless peasantry on the other.

This frequent occurrence of feudal states does not mean, however, that everybody within them was adhering equally to their stratified social organization. Exceptions were numerous, involving either groups not related to them and living in high or remote enclaves within their domain, or even people from within their own ethnicities, as many subsistence agriculturalists culturally part of these feudalized ethnicities still lived in far-flung locations where the arm of the state did not reach them fully.

## *2.2 Egalitarian groups*

Indeed, in the mountains above these midland fiefdoms and in isolated pockets on their peripheries, European colonial observers found a mosaic of what they called tribes, scattered through a sort of archipelago of higher slopes, isolated valleys and mountaintops where lowland powers rarely ventured and feudal lords had not seen the need to systematically implant their own peasants (Vial, 1898; Pollard, 1905; Lunet de Lajonquière, 1906; Gilhodes, 1922; Savina, 1924). The social organization of these isolated groups was predominantly egalitarian, based primarily on kinship, and their political formalization was determined by, and limited to, blood ties. These groups dispensed with a centralized form of political authority and were therefore stateless (or acephalous). In the Massif, examples of such groups include the Boro, Naga, Drung, Hmong, Lahu, Karen, Yao, Lisu, Akha, Khmu, Rhade, Jorai, Katu, Talieng, Seediq, Truku, Semai, Jakun, and many more.

Social ties in egalitarian groups were most commonly based on lineage (the known genealogy) or clan (the known and assumed genealogy as expressed in a common surname). They exhibited a fully integrated organization, meaning that political, economic, and religious matters were not differentiated, in constant interplay in all matters of daily life. As Max Weber famously wrote, these groups had yet to experience the “disenchantment of the world” (Jenkins, 2000).

## *2.3 Historical livelihood practices*

Social structures had a central impact on forms of livelihoods. At the time of European contact, the upland economy was structured along the lines of feudal versus egalitarian systems. The three-way division between the lowlands, midlands, and highlands geographically defined the distance between civilizational cores, peripheries, and distant fringes, i.e. barbarity.

The common economic aspects of feudalism across time and space are well known (cf. Roseberry, 1989; Cancian, 1989). An elite in control of the land and agricultural surpluses used forms of coercion to extract wealth from the labour of the peasantry, providing them in return with access to land as tenant farmers and ensuring them with a minimum of personal security as well as economic and political stability. Outside the perimeter of the feudal polity's direct grasp, trade relationships and elaborate exchange systems with surrounding polities allowed elites to use surpluses to derive further profits. Tribute could also be extorted from weaker neighbours, forced to pay a price to safeguard their political liberty; conversely, tribute also had to be paid to more powerful overlords.

Beyond the grip of the feudal state, egalitarian societies in turn participated in what can be understood as three possible systems: hunting-gathering, horticulture, or a simple proto-feudal

form of peasantry. In all cases, the household constituted the fundamental economic and ritual unit. Subsistence-oriented agriculture took care of the household's immediate needs, while indispensable commodities that could not be grown, gathered, or produced locally were procured on the market.

Hunter-gatherers, such as the Maram-Naga of Northeast India or the Mlabri of Thailand and Laos, lived in small nomadic bands of no more than a few dozen individuals and only took from nature what it provided. Small scale herders, rare in the Massif although common in the rest of van Schendel's *Zomia*, were limited to the periphery of the Tibetan Plateau in western Yunnan and Sichuan. Horticulturalists, on the other hand, constituted the bulk of the egalitarian groups, the ubiquitous practice of swiddening being their main form of food production. The most aggressive form of this specialist forest agriculture, pioneering swiddening, utilized very short fallows or none at all and was limited to actively nomadic groups or those heavily involved in growing land-exhausting crops such as the opium poppy (Geddes, 1976; Kunstadter et al., 1978). Rotational swiddening on the other hand, with long fallows, was a more finely balanced activity with limited long-term impact on the environment, and was practiced by groups willing to settle for longer periods of time in a given vicinity, such as most groups in Vietnam's Central Highlands (Boulbet, 1975). Early forms of peasantry chiefly existed among groups closer to the feudal clusters and were symptomatic of a gradual attraction towards these strong cores. The Kachin/Jingpo/Sinpho in the India-Burma-China borderlands, in the orbit of the feudal Shan, famously studied by Leach in 1954, offered a telling example of this balancing act (Sadan, 2013).

