

## Keeping the Hill Tribes at Bay: A critique from India's Northeast of James C. Scott's paradigm of state evasion

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The Barbarians come out at night. Before darkness falls the last goat must be brought in, the gates barred, a watch set in every lookout to call the hours. All night, it is said, the barbarians prowl about bent on murder and rapine. Children in their dreams see the shutters part and fierce barbarian faces leer through. 'The barbarians are here!' the children scream, and cannot be comforted. Clothing disappears from washing-lines, food from larders, however tightly locked. The barbarians have dug a tunnel under the walls, people say; they come and go as they please, take what they like; no one is safe any longer. The farmers still till the fields, but they go out in bands, never singly. They work without heart: the barbarians are only waiting for the crops to be established, they say, before they flood the fields again (Coetzee 2000 [1980]: 134).

'Barbarians' and state projects have always been antithetical. Throughout history, the demolition or capture of states by marauding 'barbarian' armies has always been a possible scenario (Bronson 1988). This threat was always both real and imminent, to the extent that a state's political life-expectancy depended on its ability to ward off raiding nonstate tribes. This is the basic thesis of this article, which, on a broader level, criticises Scott's grand narrative, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (2009), in which he argues that, over the long term, the peopling of the hills is best understood as 'the history of deliberate and reactive statelessness' (2009: x). In this view, upland peoples intentionally withdrew from the oppressiveness of state-making projects in nearby valleys. They fled upwards and concealed themselves in the intricacies of the hills, steering clear of state appropriation.

Here, my historical references are to Northeast India, which forms the western borderland of Zomia in Scott's usage of the concept. 'Zomia', as originally imagined by Van Schendel (2002), refers to a vast, contiguous highland region, located at the fringes of both political spaces and academically-defined 'areas'. It provides an alternative way of thinking

about regionalisation, situating, as it does, upland Asia at its centre of attention.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I do not claim to present a fully coherent reconstruction of history. Rather, my argumentation should be read in the spirit of Leach's statement that 'It is not the anthropologist's task to write history, but if history is to be elaborated with the aid of inspired guesses then the special knowledge of the anthropologist becomes relevant so as to point up the probabilities' (Leach 1960: 49).

I will begin with an historical account. When British colonial forces extended their influence into the Brahmaputra Valley, an officer reported a host of state-like structures, which had been put in place over the valley's fertile soil by hill polities:

We found the Assamese Valley surrounded north, east, and south by numerous savage and warlike tribes whom the decaying authority of the Assam dynasty had failed of late years to control, and whom the disturbed condition of the province had incited to encroachment. Many of them advanced claims to rights more or less definite over lands lying in the plains; others claimed tributary payments from the villages below their hills, or the services of *paiks* said to have been assigned them by the Assam authorities (cited in Mackenzie 1884: 7).<sup>2</sup>

This suggests that early state projects—with their potential agricultural surplus, concentrated manpower, and the overall amenity of life believed to prevail there—made a strong impression on those living in the less

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- 1 In Van Schendel's definition, Zomia stretches from the central hills of Vietnam in the east to west Nepal and Kashmir in the west, including parts of China, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Scott confines its western border to the Naga and Mizo Hills in India's Northeast and Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (Scott 2009: 16). Scott argues that Zomia 'qualifies as a region in the strong sense of the term' (*ibid.*), yet he fails to explain why he proposes to shrink its surface vis-à-vis Van Schendel's initial proposal. In any case, Scott's inclusion of 'Southeast Asia' in his title is politically mistaken, as not only the Naga and Mizo Hills but also Manipur, to which he also refers, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, clearly all belong to the political realm of South Asia. On the whole, however, his analysis largely stops short at the Indo-Myanmar border and thus reasserts the South Asia/Southeast Asia academic divide, which the intellectual case of Zomia is supposed to transcend. By extending the discussion on state-hill tribes relationships westward, this article recognises the potential usefulness of Zomia as an ethnographic field of study.
  - 2 *Paik* refers to a type of corvée labour system under the Ahom Kingdom in which a large number of males were expected to render services to the king.

productive uplands. For them, state resources became an object of aspiration, if not, at times, an essential supplement to cover their basic needs. Taking a cue from the historical case of Ahom-hill tribes' relationships, outlined below, I will argue (and herein lies my main critique of Scott's narrative) that the plains provided too essential a resource for those living in the relatively 'barren' hills to ignore.

### **Scott's grand narrative: 'evading the state'**

James Scott has influenced the course of political anthropology over the past four decades, and catchy phrases such as 'weapons of the weak', 'hidden transcripts', 'moral economy' and 'seeing like a state' continue to appeal to many. His latest work, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), is no different in the impact it has made. In a vast, complex and multi-layered treatise, of which this brief summary is necessarily an abridged and over-simplified one, Scott challenges much received wisdom about primitivism, arguing that nonstate hill peoples (so-called 'primitives') should not be seen as archaic vestiges, left behind by the evolutionary sequences of history. On the contrary, they have deliberately sought refuge in the stateless hills, where they have been the architects of their own marginality, for reasons based on their desire to keep the state at arm's length.

