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## Introduction to the Special Forum: Agrarian Change in Zomia

### Social, Religious, and Cosmological Dimensions of Swidden Cultivation and Upland Livelihoods in the Consolidation of the “Modern” State

Using evidence from four ethnographically rich case studies of people who conduct shifting agriculture and swidden cultivation in the borderlands of South, East, and Southeast Asia, this introduction to the Special Forum argues that state territorialization of peripheral societies in Asia produces similar effects in spite of varying political, national, economic, and geographical contexts. In addition, in contrast to the large body of literature on agrarian change, which focuses on economic, political, and ecological changes in agricultural societies, this forum is particularly—but not singularly—devoted to understanding social, religious, and cosmological change. The four case studies demonstrate how the latter are intertwined with the more infrastructural dimensions as a total “way of life.” As part of the state territorialization of peripheral areas, in all four cases this “way of life” gets partially replaced, and changes become embedded in moral discourses of “modernity,” “civilization,” and “development,” which also involve multiple economic, political, social, cosmological, and religious dimensions. In spite of these powerful new hegemonic discourses, as the case studies demonstrate, contradictions and unexpected consequences frequently arise, showing that state control is never fully realized, and that social processes are always complex and in flux.

Keywords: shifting agriculture—modernity—Asian borderlands—sedentization—Zomia

\*Note: This contribution is part of the special forum “Agrarian Change in Zomia,” guest-edited by Erik de Maaker and Deborah E. Tooker

This special forum derives from a panel titled “Who Owns the Hills? Cosmologies, Claims, and Resources of the South and Southeast Asian Uplands,” convened by Erik de Maaker at the 4th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network, City University of Hong Kong, in 2014. The intent of the panel was to highlight religious, social, and cosmological changes occurring as upland agriculture changed in the borderlands of Asia. Deborah E. Tooker, Erik de Maaker, and Debojyoti Das were participants in the panel, with Jianhua Wang, Micah F. Morton, and Ian Baird providing important relevant papers later.<sup>1</sup> The articles in this forum look at societies that previously practiced (and in some cases, currently practice) shifting agriculture or swidden cultivation in the borderland region described as “Zomia” by Willem van Schendel (2002). Van Schendel usefully introduced the concept as a way to denaturalize the different regions that are frequently referred to as South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, but which could be reconceptualized in a different way by constituting upland areas together as a region known as Zomia. Indeed, the set of articles that are introduced here speak to each other in important ways, even though they are centered in each of these regions: de Maaker and Das in South Asia, Baird in Southeast Asia, and Wang and Morton in East Asia.

While most of the recent agrarian change literature focuses on economic, political, and agricultural practices, institutions, and changes, here (and in the original intent of the panel) we want to make the point that those changing spheres are intertwined with other religious, cosmological, and social institutions and concepts, with all of these spheres being part of a moral discourse of “modernity”<sup>2</sup> that is part of state territorialization of peripheral areas. Thus, we emphasize the replacement of a whole “way of life” that included both agricultural practices and religious and cosmological concepts by a whole other way of life and discourse of “modernity.” This latter way of life needed to define the periphery as “non-modern” in order to justify and define itself. At first, it seemed that these articles were to speak to how “modernity” and “modern” social changes looked different in border regions as opposed to, say, what happens in the metropole or central/dominant regions of nation-states. However, the ethnographic material speaks instead to the ways in which swidden agricultural practices are intertwined with social, religious, and cosmological changes, and how changes in these practices relate to border regions and efforts to consolidate and construct “modern” nation states. The articles also consider the spread of capitalism, which the state both protects and through which

it organizes and receives new revenues. So it is not that “modernity” looks radically different in these border regions, but rather that “modernity” would not make sense at the center *or* the periphery without them. The “non-modern” needs to be dismantled at the borderlands in order for the state and the discourse of “modernity” to be consolidated. We also found that, throughout Asia, this process looks very similar despite different national, political, cultural, and religious contexts.