Far from living in autarchy and operating separately, highland, midland, and lowland societies were tied together through elaborate trade networks. Different ecological niches and variations in their degrees of industrialization, diffused chiefly from the core states, ensured that inhabitants from each tier could deliver specialized produce, goods, and services. Goods that were gathered, hunted, herded or grown in the high and middle regions (rare timber, coffin wood, medicinal plants, game, and various parts of animals considered essential in the Chinese, Indian, Thai, or Vietnamese pharmacopeia) were traded for indispensable processed goods common in the lowlands but often lacking in the highlands (cloth, precious metals, steel tools, salt, petrol, matches, firearms, or gunpowder). Midland groups could sell their rice, fruit, clothes, and jewellery to those living below or above them, and could make available troops and excess labour to lowland powers within the framework of tributary relations. Midland groups were also in a position to extort similar privileges from the less functionally organized peoples dwelling in the upper reaches and on the fringes of their domains. The feudal groups regulating the trail and river systems profitably acted as middlemen in this bidirectional circulation, as documented by Le Failler (2014) in a detailed historical description of this process in and around the Thái polity of Sip Song Chau Tai in north-western Vietnam.

### **3- Relationship to the lowlands and the state then and now**

Politically speaking, historical relationships between highland and lowland societies have been complex and often strained (Poisson, 2009). Before European colonization and the advent of national territories bounded by modern borders, the highlands and their inhabitants were of limited interest to lowland rulers. Politically as much as economically, these fringes acted as buffer zones (Winichakul, 1994; Lieberman, 2003). Unless some precise geostrategic

aspect came into play such as mining access or invasion corridors, keeping marginal inhabitants in check through tributary relationships was usually considered a better strategy than conquering and policing underpopulated, barbarian marches at a higher cost. Such was the situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts on the joint fringes of India, Burma, and Bangladesh; in the Kam and the Naxi domains shielding China from Tibet; in the Sip Song Panna, Kachin, and Shan states buffering between China, Laos, and Burma; in the Sip Song Chau Tai separating northern Vietnam and Laos; and in the ‘Montagnard’ domain between Vietnam and Cambodia.

China would become the first lowland power to invade and permanently occupy such highland peripheries (Herman, 2007; Yang, 2009). This occupation happened increasingly as expanding lowland demography and farming demand made access to more land necessary. The arrival from the Americas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century of new crops such as maize, potato, cassava favoured this massive human migration to the uplands. Local upheavals such as the Taiping, Miao and Panthai rebellions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were triggered at least in part by migrations of Han settlers from the plains to fertile high valleys in the southwest combined with the increased presence of the Han state on its southern frontier, complete with military domination and relentless taxation.

### 3.1 The Zomia hypothesis: up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century

Might the Southeast Asian Massif have been a zone of refuge for marginal peoples and runaways? That is what James C. Scott suggests in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009). The book is the first scholarly attempt to theorize the remoteness — which Scott associates with the “friction of terrain” (ibid.: 40) — of the Massif, and its inhabitants’ defiance of the state as self-styled “barbarians by design” (ibid.: 8)