Scott quotes Ernest Gellner's classic *Saints of the Atlas* (1969) to claim that, from a historical point of view, tribalism is a state effect, and that political autonomy is not a given, but a deliberate choice. Nonstate people, therefore, are perfectly aware of what they have rejected, namely the oppression of centralised political rule. He also finds an intellectual companion in Clastres' *Society Against the State* (1977), which is an anarchistic interpretation of native peoples' social organisation in post-conquest South America. Elevating it to the status of an epigraph, Scott adopts Clastres' stance that: 'it is said that the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. It might be said with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is a history of their struggle against the state'. And indeed, Scott's narrative is one of withdrawal, avoidance, 'self-barbarization', social and political fragmentation and economic minimalism; all deliberately practised by hill dwellers to avoid state appropriation.

In Zomia, 'becoming barbarian' resonated with not becoming a subject of the state. It meant fleeing the adverse effects of state projects in the valleys.

For those wishing to evade the state, the complexities of the undulating hills and elevated mountains, or the 'friction of terrain' as Scott calls it, provided the opportunity. Hill populations are, therefore, 'best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys' (Scott 2009: ix). After settling in the hills, the narrative goes, the newly arrived escapees intentionally rendered themselves illegible from a state's point of view. In fact, virtually everything about their livelihoods can be read as strategic positionings to keep the state at bay. 'Their physical dispersion in rugged terrain, their mobility, their cropping practices, their kinship structure, their pliable ethnic identities, and their devotion to prophetic, millenarian leaders effectively serve to avoid incorporation into states and to prevent states from springing up among them' (ibid.: x).

While populations in the hills were marked by centrifugal movements, a centripetal process characterised life in the valley state. It was based on the inclusion and absorption of people, and devoted to restraining them from sprawling into illegible zones. Power, Scott argues, transposing Geertz's treatise on the *Theatre State* (1980) in Bali to Zomia at large, boiled down to manpower. Hence, it was the appropriation of people, rather than a quest for territory, that was the key to state making. After all, a concentrated and legible population was needed to produce a systematic surplus, as much as it was a prerequisite for military defence. An ambitious state, therefore, functioned as a 'centripetal population machine' (2009: 64), which constantly sought to replenish and expand its manpower base. As migrants did not usually draw in voluntarily, the valley state had no choice but to resort to scouring its periphery and capturing, absorbing and enslaving nonstate peoples.

At the core of Scott's analysis is the binary distinction between the valley and the hills. This division largely corresponds to the delineation between state and nonstate spaces, which constitutes the real fault line. It must be added, however, as Scott himself qualifies, that 'nonstate space' is not a synonym for hills; it points more generally to locations where a state has a particular difficulty, often because of geographical impediments, in concentrating manpower and production (2009: 13). Despite their fundamental disparities, Scott asserts that valley and hill spaces are also deeply connected, that their history is a symbiotic one, and that they 'have to be read against each other to make any sense' (2009.: 27). Scott's

anarchistic reading of history, as he himself acknowledges (2009: xii), makes little or no sense for the period following the Second World War, after which the territorially-conceived nation-state became the nearly exclusive form of sovereignty, virtually erasing the last nonstate spaces from the political map.

In Scott's theory, the adverse effects of early state-making projects predominate: taxes, slavery, *corvée* labour, epidemics, and warfare. The reverse option, that the pre-modern valley state also had much to offer, albeit unintentionally, to those residing in the nonstate, remains, by and large, under-estimated. However, these benefits were many and various; harvests, fish, agricultural implements, manpower, clothes, cattle, and advanced weapons. The quest for control over these resources and over arable land in the plains is, I argue, pivotal to understanding pre-modern political fluctuations, perhaps more so than a Scottian focus on a massive, unidirectional, and sustained fight from the lowlands to the hills. Nor did hill peoples have an instinctive propensity for statelessness. An opposite flow, involving people deliberately moving from the hills into the 'state-ridden' plains, was equally pertinent. In fact, most of the pre-modern states that existed in the Brahmaputra Valley were established by erstwhile hill dwellers, who had descended and crushed, or taken over, existing state structures. Notably, a sizeable number of the offspring of these former valley kingdoms, like the Chutiya, Kachari, Dimasa, Jaintia and Ahom, are now again found inhabiting tracts in the hills. Hence, if viewed through a wide historical lens, people may have been both plains people and hill dwellers at different points in their history. Local origin and migration stories, as I will illustrate, testify to such a dialectic, in a way that a common legacy of flight, which one would perhaps expect on the basis of Scott's theory, is by and large absent in India's Northeast. The narrative presented here, although far from being deterministic, has the further advantage of complicating the artificial hill-valley binary which has been so embedded in scholarship on the region, and which Scott's argument ultimately reinforces.

### **The case of Ahom-hill tribe relations**

Once a mighty kingdom, stretching its dominance over all corners of the Brahmaputra Valley, the Ahom Kingdom eventually decayed in, as Gait puts it, 'the "sleepy hollow" of the Brahmaputra valley ... [where] it was only

the intervention of the British that prevented them from being blotted out by fresh hordes of invaders, first the Burmese, and then the Singphos and Khāmtis, and also, possibly, the Daflas, Abors and Bhutias' (Gait 1926: 8). When the first Ahom, a Tibeto-Burman speaking community, crossed the Patkai range into Assam in 1228, coming as they did from the northern and eastern hill tracts of Upper Burma and Western Yunnan, they encountered acute competition and rivalry among tribes residing there. Amidst this turmoil, Sukupha, an Ahom noble, organised his forces and reportedly overpowered the Tangsas, Noctes and Wanchos, who made their homes in what is now Arunachal Pradesh (Luthra 1971: 1144). Slowly at first, and not without setbacks, the Ahom extended their sway over the Brahmaputra plains. By 1539, for instance, Ahom territory had expanded to twice the size it had been around 1407 (Guha 1983: 19), and around the close of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Ahom occupied almost the entire valley (Luthra 1971: 1144), a position they would retain until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the following discussion is less about Ahom governance in the plains, which has been described in notable detail elsewhere (e.g. Gait 1926; Guha 1983, Sarma 1986), than it is about the relationships between the Ahom government and the surrounding hill tribes.