While it is generally recognized that state-evading strategies were prevalent throughout this region, including the production of non-state spaces prior to World War II (see van Schendel and de Maaker 2014; Baird 2010; Scott 2009; Tooker 2012), there are also many examples from before World War II of upland minorities desiring to variously interact with lowland states, including receiving support and recognition from them (Jonsson 2010; 2012; Baird 2013; Lee 2015). But the timeframe for the articles included in this special forum is recent and mainly includes examples from eras when states have acquired new technologies for controlling formerly peripheral regions to degrees that differed from past interactions (see van Schendel and de Maaker 2014). With these technologies, states use “modernity” to spread state control, including changes in cultural and religious practices.

The literature regarding agrarian change is substantial and has developed over many decades. While its focus has shifted over time, it has always emphasized land tenure and land reform and the various factors that result in changes in peasant agricultural livelihoods (Lehmann 1974; De Janvry 1981; Bernstein 2002). In recent years, agrarian change research has largely been focused on critically examining the impacts of large-scale land acquisitions on peasant agriculture and livelihoods (Borras et al. 2011; Borras and Franco 2012; Wolford et al. 2013). However, Tania Li (2011; 2014) has usefully advocated for doing more research regarding the role of labor when it comes to land tenure and agrarian change issues. Indeed, researchers have shown an increased interest in adopting political ecology–influenced frameworks for considering the role of labor. While some research, such as Oliver Pye and colleagues (2012), has usefully considered the precarious positions in which Indonesian laborers frequently find themselves when working in Malaysia, Li’s work has a different focus. She considers the links between labor issues, land tenure, and agrarian change, and that there is not much demand for some people who lost their land. Some researchers have also been looking more explicitly at how labor movements associated with large-scale land concessions have been affecting agrarian change in both places that send laborers elsewhere, and, where land concessions have been established, adopting various theoretical frameworks to understand these linkages, such as ones based on political ecology, teleconnections, and telecoupling (Baird and Fox 2015; Fox et al. 2018; Baird et al. 2019). But what is largely missing from all this research is the importance of cosmological or religious and other social dimensions of upland agrarian change, the focus of this special forum.

The four articles in the special forum consider this in somewhat different but interconnected ways. All four consider how religious and other social, economic, and political factors have impacted upland livelihoods and associated agrarian prac-

tices, particularly upland swidden cultivation. The case studies specifically consider: a particular religious sect of Hmong who live along the Thai-Lao border (Baird), transition to rubber farming by Akha in Southwest China near the borders with Burma and Laos (Wang and Morton), social and agrarian change among the Garo of Northeast India along the Bangladesh border (de Maaker), and links between agrarian and religious change among the Nagas along the Northeast India border with Burma (Das). In particular, shifting agriculture is the take-off point. Indeed, it has long been recognized that shifting cultivation is integrated with multiple social and cosmological domains and practices; it cannot be understood as an isolated economic or even agricultural domain but more as a way of life. As a result, any changes in shifting agriculture are bound to result in changes in other social domains. Das, for example, looks at changing labor relations with the transition away from shifting agriculture among the Nagas and the role of the state and particularly religious conversion to Christianity in this transition. De Maaker notes that some traditional values remain despite the move to a market economy among the Garo. Wang and Morton also look at the shift to a market economy among the Akha with rubber plantations and the role of the state. Baird looks at a new religious movement among the Hmong and sees it as partially a response to various state criticisms of Hmong society, livelihood practices, and upland agriculture.

These ethnographically rich articles have different emphases and reference different time ranges. Yet, despite their geographical separation and different social, cultural, political, and national contexts, we find common transformations, both structural and discursive, among these differing societies. The articles differ in the extent to which they address economic and political issues or cosmological and religious ones, some focusing on one more than the other. Nevertheless, they all indicate how upland borderland territorialization processes are often related to agricultural changes.

#### ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CHANGES

Perhaps the most obvious economic change is the spread of capitalism, and, associated with these economic changes, political pressures from states on upland societies to transition to sedentary forms of agriculture. James Scott adopted van Schendel's idea of Zomia as a way to understand why non-state peoples previously evaded the state (Scott 2009), even if the reality was more varied. However, these new economic and political transformations are often seen as a way to "modernize" and "develop" and are also seen as a way for states to control populations, making them "legible," taxable, and more easily incorporated into state systems. For the Akha in China (Wang and Morton), rubber plantations were promoted by the state to replace swidden agriculture "in the interests of national security, defense building, and industrial growth," but Wang and Morton also mention that it was a way for the state to control ethnic minorities on the border, especially by making their production legible and thus taxable. There was a shifting cultivation ban in 1998 that effectively ensured the transformation of local ethnic farmers into "modern" cash-crop farmers. De Maaker mentions that sedentary agriculture is

replacing swiddens among the Garo, and Indian “development” projects move people away from shifting agriculture to sedentary forms. For the Hmong, Baird discusses both Thai and Lao government regulations that restrict swidden and encourage ways to transform agricultural strategies in the uplands so that they are more sedentary. Das describes the Indian government’s anti-insurgency practices among the Nagas as linked to incentivizing the spread of wet rice agriculture, although he claims that later efforts by Baptist missionaries were more effective in transforming agriculture in the uplands. In some cases, new technology is introduced (see Das on the introduction of the plough among the Nagas). In many cases of the sedentized crops, as land becomes privatized labor becomes wage labor and is no longer based on inter-household reciprocal labor exchanges.

Sedentary agriculture reduces movement. These societies and people are no longer moving around as much as they did before, something that Jim Scott sees as a method of state control and an easier way to extract labor power through taxes. In some cases, this takes the form of state resettlement (see Baird on the Hmong in Laos). Wang and Morton also discuss resettlement policy in China during the commune period (1958–early 1980s).

Along with this goes the privatization of land that was previously communal or shared through usufruct and the use of technology to survey and map the land.<sup>3</sup> Other forms of legibility included various types of registrations and land titles backed by a state legal system, which enabled the state to collect taxes. De Maaker talks about the privatization of land, as use rights that were normally released among the Garo (and their use redistributed based on need) are now held onto in order to grow cash crops.

Cash crops, wage labor, and multicropping arose, along with increasing class formation as these societies became incorporated in a market capitalist economy. New social divisions of landowners and land workers emerged. Just as land is becoming commoditized, so are the crops (Das mentions cash crops of paddy rice, long beans, and maize). Das discusses the creation of an elite middle class among the Nagas and outlines the change from reciprocal inter-household and age-set divisions of labor in swiddens to church-organized, more centralized, “efficient” wage labor in paddy fields. De Maaker notes that previously held redistributive feasts were disappearing among the Garo, even as social inequality increased. However, he also notes that there is still an emphasis on communal sharing that prevents the society from going into a full “individualization of wealth.” Nevertheless, those with a cash income can claim the use of more land as they can hire wage laborers to work it, thus increasing a class formation process. Wang and Morton note the development of socio-economic differences among the Akha in China with cash crops, especially rubber, linked to uneven land distribution.

There is also a simultaneous incorporation into state political, administrative, and legal structures, and a loss of political autonomy. Roads and newer forms of communication along with electric and water systems contributed to this process and the control of border areas (see Das on the Nagas), as did registration requirements (see Baird on the Hmong in Laos and de Maaker on the Garo). In some cases, this process started with the inclusion of the group in the colonial state (see de Maaker

for the Garo) and continued post-independence. De Maaker notes the mapping of village boundaries and the registration of landowners among the Garo. Das notes the importance of Christian churches among the Nagas but also points out their increasing incorporation into the Indian state administration and bureaucracy.

