

## From Padi States to Commercial States

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# Preface

## The Institutionalized Zomia

In 2009, the notion of 'Zomia' emerged and suddenly became inescapable. How does one explain such a phenomenon that took even the author James Scott by surprise? The term suddenly appeared and has since become a topic of reference for conferences, classes, discussions, articles, panels, etc. We discovered this phenomenon while attending the 2010 Asian Borderlands Conference entitled 'Enclosure, Interaction and Transformation', held in Chiang Mai (Thailand), where we heard Scott talk about his book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2010). Scott was aware, and even somewhat amused, of the criticism his work had already started to garner. 'As for the criticism that keeps coming, in journals and at conferences, I've got a thick skin', says Scott (Hammond 2011). Scott then listened to our talk on, among other topics, the subject of 'our' maritime Zomias. Amidst all the criticism and debates, the objections raised by many researchers to the disappearance of Scott's Zomia after World War II seemed to have sparked his interest. 'Academics are even now trying to make the case that the conditions he sets up for state-evading peoples may still apply, not only in Zomia, but also among Myanmar's Sea Gypsies and some groups in Africa. "There are people busy working on other Zomias, if you like", says Scott' (Hammond 2011). In fact, we decided that we would gather the works we presented at this conference, driven by Scott's interest – and by the fact that he cannot cover everything, as he told us – in a historical and contemporary study of maritime populations, namely the sea nomads.

The purpose we had in writing this book was to show how the concept seemed 'logical' to us and how we can interpret, reinterpret and use it, just as with any new concept. Within the span of a few years, the term has become a 'must' in the vocabulary of the social sciences. Yet the term did not appear out of nowhere and has not experienced such a soaring development for no reason. Furthermore, Ivanoff, in this book, rightly places the concept of Zomia within a wider framework, at the crossroads between the fields of anthropology (Condominas, Barth) and history (Winichakul, Pavin Chachavalpongpun), a discipline in which Scott, an enterprising historian, has given a new importance to anthropological studies. Anthropologists, especially French anthropologists, would very much like ethnicities to disappear in order to rid themselves of this cumbersome concept, as

evidenced by the care that they use when discussing it. Yet finding new ways to understand the reality of peoples and their resistance skills is the whole point of anthropology. Even if these peoples do not really exist, do not assume to be related or do not have any objectives other than refusing the state, it is obvious that these Zomians, who are outside of the state's channels, have become new anthropological subjects, new ethnicities with new strategies. In fact, Scott based his study on the works of anthropologists who discussed ideology (Benjamin 1988, Ivanoff 1999) or dissimulation, a nomadic choice, regardless of whether it is subject to historical factors, such as war, colonialism and slavery.

If this is so, what then would be the point of holding a conference panel entitled 'To Be or Not to Be Zomian' at a seminar at the University of Wisconsin on the topic of the Hmong? It is not a matter of thinking in order to grasp a new fashionable concept, especially if it can be seen as ineffective (in the case of the Hmong, some live in symbiosis with other state tributary communities, while others live in 'autarky') and considered as an archaic view of ethnicities. Scott presents a Zomian that is equal to the decision-makers of the centre, attributing as much value to the Zomian's culture as to that of industrialized countries. He explained the Zomian's ethnic force, as well as the Zomian's intelligence (adaptability, temporary integration, rational exploitation of resources, etc.). This is what Scott wishes to put forward by describing the prototypes of groups that make up Zomia. These mobile slash-and-burn farmers, isolated in the mountains, choose to lead this lifestyle and build their ethnicity with this in mind.

## The Manipulation of the Concept of Zomia

As we mentioned earlier, this concept can be manipulated, worn out and used in discussions in the social sciences. It is not permanent and has no heuristic value just because some renowned researchers decided so. Thus, has Zomia become a compulsory reference on which anthropologists must intellectually base themselves, organize their work and define the studied population? This is where anthropologists are mistaken when they see Scott's work as a provocation, whereas Scott himself knows that the

1 Mai Na Lee, H. Jonsson, F. Nibbs, J. R. Hickman & Yonglin Jiang (2011), 'To Zomia or Not to Zomia? Critical Ethnographic and Historical Perspectives', *Hmong in Comparative Contexts Conference*, organized by the Hmong Studies Consortium, University of Wisconsin-Madison/University of Minnesota, 4 March 2011.

perfect Zomian does not exist. What he was putting forward, rather, was the concept of a developed culture and form of ethnicity aimed towards one goal: freedom from the state. In so doing, he prompted anthropologists to rethink the concept of ethnicity, and the relationship between nomadic and sedentary peoples and between the centres and the peripheries. He discovered a concept that is not a theory but a way to understand groups of people with common characteristics beyond the simple comparison of two techniques, two phonemes. He goes beyond reconstructions of syncretic elements, as any complex analysis would achieve highly relative isolates.

Moreover, there is no isolation. Zomians interact with lowland peoples as their counterparts in the forests and the sea, and interact with other segments of society as well (for more information on the binomial principle of sea nomads, see Ivanoff in this volume).