The Ahom cultivated different relations with different hill tribes. Hence, framing Ahom-hill tribes' relations in terms of a single, progressive narrative would involve grave over-simplifications. Nor were hill tribes themselves placid in this process; the Ahom incorporated some in the ranks of their army, but there were also instances in which a hill tribe sought the support of the Ahom army to intervene in an inter-tribal conflict (Luthra 1971: 11). Raids and retaliations occurred with notable frequency too: most of the historical sources testify to this. Yet there is more to early valley-hill relations than hostilities. Some hill Naga communities lived chiefly by manufacturing salt, which they retailed to plainsmen. The Ahom government raised revenues from the salt that was brought down, and the Nagas in turn depended on the markets in the plains for certain foodstuffs and goods (Robinson 1959 [1841]: 383). Mofatt-Mills reported an occasion on which about a thousand Angami Nagas descended to the plains to trade with merchants in salt and cornelian beads. He noted how the 'utmost goodwill was manifested towards the authorities and the people of the plains' (Mofatt-Mills 1969 [1854]: 126). On the whole, the Naga Hills, Robinson writes in 1841, '[have] always been accessible to the people of the

plains; whilst the Nagas on their part, have always been permitted access to the markets on the frontier' (1959 [1841]: 383).

However, trade relations, where they existed, were not infrequently overshadowed by acts of warfare, as hill polities swooped down and looted villages lying within Ahom jurisdiction. Most probably, they did not plunder the plains because of their 'most rapacious nature' (Devi 1968: 270), or their 'savage' and 'warlike' state of being, as many colonial accounts would later claim. More plausibly, they raided the plains out of sheer necessity, given that 'technical backwardness and poverty of resources kept the tribes dependent on adjoining areas for the supply of essential commodities' (Sikdar 1982: 17). Often in a state of being 'too poor to be able to trade' (Peal cited in Devi 1968: 20), because the uplands were less productive than the more fertile plains, plundering may have been their last resort. Devi (1968) has reconstructed a pattern, based on a study of historical cases, which, in an abridged version, is as follows: after a hill polity launched a successful raid on the plains, the Ahom King retaliated by directing his military forces into the hills. Violent battles ensued, killing or capturing a large number of hill people. More often, however, the Ahom army would find the hostile village completely deserted, as its inhabitants, not keen on confronting the superior Ahom forces, had already taken refuge in the jungle or moved to higher altitudes. The Ahom army was usually able to recapture some of the stolen goods, and took revenge by setting the abandoned village ablaze. Yet hill peoples regrouped quickly and their thatched houses were quickly rebuilt; it was only a matter of time before they gained sufficient strength to pillage the plains again.

The booty from a successful raid on the plains invariably consisted of grain, goods, weapons, agricultural tools, and persons, who were enslaved in agriculture and animal husbandry in the hills, or used as payment or tribute to neighbouring tribes. The abduction of plains people needs to be stressed here, because the absorption of manpower is usually thought of as a state activity, not a tribal one. Gray, an enterprising tea-planter, narrated how during a visit to the hills an Assamese woman told him how she was captured by the Singphos, who raided her village and took all inhabitants into slavery. She had been sold to a different community and separated from her relations. In the course of time, a Singpho had married her and she had two sons by him. Even though fifty years had passed, she had not forgotten her mother tongue, nor her memories of the plains

(1959 [1893]: 416). The colonial officer Peal was astonished when, during an exploratory expedition in Singpho territory, he stumbled upon a village whose inhabitants were clearly not Singphos. He found out that 'these people are the descendants of Assamese carried off by the Singphus some 80 or 100 years ago, and reduced to slavery' (1959 [1881]: 99). Slave raids on the plains were apparently widespread. The Hill Dolpha, too, 'annually kidnapped large numbers of men and women, whom they consigned to perpetual slavery' (Robinson 1959 [1851]: 175).

At times, hill groups did not just raid the plains, but notionally exerted sovereignty over them. The Jaintias, for example, extended their sway from the hills into the plains in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Jaintia king at the time, as recorded in inscriptions on coins and copperplates found in the plains, was referred to as 'Parbhat Ray', which may be translated as 'Lord from the Hills' (Gait 1926: 262-3). The hill Abors also wielded absolute power over the Miris of the plains, who they claimed as their dependents and runaway slaves. The Abors asserted an inalienable right to the gold and fish extracted by the Miris from the Dihong river. The Ahom government implicitly recognised Abor suzerainty over the Miris by relieving the latter of all revenue charges (Mackenzie 1884: 34-5).