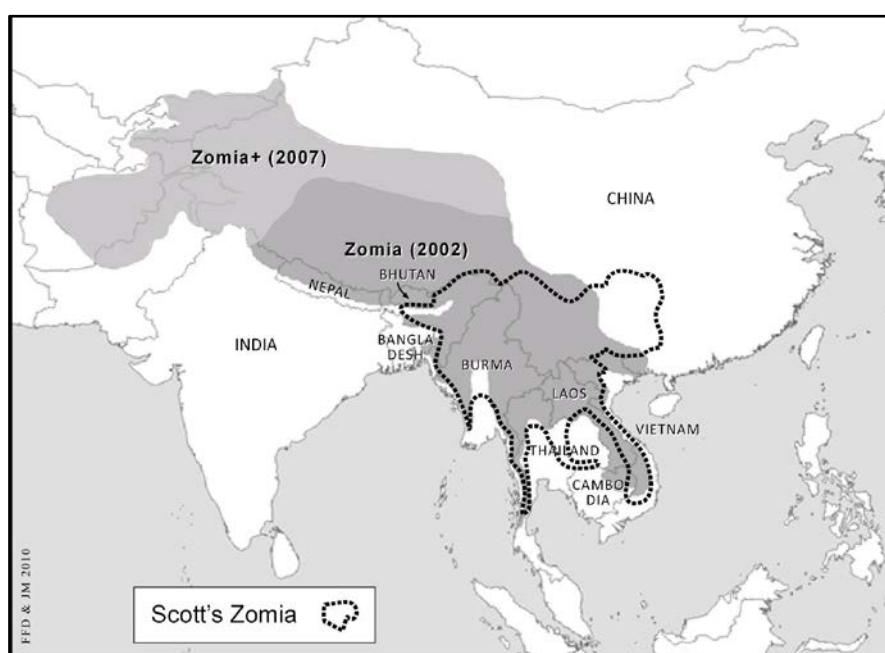


Fig. 1 Van Schendel's *Zomia* (2002) and its 2007 extension<sup>3</sup>, with Scott's *Zomia* (2009). Source: Michaud, 2016b.

Scott calls the region *Zomia* from a neologism coined by Willem van Schendel (2002). Originally, as in Figure 1, what van Schendel meant by *Zomia* included the whole of the Himalayas and their high peripheries (Shneiderman, 2010). Scott focuses solely on the eastern portion but retains the name, generating a degree of confusion not only as to what does *Zomia* cover exactly, but also on what is the fundamental difference between Scott's and van Schendel's *Zomia* – not to mention the Southeast Asian Massif but that is another debate.

The substance of Scott's thesis is that over the course of centuries, the uplands of *Zomia* were populated by people fleeing lowland domination. He proposed that these “runaways”, as he calls them (Scott, 2009: 8), wanted to ensure that the very notion of “the state” did not take root within their own societies. *Zomia* thus became a major zone of refuge from domination, a “shatter zone” (ibid.: 143) where populations practiced forms of “non-confiscatable” “escape agriculture” (ibid.: 196, 187) like growing root crops on swiddens or under the forest canopy with the aim of not being detected and ultimately, “not being governed.”

But with “the state” encroaching on the highlands from every direction, Scott believes that over the last two centuries, *Zomia* gradually underwent “the last great enclosure”<sup>4</sup> (ibid.: 4) this planet has known. Roughly since World War II, he estimates, his theory of flight and avoidance has ceased to apply as lowland governments relentlessly expand “distance demolishing technologies” (ibid.: 11) and crack down on defiance to their project.

Scott's thesis has shed light on creative forms of resistance and resilience by highland populations throughout history and up to the present day. Some of his generalizations, however, warrant a healthy scepticism (Lieberman, 2010), not least because states have actually operated successfully in the Massif for centuries. We saw above that a number of endogenous feudal states and kingdoms thrived in the uplands (and that certainly applies to Tibet too). But Scott's theory remains appealing, engaging, and highly original. As with van Schendel's 2002 proposition, it offers a dramatic change in scale that shows the ground from high above, revealing a picture rarely seen before.

### 3.2- Facing the state in the 20th century

James C. Scott estimates that past the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state definitively reined in the uplands that had so far escaped its grasp. The state won, Scott declares, and the process of enclosure was completed.

I suggest that this pronouncement demands more nuance. Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, official national positions towards mid- and highlanders in the Massif have varied between countries, the paternalistic positions taken by socialist regimes (China, Vietnam and Laos chiefly but also for a while, Cambodia, Burma and India) contrasting with the more pragmatic ones taken by capitalist regimes (most others, including during the European colonial era).

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with van Schendel and Scott, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> In the sense of surrounding and shepherding peoples into mainstream society rather than the Marxist sense of fencing off space to empty it of its original inhabitants and profit elites

Over revolutionary times and their accompanying wars — that is, roughly between 1910 and 1975 — communist ideology in the Massif was influenced by the dominant position of the Soviet Union. Josef Stalin (1913) had outlined that within a socialist republic everyone was to be of equal legal status. Underlying this ostensibly inclusive rhetoric was the need for socialist forces to win the allegiance of the largest possible segments of the peasantry and labour force during struggles of independence and revolution in China, Vietnam, and Laos, but also during colonial times in French Indochina and British India, Burma and Malaya when highland societies' historical antagonism with the old lowland powers was actively fanned. This strategy was largely responsible for assurances made during the early years of the struggle that routinely promised highland groups the right to unilaterally declare cultural, political, and territorial independence once the colonists/anti-communists had been defeated (Michaud, 2009).