The term Zomia, to the surprise of Scott himself, became a key concept that anthropologists manipulate with violence and without good judgement. Scott does not question ethnicities, identity construction, trade and interactions. He simply gives characteristics and a common goal to an overall population. After all, it was a test, and it caused a stir. Nevertheless, it raised the issue. The intensive specialization of knowledge in anthropology prohibits large comparative ideas, but, as a historian, he was able to afford some 'shortcuts' that are being held against him, and, yet, that are useful to relaunch the debate on the relationship between states and minorities, centres and peripheries, nomadic and sedentary peoples. Thus, reactions, symposia and seminars arose, and a movement has tried to reduce Scott's ideas to his mistakes (though he has made quite a few, how is one to understand and discuss dozens of different ethnicities?), losing sight of the main purpose, which was to make people think. In Hammond's article (2011), *The Battle Over Zomia*, any researcher who is interested in this concept will find whatever he or she needs to support his or her argument (whether for or against Scott; this is where the genius of Scott's idea lies, as it can be contradicted or praised, used or refused). As a result, Jonsson's work (2013) may rely too heavily on the "political crafting" of ethnicities and on the position they are trying to reinforce in regards to the 'other'. This emphasis is also reflected in the ethnic groups living within the Zomia where political crafting is a great art (see Ferrari, this volume). This shows the dynamics of these populations, which are far from being endangered.

Thus, Scott's book is a model, that is to say, its intention is to generate a discourse and is a starting point for a discussion on the use of one of the many aspects of ethnicity, yet we remain in the realm of both symbolic and

realist imagination, which of course leads to various reactions. In fact, this was the intention.

Supporting his point of view on the existence of Zomia – which we believe to be valid, because, as we will show in this book, Zomians (whether inner or outer) do in fact exist – he was right to be provocative. He was thus able to launch a debate, proving that there was a gap in existing scholarship.

In this book, we extend the current discourse through the study of internal Zomians, because drawing a political identity that may be suitable for its survival, as well as for its survival within the state, is crucial. The work of NGOs and researchers has resulted in Zomians being considered as the relics of a past that they would like to revive but are forced to accept. So most of them end up saying to themselves “we might as well help them and integrate them”; but we know all too well that integration policies are prone to failure, as ethnicity is not dead and has always existed. Scott broke this dynamic and prompted a debate in areas that he probably had not foreseen. Thus, some researchers put the finger, sometimes too quickly, on critical issues in contemporary anthropology:

Clunan, of the Center on Contemporary Conflict, has a different concern about Scott's stamping an expiration date on Zomia. 'It's too easy for him to say that his argument doesn't apply to the 20th and 21st centuries,' she says, 'because if it did, it would incorporate a whole bunch of pretty nasty actors,' among them insurgents, human traffickers, and terrorists. (Hammond 2011)

The human rhizome (Lejard 2011) is an example of the 'Zomian' dynamic based on migrants and traffickers. It may appear and develop 'anywhere', but it requires lines of action and agency to territorialize it, as suggested by Deleuze & Guattari (1980). They may appear in 'lost' places, among the buried ruins of a glorious past, or in the remains devastated by a tragic history. Thus, at the centre of 'nowhere', on the peripheries of two nation-states, a unique place that we have studied, Poipet, has grown in recent years. Poipet, a town at the Cambodian-Thai border on the only road between Phnom Penh and Bangkok, has become the avatar of globalization. Lejard (2011) tells us that a 'Krom' space emanates from this place, reaching into Thai territory.

Historically charged rituals then appeared. A myth explains the symbolic battle of the border through fabulous figures, but the place is thus deterritorialized as it goes beyond the simple concepts of human geography. It is a mental map that draws the history of the Khmers and of their alliances with

Khmer-speaking Thais, from a place inhabited by migrants who are being exploited by a globalized economy. However, neither globalization, nor the researchers (Segalen 2001) or the managers who want to get rid of new ideas from people like Scott who require us to revisit misunderstood concepts such as the rhizome, nor the missionaries, can ever destroy the Zomians. This is because the Zomian, however wild, exotic, ethnic or 'other' he or she may be, is also a resistant. The Zomian has forever fascinated us and revolted us, as the nomad is not meant to exist, since the nomad contradicts the state's discourse, which is why there is such a perfect separation between the two groups.

Where Scott goes too far, in our opinion, is that this separation is not as drastic and that there are exchanges between Zomian groups that coinhabit within the states (in addition to the exchanges between Zomians and non-Zomians, that is to say between 'wild' and 'civilized' peoples). This unequal exchange has in fact reinforced the idea of populations specializing in the forest (forest 'savages') and in the sea (the sea nomads), all of whom gather their produce for the international market of product demand. States could have revealed the latencies of groups that would have specialized themselves, thanks to them. But no, it does not work this way, as cultural latency is an accumulation of experiences that take shape within an ethnicity that is suitable for a given moment among many possibilities.

Even though Jonsson (2011) may be correct in suggesting that ethnic construction is a historical phenomenon since it evolves with the times and the era (and this is why 'globalization' will not destroy them), he is wrong to base it solely on exchanges (which is what we 'must' be thinking since Barth). History, as we can see today, is a construction that is in constant mutation.

Zomia reminds us of a reality that we dare not approach: where does this ethnicity actually come from? From the accumulation of experiences, not to mention primordialism or essentialism, or the appearance of latent features in times of historical conflict (Godelier 2007)?

Thus, at the risk of repeating ourselves, this book should not be taken literally, but rather as a new way to think about ethnicity. It goes without saying that not all Zomians have fled, as some have remained within the states. But, as we will show in this book, it is not because one feigns to play the dominant people's game that one necessarily becomes different. A Zomian Hmong and a collaborating Hmong both remain Hmong. This is the strength of ethnic choices, reminding us of ideologies, choices, dissimulation and other techniques among smaller-scale societies.