Hill polities, in acute need of resources, were ever ready for an opportunity to raid the more productive plains. Hence, the more the Ahom valley state expanded towards the hilly peripheries, the greater the territory it had to defend, and the more vulnerable to raiding tribes it became. The concentration of manpower, and the systematic production of surplus, were no doubt important for the Ahom state in consolidating its core. What needs to be stressed, however, is that its continued existence equally relied on the Ahoms' ability to fend off marauding hill tribes. When, in the long run, military interventions against hill groups proved inconclusive, the Ahom government resolved to change tactics and 'coercion' was replaced by a policy of 'seduction'.<sup>3</sup> Seduction came in the form of the so-called *posa*-system, a government scheme that offered conditional long-term coexistence to hill tribes as an alternative to Ahom suzerainty. Probably anticipating that it was a craving for resources that instigated predatory raids, the Ahom government opted to make the produce of several villages along the foot of the hills liable to the demands from surrounding hill

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3 Here I am borrowing the terminology coined by Ferguson and Whitehead (2000 [1992]).



tribes. During Pratap Singh's reign (1603-1641), for instance, 'the Akas, the Dufflas, the Miris, and the Abors' were granted the right of levying *posha* which, apart from annual collection of goods in specified areas included labour-service of the Assamese *pykes* for which the ryots were given corresponding remission from the state's revenue demand' (Mackenzie cited in Mishra 1983: 1838).<sup>4</sup> In return for these privileges, the hill tribes had to refrain from making inroads into Ahom territory (Devi 1968: 270).<sup>5</sup> When mere containment was not the sole rationale, it was the creation, or sustenance, of trade relationships that propelled the Ahom state's political adjustment. The Noctes, for instance, controlled the salt wells located in the foothills. Although once routed by Ahom forces, they had over the years regained strength and had fought back Ahom incursions with notable success. The Ahom, eager to ensure regular supplies of salt, resorted to a policy of seduction. In return for negotiated access to the salt wells, the Ahom government recognised the political ascendancy of the Nocte chief, bestowed an honorary post upon him, and offered the Noctes an annual supply of foodstuffs from the plains (Misra and Thakur 2004: 183-4).

#### *Secondary state formation in the hills*

Secondary state formation, the establishment of smaller states in the shadow of powerful valley states, is seldom debated in discussions on

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4 *Posa* arrangements have also been documented elsewhere along the valley. The Tablungia Nagas, for example, were granted fishing waters in the plains, along with the services of fishermen, to supply them with dried fish (Devi 1968: 33-34). Similarly, revenue-free lands and fishing waters along with retainers were granted to the Noctes, Wanchos, (Luthra 1971: 1144), Konyaks, Aos, and Lhota Naga tribes living on the borders of the Lakhimpur and Sibsagar Districts (Devi 1968: 271).

5 The British colonial administration did not do away with the existing *posa*-arrangements, but 'bought out' hill peoples' suzerainty over the commercial plains by assigning them with annual stipends, which were paid in cash. For example, the claims on the plains by the Monpas of Towang were bought out by payment of an annual sum of 5,000 rupees while the hill peoples of Shergoan and Rupa were granted an annual payment of 2,526 rupees (Luthra 1971: 1145). The payment in kind to the Daflas was commuted to 2,543 rupees and the Miris and Adis received 2,178 and 3,312 rupees respectively (Sikdar 1982: 22). This policy was condemned as an admittance of state weakness by many and Kar has rightly noted that a sense of embarrassment runs through colonial accounts about this payment of 'blackmail' (Kar 2009). The official view on the matter, however, is perhaps well illustrated by the following statement from an agent to the Governor General: 'The money will indeed be well spent if we can purchase security to the inoffensive people of the plains' (cited in Kar 2009: 66).

Zomia, and yet Fiskesjö (2010) has convincingly shown that manifestations of state formation were evident among the pre-colonial Wa people on the hilly Burma-China frontier. The presence of highly profitable mines, which the Wa sought to control and exploit, was an import catalyst in this process. Fiskesjö suggests that the presence of salt wells among the Naga might have resulted in a similar process, a proposition with which I would agree. The fixed location of Naga-owned salt wells, which the Naga systematically exploited, incited processes of upland state-formation. State-like structures were especially marked among the Angami Naga, who, besides the manufacture of salt, also practiced terraced wet-rice cultivation in the hills (Hutton 1921: 70-2) and were described by Butler as the most 'powerful and warlike', but also the 'most enterprising, intelligent and civilized' of all Nagas (Butler 1969 [1875]: 293). Angami Nagas regularly indulged in such 'state-like' activities as warfare, levying tribute from neighbouring tribes, and slavery.<sup>6</sup> In pre-colonial times the Angami village of Khonoma established a monopolistic protection racket. In spite of frequent dissensions within, it emerged as a strong power centre which levied widespread tribute and was known and feared from afar (Hutton 1921: 11).

Secondary states usually emerged on the basis of a control of natural resources or trade routes. Over time, some of them evolved into large-scale predatory powers which were based on conquest and subjugation just as much as primary states, although the latter were often more reliant on agriculture than trade (Fiskejsö 2010: 261). The primary state (the Ahom in our case), appears to have been careful not to invoke the wrath of strong power centres in the hills. The Ahom's implicit recognition of the hill Abors' suzerainty over the Miris of the plains testifies to this. Instead, attempts were made to purchase peace from them. As this involved the surrender of *de facto* sovereignty over some produce and some stretches of arable land in the plains, it can be seen as a sign of state weakness. Yet, this policy

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6 Acts of war usually ended by the losing side agreeing to pay an annual tribute to the other, 'the tribute being either merely a nominal one of a few beads or a substantial payment in mithan or salt' (Hutton 1921: 156). At times, the inhabitants of defeated villages were, if not killed, taken into slavery. That slavery took place with notable frequency among the Angami is suggested by the existence of standard measures of the value of slaves. Mofatt Mills wrote: 'the value of slaves and cattle is strangely estimated at the following rate, a male slave is worth one cow and three conch shells, a female slave is worth three cows and four or five conch shells' (Mofatt Mills 1969 [1854]: 290).

of 'seduction' simultaneously enabled the Ahom to cultivate a *status quo* of relative stability with adjacent tribes, some of which were sufficiently powerful to endanger Ahom rule in the valley. In its final evaluation, the extraordinary resilience of the Ahom Kingdom was perhaps not due to its military power, concentration of manpower or systemic produce of a surplus, but evolved, in the words of Luthra, around its 'tact, diplomacy and statesmanship, of a high order in formulating a *modus vivendi* with the tribes' (Luthra 1971: 1144).