With the revolutionary and independence wars over, however, virtually all promises for minority self-rule were forgotten or at best replaced with watered-down substitutes that gave priority to a unified nation ruling over an indivisible national territory. The change of tone can be detected in the policies and attitudes of the Indian state before and after independence in response to Naga and Mizo demands for autonomy (Pachau, 2014). It also happened in China, Vietnam and Laos, where the new socialist states backtracked on their early promises, opting instead for “supporting” highlanders to “catch up” with the enlightened industrial socialist masses by joining the proletariat working in mines, dams, and factories, complete with matching educational and health services (Viet, 1968). On the bright side, all national minorities were granted full-fledged national citizenship; but this status entailed that in return for the help bestowed on them by their “big brothers,” the “little brothers” were to “progress” by leaving behind their “backward” ways and behaving like modern socialist subjects. Cultural, religious, economic, and especially political distinctions in the highlands were only to be tolerated if these did not impede integration into the socialist nation — in other words, not very often (Nguyen, 1968; Evans, 1985).

In Vietnam, this policy was creatively labelled “selective cultural preservation” (Nong, 1978; Salemink, 2000), an astute socialist tactic also shared by China, Laos and authoritarian regimes. It boils down to the encouragement of minorities' cultural, economic and political absorption into the majority while allowing benign cultural expressions to persist in simplified formats. The latter include house architecture and clothing along with dance and music expressed during annual “culture days” and “minority festivals” (Mueggler, 2002). Such “culture” may be made public through vectors like “traditional” villages frozen in time and humming with songs and choreographed footsteps arranged for tourist consumption – not to mention sanitized representations in ethnological museums and on postage stamps (Oakes, 1998; Walsh and Swain, 2004; Nyiri, 2006). The end result promotes only the picturesque and inoffensive — conveniently rebranded “Intangible Cultural Heritage” (Salemink, 2001; Goudineau, 2003) – as a token contribution to the Nation's ethnic variety.

Under 20<sup>th</sup> century more liberal regimes, on the other hand, highlanders have been in an even weaker legal position, with some even lacking national citizenship. Such is the case in Thailand, where around half of the adult members of “hill tribes” have been refused legal recognition despite most of their lineages having tilled the land for several generations (Toyota, 2005). In Bangladesh, where poverty is a huge national concern with the non-



Bengali minority population remaining proportionally minuscule, deliberate attempts to settle Bengali Muslims in the minority highlands and to use tough repressive measures against the non-Muslim minorities are still being reported (Roy, 2012). In Cambodia, a nation still in a state of political and economic uncertainty, the state can simply not afford to pay much attention to the minute numbers of highland groups and their particular needs (Bourdier, 2015). Malaysia and Taiwan now show good intentions, but believe more in national modernity for all than in cultural exceptionalism (Simon, 2006; Gomes, 2007). In Burma (Myanmar), armed confrontation and repression remain until 2016 the core policy of the military leaders and there is little hope for a permanent and satisfactory solution any time soon as illustrated by the constant flow of Karen and Rohingya refugees fleeing the country (Horstmann, 2011). In India, national policy makers have shown indifference and a lack of sensitivity towards the special problems of the Northeast. Combined with the continued exploitation of the region's natural resources. This has kept alive local tribal<sup>5</sup> groups' demands for independence, or at least for more regional autonomy; armed insurgent groups have proliferated in recent times, often operating in alliance with similar armed groups in the jungles of northern Burma (Baruah, 2001, 2005; Hazarika, 1995).

Beyond these legal and financial quandaries, the liberal countries sharing the Massif have taken a rather pragmatic path to the management of their national minorities. The philosophy is essentially that if peripheral peoples can take care of themselves without being an obstacle to national wealth, a burden on the national economy or a threat to the nation, and if they can even contribute to the national economy — through ethnic tourism, for instance — they are welcome to remain as different from lowlanders as they wish. The end result, it is theorized, will in any case be a 'natural' integration into the majority through market forces, the media, and national education.