Village leaders, who previously gained their status from an egalitarian- or consensus-type framework (or at least an internal framework), were now connected to a state administrative apparatus that could provide resources and recognition (see de Maaker on the Garo). In some cases, states gave minorities extra benefits, but these were often controlled by elites or helped to create elites (see de Maaker on the Garo).

#### DISCURSIVE CHANGES AND GENERATIVE CAPACITIES

While these changes appear infrastructural, it is important to remember that they are part and parcel of a discourse of economic development and “modernity.” One of the key contributions of this set of articles is the way that it especially focuses on how a moral discourse of “modernity,” including social, religious, and cosmological change, is also related to agricultural change, dimensions missing from the literature on agrarian change. In this framework, swidden or shifting agriculture is generally considered “primitive” and “wasteful,” and cash-crop agriculture is considered “civilized” or “modern” and a more efficient use of land and labor (see Baird, Wang and Morton, and Das). However, religious and cosmological change has also been associated with agricultural change, including “modern” values being intertwined with ideas about economic development. Among the Nagas, millet and Job’s tears were viewed as inferior crops to wet rice, “modern” people were called “rice eaters,” and “the message of growing rice . . . [was spread] along with the teaching of the Bible.” It was also considered more “civilized” than the older crops. Those who continued to eat Job’s tears were even ridiculed (see Das on the Nagas). This, in essence, ridicules a whole way of life (i.e., the “non-modern”). A common theme is that these various “modern” forms benefit the state and not the local actors. Das notes Christian services in which villagers are encouraged to improve their lives by taking on waged white-collar jobs, like those of government employees.

Although this could just as easily have been included under economic and political changes, an increase in demand for cash and consumerism is noted by these authors (see Das on the Nagas) and created needs for children’s tuition fees, school uniforms, transportation, electricity bills, and so on; others note telephones, houses, transport (motorcycles), TV, tractors, and drinking water.

New status differences developed based on wealth and not on traditional hierarchies. For example, Wang and Morton discuss the new willingness of Han Chinese to marry wealthy Akha despite previously viewing them as lower in the ethnic hierarchy. Ethnic and age hierarchies were breaking down (see Wang and Morton on school teachers saying children were now more difficult to teach, an indication that age hierarchies were changing). Traditional ceremonies and festivals now follow class lines. For example, weddings and new house celebrations are more

elaborate among the wealthy (Wang and Morton for Akha in China), and new “modern” ceremonies such as birthdays are added.

The close connection between shifting agriculture and the relationship to the cosmos or the divine necessarily changes form. Wang and Morton, for example, note that some animist beliefs among the Akha remained after the Mao era, but now the younger generation is rejecting them as they are no longer respectful of spirits and say that “money is stronger.” While Christianity is a popular new choice of religion in some of these borderlands as it is oppositional to lowland religions, whatever religious practices are taken on must fit within the constraints and discipline of the new capitalist and state regimes. Thus, a common theme in changing religious practices (and this seems to be the case whether it is Christianity or not—see Tooker 2004) is the control over, and efficient use of, time and money, often through standardization. Das notes that conversion to Christianity among the Naga, starting in the 1950s, was viewed as “entry into the new world” (as opposed to the world of headhunting), and older ceremonies were viewed as economic waste. De Maaker notes in the Garo adoption of Christianity that there is a decline of community religion (associated with *swiddens*) and an avoidance of large-scale rituals, something that reduces the redistributive sharing of communal religion. Das has a fascinating, extensive discussion of new notions of time, calendar, and labor coming into Naga society through Christian churches as intermediaries, and a movement away from a relational sense of time. Missionaries contrasted their new calendric notion of time with the local yearly rituals and agricultural cycle and appropriated Naga time by controlling time. Das links this to new notions of surplus production and accumulation, and the Protestant work ethic. New forms of labor groups directed money to the church, and efficient use of time (removal of leisure) was emphasized. He also notes the fostering of promptness and schedule discipline.