### **Local origin and migration stories**

The history of the relationships between the Ahom and the hill tribes suggest that hill polities deliberately expanded, or aspired to expand, to the more productive plains. Hence, when one adopts a wide historical lens, hill polities, or sections of them, have been both plains people and hill dwellers at recurrent points in their genealogy. Of course, groups did not move up and down as coherent units: fissioning, fusing and the incorporation of new entrants constantly altered their demographic and social composition. Local oral histories in India's Northeast support such a reading, although it should be stressed that such stories are circumstantial; they are interested and historically positioned tales which permit a certain drift by selective forgetting and remembering. The following brief excursion is indicative, I suggest, not necessarily for its historical accuracy, which can hardly be evaluated, but because it sheds light on how contemporary hill peoples in Northeast India themselves explain their present location in the hills.

A story current among the Garos locates their place of origin in Tibet. It recounts how they descended to the Brahmaputra Valley, stopping at various places on the way, before finally moving up again to their present location in the hills (Endle 1911: 3-4). The Mikirs narrate how they resolved to move down and place themselves under the protection of the Ahom government after they were habitually harassed by warring Khasi chiefs (Lyll 1908: 5). Mills recounted how a hill group, the Molungr, was driven into the plains by raiding Ao Naga forces. The Molungr became dispersed; some returned to their village to live under Ao suzerainty, some crossed the Brahmaputra Valley and settled in the hills to the north of it, while others walked up into the hills again and settled at higher altitudes (Mills 1926: 10). Roy believed that the Adi of present-day Arunachal Pradesh most likely came from the north across the Himalayan barrier: 'they might have come

in a sweeping mass down to the plains of Assam and have been driven back afterwards into the high-lands' (Roy 1960: 12). The legends of many Naga tribes, including the Sema, Tangkhul, Angami, Mao, Somra, and Chakeshang, point to Meikhel or its surrounding area as their place of origin, from which they have dispersed in various directions over the course of history (Horam 1975: 30). Meikhel, located a little to the south-east of present-day Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, is an area of undulating hills. The Kacha Naga, in turn, refer to the Japvo Mountain as the place from which they originated. A story among the Khasis tells that they came originally from Burma and descended across the Patkai hills to Assam, and later moved up into the hills again to their present location (Gurdon 1914: 21).

The reason for residing in the hills and not in the plains is also explained in some origin stories. Among the Angami Naga, Hutton has recorded a story which goes roughly as follows: the husband of *Ukepenopfü*, their ancestress, was very wise but had a frightening appearance. In order not to scare off his two sons he lived in a vessel, waiting for them to grow up to share his knowledge and wisdom. One day some people told the boys that they had a father, although they had always been told that they did not. *Ukepenopfü* could no longer deny the fact but warned them, 'I will show you your father, but he who gets frightened cannot acquire his knowledge'. She took them to the vessel and introduced their father. The elder boy, who became the ancestor of the Nagas, was frightened and ran away. The younger was not scared and the old man went with him to the plains and passed all his knowledge on to him. This explains, the story concludes, 'why the Nagas are poorer in knowledge and cunning than the men of the plains' (Hutton 1921: 261). Another Angami version tells how two brothers each took a different path. One blazed his path on the *chomhu* trees, the other marked it on *chemu* trees. While a blaze on a *chomhu* tree remains white for several days, that on a *chemu* tree blackens quickly. As a result, most of the followers of the two brothers tracked the path of the first boy, which eventually ended in the plains, while the few who followed the *Chomhu* blaze stayed behind in the hills (ibid). Mills narrates a tale in which the Lhota Nagas and plainsmen are represented as one and the same people, who migrated from a place called Lengka, which is located somewhere north or north-west of the Naga Hills. For reasons unknown they split into two bodies, one of which became the plainsmen of the Brahmaputra Valley, while the other became the Nagas of the hills (Mills 1922: 3).

While movement is clearly embedded in all of these stories and none of the hill groups claim to be autochthonous to their present location, a shared narrative of flight, which would add flesh to the bones of Scott's theory, is by and large absent. Some groups do refer to a past life in the plains, but this does not precede their descent to the plains from the hills. This points to a 'hills-plains-hills' movement, rather than an origin in the plains from which they then fled to the hills. In addition to this, a number of hill communities refer to a place in the hills, or a mountain-top, as their mythical place of origin. These narratives reject an initial migration story altogether, and maintain that there has been an *emergence* in the hills.<sup>7</sup> Stories like the one told by the Angami Naga suggest that, rather than the outcome of active political deliberation, their location in the 'barren' hills is the result of a sudden twist of fate, or a failure of understanding on the part of their forefathers.