The disinterest of lowland majorities towards highland cultural differences can be theorized in a concentric Mandala model, fundamental in Asia, which rates degrees of civilization from the core outwards, based on distance and geographic, linguistic, religious, economic, cultural, and historical distinctions (Drekmeier, 1962). The highland/lowland dichotomy, contested by scholars (Brookfield, 2011) following the publication of Scott's *The Art...*, has in fact long been a central narrative fuelled by age-old lowland prejudices against the distant, heavily forested, little-known highlands, home of suspicious and dangerous people among whom malevolent spirits roam freely (Reid, 1999; Poisson, 2009). For sedentary lowlanders seeing themselves as "cooked," a classic Chinese notion for a civilized society, the highlands and their forest barbarians were believed to be "raw" (Fiskesjö, 1999). All across the Massif, groups dwelling higher up have been assigned derogatory labels; those living in intermediate regions of moderate altitude with thin forest cover, large expanses under permanent cultivation, and closer proximity to dominant lowland civilizations, are deemed more palatable for political alliances.

In continuity with this outlook, despite their small numbers compared to national majorities, since the 1980s governments have blamed highlanders for most if not all of the deforestation, land erosion, and chemical poisoning of land in nearly every watershed around the Massif.

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term 'tribal' here due to the fact that in India (Scheduled Tribes) and Taiwan (Plain Tribes, Mountain Tribes), indigenous peoples have coopted the tribal terminology and made it a core characteristic of their self-distinction, even a foundation notion for their ethnonationalist claims.

Which is an absurd claim (Leibold, 2014). Nevertheless, swiddening is publicly decried by state officials as harmful to the environment and to eradicate its practice, isolated populations are forced to relocate along national road networks and crop substitution programs are implemented everywhere to sedentarize swiddeners and permanently shift them to commercial agriculture.

Such a history of mistrust means that in the Massif today, highlanders generally face governments stubbornly showing them “the right way” while lacking reliable cultural information about them, governments vigorously implementing policies of cultural integration and economic standardization (Duncan, 2004). Education is geared towards Sinization, Indianization, Thai-ization, Kinh-ization and the likes (Hansen, 1999; Lee, 2001; Messier and Michaud, 2011). Tourism, a multi-billion booming industry in the Massif, becomes a crucial factor in this equation as domestic tourists from the new middle classes are increasingly flocking to gaze at the “barbarians within.”

#### **4- Conclusion: Modernize or perish.**

Most challenges in the Massif relate to what has been theorized as the “agrarian transition” paradigm, in which rural life centred on subsistence agriculture steadily gives way to industrial agriculture and converts peasants into wageworkers serving the growing demands of industrialists and urban areas (Kelly, 2011). Many issues can also be connected to debates on modernization, globalization, and development (Hall et al., 2011), in the wake of which thought-provoking research has blossomed around the notions of agency, resistance, and the indigenization/vernacularization of modernity (Scott, 1990; Sahlins, 1999; Ortner, 2006; Merry, 2006).

In the highlands, distance has helped shielding many people from some of the dramatic global events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but not all of them. Groups in the midland regions of the Massif saw their strategic advantage as trade intermediaries vanish as road infrastructure began to extend into the highlands, bringing in the modern state and its agents shortcutting the previous equilibrium. Their old feudal organizations were declared unsuitable to the modern world, both socialist and capitalist. Subsistence agriculture, adjusted to the household's needs and often based on swiddening, has been forcibly replaced with cash cropping and plantations geared to market demand; this has exposed often ill-informed and inadequately literate highlanders to the hazards of brutal market shifts most of them are not yet equipped to fully apprehend or adjust to. An unprecedented movement of peasants turned unskilled labour is thus pouring out of the mountains towards the urban centres.

The switch to highland commercial agriculture has been supported by the circulation of international capital and the globalization of the agricultural market as well as in large part the new hegemony of Western discourse on environmental protection as conveyed to the local level through development projects conceived and implemented by externally-funded international agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Hand in hand with international environmentalist discourse and the spreading of cash cropping, such drastic changes have opened the way for the final monetization of highland exchanges, with payment by barter narrowed to a circle of close kin and neighbours. Increasing recourse to the market has brought to the mountains goods and commodities that have never before been readily available and improved opportunities for the sale of local niched-agricultural produce. In

particular, channels for the provision of cash cropping inputs such as hybrid seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides have opened up (Turner et al., 2015).

Throughout the Southeast Asian Massif, the national economic programs are all geared toward economic growth and cultural progress, and ‘modernity’ has become the bright horizon offered to all as the only way forward. While there are obvious material benefits to this strategy, the drawbacks and the cultural costs, no doubt substantial, are yet to be examined on the long term.

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