However, we also find these themes in non-Christian contexts (see also Tooker 2004 on the Akha). Baird, for example, discusses a relatively new Hmong millenarian religious movement along the Laos-Thailand border. It is interesting to note that it is viewed as a reform of traditional Hmong religion, “one that is easier and cheaper to practice, and does not require the sacrificing of domestic animals.” In addition to supposedly saving time and money, there is a call for standardization of Hmong practices as well. Baird compares the new Hmong movement he discusses with a similar reformist Hmong group in the US. They view their practices as simplifying traditional practices, thus saving time and money.

#### SYNCRETISM, CONTRADICTIONS, RESISTANCE, AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

This is all not to say that the transformation from one form to another is clear cut or smooth. What appear to be syncretic forms emerge. It is difficult to tease out whether this is syncretism (and possibly incorporation of internal contradictions) or just transition to a new form. Thus, a taxed use right (*patta*) among the Garo, while technically can be sold, should still take into account the interests of fellow villagers (for example, kin and matrilineal relatives) or would be viewed as antisocial (de Maaker). Das notes the syncretic structure of Christianity with its

incorporation of Naga age-sets. De Maaker states that even Christian Garo have doubts about whether “primordial entities” can be controlled by the Christian god, for example, in cases of illness. And Baird interprets the new Hmong religious movement as a response to lowland criticisms of them.

There are also unintended consequences of state impositions and the march to “modernity,” in some cases in the form of resistance.<sup>4</sup> Thus Wang and Morton note that the Akha encroach into state forest that was formerly ancestral land and “steal” from the state, while de Maaker notes the emergence of insurgent groups partially fueled by intra-ethnic class polarization as Garo elites gained access to state resources and left others behind. Wang and Morton see new problems emerging, with youth having extra time on their hands—since labor on cash-crop rubber farms is not continuous—and also social ills like material consumption, gambling, alcoholism, prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases, and poor health from polluted water. Perhaps most interesting is Wang and Morton’s finding that the Akha eventually took up cash crops with a strong entrepreneurial spirit, and their private farms are doing better than the state farms, even expanding rubber farms beyond state borders into Laos and Burma.

These parallel processes in borderland regions indicate a larger reorganization and re-orientation of former center–(autonomous) periphery relations as the periphery becomes ethnicized in a “modern” state system. The fact that they occur in different national, political, economic, and cultural contexts indicates broader transformations in human relations that are both structural and ideological in nature. The moral cloak of “modernity” has become effective in justifying and explaining these transformations as its rationale becomes accepted at both center and periphery, often not without resistance. Nevertheless, there are unintended consequences to this new rationale as the underlying structural ideological components spread beyond state boundaries and often cannot be controlled by the state (see for example Wang and Morton’s discussion of Chinese Akha rubber farmers expanding into Laos, Tooker’s knowledge of Thai Akha coffee farmers expanding into Burma/Myanmar, and Baird’s discussion of Hmong religious reform expanding across state borders, even to the US). So while the state is the initiating force, it produces effects that are beyond its control. This collection of articles provides a remarkable, ethnographically rich look at these parallel processes in action and, in doing so, provides a better understanding of the transformation of human lives and meaning in Asian borderlands.

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#### NOTES

1. This introduction is based on Deborah Tooker's (rewritten) discussion paper for the original panel. Ian Baird contributed important sections on the agrarian change literature and astute revisions of the overall document. We are grateful to Erik de Maaker for originally organizing this insightful panel and for providing helpful comments on this introduction. Authors are listed in order of contribution to the article. Deborah Tooker thanks two students who helped with style editing, Reilly Callahan and Emily El Younsi.
2. Here we are referring to "modernity" as a discourse, the properties of which will become clear in the rest of the article. It defines itself in relation to the "non-modern."
3. Maps were also used for political purposes, not just economic (see de Maaker for the Garo).
4. Van Schendel and de Maaker (2014, 3–9) give some examples of state-evading strategies.

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