### **Intruding into the state: an antithesis to state evasion?**

Scott's theory of state evasion, not surprisingly, calls up vivid responses. Its originality, evocative powers and bestowal of historical agency on peoples who were earlier imagined to have none is widely acclaimed. However, criticisms abound. Many of these are broadly sympathetic. Tapp concludes that, on the whole, 'much evidence is on Scott's side', though it may be 'over-painted' (Tapp 2010). Taking the cross-border Thangmi community in parts of Nepal, India and China as her example, Shneiderman introduces contemporary empirical evidence of the historical intentionality of upland peoples vis-à-vis the state, suggesting that Scott's analysis may have more contemporary currency and political relevance than he himself allows (Shneiderman 2010: 292). Others are more critical. Lieberman describes the evidence for a sustained flight from the lowlands to the uplands as 'thin' (Lieberman 2010: 333). Rather than state-repelling egalitarianism, hierarchical relations (e.g. patrilineal clan systems, matrilineal marriage structures), often intermeshed with customs of gift-giving and 'feasts of merits', also shaped political organisation in the hills (Barth 2010: 175). Scott's model is also said to suffer from a 'strong whiff of functionalism', while his conception is 'anything but Popperian' (Subrahmanyam 2010:

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7 Such a narrative of historical emergence, rather than one of migratory waves, is observed more widely among indigenous communities (see Kuper 2003).

26). It is also over-generalised, liberally referencing, as it does, a theory, Leach's *Political System of Highland Burma* (1964 [1954]), which is itself thin in evidence and widely disputed (Sadan 2010). The Ahom-hill tribes narrative outlined above, coupled with the stories contemporary hill peoples tell themselves about their own history, forces us to question the sequence of events that Scott wants us to believe.

In his *A History of Assam*, published in 1926, Edward Gait presents us with what would appear to be a direct inverse of Scott's paradigm. Rather than portraying hill tribes as deliberately evading the state, he presents them as constantly on the alert for an opportunity to raid the plains, or, even better, to oust existing rulers and grab control over the Brahmaputra's fertile soil. His formula goes something like this: Hill groups, the Ahom being a prime example, descended to forcefully capture tracts of the plains. Some of the plains people were accommodated, others were pushed into the hills. The Ahom then established and consolidated their supremacy, thanks to the material resources generated from the fertile soil of the valley. Thus, initially they were able to fend off the now scattered forces of the former valley rulers, who were not quite ready to give up their access to the plains and tried to regain it by carrying out attacks. In the long run, however, the damp and relaxing climate of the valley, coupled by the great material prosperity that people enjoyed there, resulted in a tendency towards deterioration. As Gait puts it: 'Any race that had been long resident there, though rising in the scale of civilization and gaining proficiency in the arts of peace, would gradually become soft and luxurious and so, after a time, would no longer be able to defend itself against the incursions of the hardier tribes behind them' (Gait 1926: 7). A tendency towards internal disintegration over time, for there was no national spirit among the small communities co-opted by the valley king, diluted the central administration. When the valley kingdom showed initial signs of decay, surrounding hill polities would intensify their offensive; they would harry the plains with constant raids, encroach in all directions and eventually reduce the valley to anarchy. Then, Gait continues, 'would come the opportunity for some enterprising hill chief to swoop down with his tribesmen, or a confederacy of kindred tribes, and, after sweeping away the effete remains of a worn-out nationality, to establish his followers in its place' (ibid.: 7-8). In the beginning, the material resources produced by its fertile soil would add to its strength. However, 'time would bring its revenge; and, in the end, the

new dynasty would sink just like the one which it had subverted' (ibid.: 8).

Undoubtedly, Gait's narrative is over-drawn; as such, it too is imaginative. It importantly shows, nevertheless, that the pre-modern valley state not only stirred a sense of fright, but also functioned as a magnet that pulled hill groups down in their search for resources and arable lands.<sup>8</sup> The observation that hill groups expanded downwards into the more productive plains strays away from Scott's emphasis on a sustained fight from the lowlands to the highlands. Such a sequence, however, is remarkably similar to another argument by Ernest Gellner, which he takes from Ibn Khaldun, and to which Scott does not refer. Contrasting city-dwellers with pastoralists on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, Gellner argues that the luxury which surrounded townspeople, not to mention their delegation of politics and defence to their rulers, rendered them weak and indolent. This was in contrast to pastoralists, who were inclined to be courageous, and were virtually all armed. Further, pastoralists preferred to situate themselves beyond the pale of the state and to rely on a non-labour intensive life-style. Taken together, these factors predispose pastoralists (and here Gellner's argument takes a crucial turn) 'towards a life-style which incorporates raiding, and of course the defence against raiding by others. This in turn provides the training which makes shepherd tribes state-resistant, and yet at the same time turns them into *potential state-founders*' (Gellner 1983: 12; emphasis mine). Gait's narrative, and the case of the Ahom-hill tribes' relationships, testify to such a reading and indeed suggest that, on the whole, the line separating predatory raids from state-making projects was a fragile one. In fact, the history of state-formation in the valleys was, to an extent, a history of nonstate peoples expanding their sway downwards, in the process co-opting or scattering former rulers.<sup>9</sup> The

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8 Scott's narrative fails to explain why, if the hills were peopled by recurrent migratory waves of state-evading peoples, the issue of overpopulation never really emerged. Would it be possible that there was always space for new arrivals to squeeze in and celebrate their statelessness by making a living out of swidden cultivation? This sequence of events is all the more unlikely when one considers that slash-and-burn agriculture is perhaps not labour-intensive, but is surely land-intensive. That the hills never became overcrowded, and even today are comparatively less densely populated than the plains, suggests that, either the number of state-evasive peoples was, (contra Scott), relatively modest, or (and this aligns with the thread of my argument), that people also moved away from the hills, into the more productive plains.

9 Gait links, albeit somewhat artificially, the relatively brief existence of many dynasties in the Assam plains with the slow and intermittent character of the advance of Hinduism

British, who arrived and later also departed via the sea, provided a major exception to this sequence.

The contest was over the fertile soil along the Brahmaputra River and the control of state-generated produce; as such, it was a contest for the ownership of the valley. One should be wary of reasoning too much in typologies, as some highland groups were numerous and sufficiently powerful to raid the plains and impose state-like structures, while others, hunters and gatherers at the opposite extreme, may not have tried to venture into the plains with equal force. On the whole, however, the process of hill groups moving down was significant. To illustrate further, the search for arable lands has led sections of hill tribes, like the Garo, Miri and Tiwa, to migrate to lower altitudes or plains, which has, over the years, led to them developing identities different from those left behind in the hills. Indeed, the highly fertile river islands and banks of the Brahmaputra River continue to attract land-hungry migrants (Subba and Wouters, forthcoming).

*The valley-hill binary as a 'colonial effect'?*

Much of the scholarship on Northeast India is characterised by a valley-hill binary, just as a highland-lowland dichotomy figures dominantly in the literature on Southeast Asia. For Burling, who considers India's Northeast culturally part of Southeast Asia, a deep-rooted and widespread contrast between hill dwellers and plains people paradoxically provides the most important unifying theme of the region (Burling 1965: 4). Ultimately Scott reifies this binary, suggesting that this relatively sharp division has been a historical constant.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, good reasons to assume that

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in the region. He points out that Hindu priests found their way to Assam but generally confined their attention to the king and his chief nobles, from whom alone they had anything to gain. They would then try, often with notable success, to convert them. For the king they would invent a noble descent, while the nobles were admitted to the rank of Kshatriya. The Hindus would, as a reward, enjoy lucrative posts at court and lands granted to them by their proselytes. If the valley dynasty lasted long enough, ideas of Hinduism would gradually filter down and replace tribal religious practices, as happened in the case of the long-lasting Ahom Kingdom. More often, however, the dynasty would be overthrown before ideas of Hinduism could trickle down. Some of the survivors of the aristocracy would become merged into a Hindu caste but on the whole Hinduism would sink into triviality, except in cases where its priests could succeed in inducing the new rulers to accept their ministrations (Gait 1926: 10)

10 Scott's analysis subsequently shows a hint of statism, because it comes down to an almost



the valley-hill divide in India's Northeast (and this argument might have a wider application in Zomia) became socially more marked and decisive only after the colonial annexation of the adjacent valley. Before colonial times, this binary appears to be socially less relevant; flows of people, goods, ideas and residence-patterns across it were more frequent, and, on the whole, more of a continuum.

Leach was well aware of this valley-hill continuum, arguing that 'valley' and 'hill people' not only interpenetrate politically and culturally, but also territorially (1960: 60). For Burma he argued that, while on a crude level of generalisation the hill Kachin and the valley Shan are quite different from one another in terms of social and political organisation, religious views and agricultural practices, there exists a great deal of continuity between them, given that they are 'almost everywhere close neighbours and in the ordinary affairs of life they are much mixed up together' (1964 [1954]: 2). This perpetual ethnic mingling even leads to some families considering themselves simultaneously Kachin and Shan (*ibid.*). Lehman also stressed this mutuality for the Chin. The Chin, he argued, are a 'subnuclear society', a term he proposes for societies who reside in the margins of state formations and whose society and culture must be understood in terms of their relationships with complex, nuclear valley societies. Such societies are neither fully peasant nor purely tribal; they have characteristics of both (1963.: 1-2).<sup>11</sup>

A similar kind of fluidity seemed to exist in Northeast India, yet all of

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primordial urge, or the innate idiosyncrasies of ethnic psychology, for statelessness among hill peoples. Valley peoples, in turn, are represented as predisposed to a state-life by virtue of their decision, despite their political agency, not to escape state enclosure (although one must acknowledge, as Scott himself points out, that in many cases they stayed because the state prevented them from moving away.)

- 11 Far removed from civilisation, self-governed, self-contained and self-sufficient, much akin to Wolf's 'people without history' (Wolf 1982), the highlanders of India's Northeast have been regularly represented as dwelling in isolated out-of-the-way places, since 'time immemorial'. Eaton, for example, argues that the Naga have always been economically self-sufficient and 'never developed sustained trade relations with the plains people ... institutionalized intervillage warfare and the cultural values on which it rested, which included headhunting, had the effect of narrowing very considerably the Nagas' vision of the world' (1997: 249). This isolationist perspective also enjoys political currency, as rebel groups revert to this narrative in order to enhance the legitimacy of their demand to be excluded from the Indian polity. However persistent this depiction might be, there is hardly any evidence that corresponds to such a view for pre-colonial times, as the case of the Ahom also indicates.

this suffered a blow with the colonial annexation of Assam. For mercantile reasons, the British concentrated on administering the plains, which were commercially viable in ways the ‘barren’ hills were not. In the words of Lord Dalhousie, speaking as Governor-General of British India,

I dissent entirely from the policy which is recommended of what is called obtaining a control, that is to say, of taking possession of these hills, and of establishing our sovereignty over their savage inhabitants. Our possession could bring no profit to us, and would be as costly as it would be unproductive’ (cited in Elwin 1969: 162).

In fact, one major source of contention was the British policy of pushing the hill tribes up into the hills, alienating them from land previously under their control and granting such land, formally declared ‘wasteland,’ to tea planters and immigrant peasants from Bengal. The hills, on the other hand, were declared off-limits for land transfers to non-tribal outsiders’ (Karlssoon 2011: 270).

This sense of isolation took further shape with the imposition of an inner line, whose official purpose was to provide a territorial frame to British capital (Kar 2009: 51).<sup>12</sup> More deeply, Kar continues, it was to ‘demarcate “the hills” from “the plains”, the nomadic from the sedentary, the jungle from the arable – in short, “the tribal areas” from “Assam proper”’ (ibid.: 52). It subjected the region beyond to a permit regime and, although total seclusion was not enforceable because hill and valley people needed to meet for trade purposes, more stringent regulations reduced the frequency of these interactions. In this process, the unenclosed territory came to be seen as ‘outside of the historical pace of development and progress... where the time of the law did not apply: where slavery, headhunting, and nomadism could be allowed to exist’ (Kar 2009: 52). In the dominant representational order, and propelled by ideas of unilineal social evolution, hill dwellers came to be seen as the opposite of ‘British civilisation’, as well as inferior to the alternative civilisation presented by the high castes of the ‘mainland’. This eventually led to the ‘invention of tribes’, a process through which uplanders became socially construed as collectively backward and sharing

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<sup>12</sup> In 1919, the region unenclosed by the inner line was renamed as the ‘backward tracts’ and the idea of ‘backwardness’ thus became inscribed in its official designation.

characteristics that were fundamentally different from those inhabiting the plains.<sup>13</sup>

From this point of view, the hills took on their identity as remote places peopled by insulated tribes only after the colonial annexation of the Assam plains, which isolated and essentialised hill dwellers in unprecedented ways. In any case, 'remoteness' is not an objective status. It has a position in topographical space, though as Ardener has convincingly shown, it 'is defined within a topological space whose features are expressed in a cultural vocabulary' (Ardener 2007: 214). Hence, as historical constants, the categories 'hill people' and 'valley people' are problematic; they do not just refer to a 'natural' division of space but are also a reflection of socially constructed images and perceptions, which can hardly be called static over time. As a decisive, socially meaningful and deep-rooted demarcation, the valley-hill binary, which lies at the heart of Scott's argument, might therefore better be seen as a colonial and academic construct, rather than a perpetual ethnographic reality.

#### *Some concessions to Scott's theory*

Scott, it needs to be stressed, is not unaware of all of the above. He remarks, for example, that 'Many valley people are, as it were, "ex-hill people", and many hill people are "ex-valley people"' (2009: 27), yet this insight, adequate as it is, is subsequently submerged by his emphasis on a massive, largely unilateral and sustained flight from the plains to the uplands. Scott often starts an argument with bold and eloquently asserted claims, then uses subsequent paragraphs to introduce complexities. He accepts, for instance, that the world of pre-modern states was not always only threatening but at times also attractive to nonstate peoples. Its potential surplus could form a target for raiders from the hills, incidentally culminating in racket-cum-blackmail relationships, with hill groups extracting tribute from sedentary communities. For instance, the Kachin controlled the Bhamo area in the plains and appointed Burmese and Shan headman there. However, he then

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13 To grasp this process at work, Van Schendel has usefully coined the term 'tribalist discourse', which points to the remarkable resilience of images of tribes based on the 'presumption that all tribes share characteristics that are fundamentally different from, even opposite to, those of civilized people. Principal among these are 'childish' qualities that betray a lack of socialization: immoderately emotional behaviour (revelry, sensuality, extravagance, cruelty, fear of the supernatural) and naivety (credulity, incapacity to plan for the future)' (Van Schendel 1992: 103).

moulds this sequence into his general argument by arguing that when marauding tribes did raid valley settlements they generally did so to the extent that they 'killed the goose that laid the golden egg' (2009: 151). This was because different hill polities eyed the same valley resources, with none of them sufficiently powerful to permanently control them. Scott also acknowledges that hill tribes like the Karenni were notorious slave-raiders, but he then argues that slave raids on the plains were 'yet another process by which valley people became hill people in Zomia' (2009: 152). However, this reasoning negates the common thread of his own narrative, namely that the peopling of the hills is the result of applied political agency. Now, Scott cannot have it both ways because being captured and dragged into the hills clearly does not amount to much of a choice. Keeping these added complexities of Scott's theory, to which I have alluded only briefly here, in mind, my assessment of it is not entirely hostile or wholly antithetical. However, I do assert that the primary emphasis should not be on withdrawal, flight and evasion.

### **Conclusion**

Most if not all interactions between hill dwellers and plains people, Leach argued, 'related to the fact that as a general rule the valley peoples are producers of rice surplus to their own requirements, while equally, as a general rule, the hill peoples suffer from a rice deficiency which must somehow be made good from outside' (1964 [1954]: 22). A similar dialectic was applied by Lehman. The Hill Chin in Burma, he argued, were 'acutely aware of their own disadvantageous situation' (1963: 216). For those Chin living at higher altitudes, where resources were more scarce, capturing resources from the plains was particularly vital, to the extent that their entire social and political organisation became an adaptation to this end (*ibid.*: 27). What Leach and Lehman already knew is that state projects in the valleys, their military might and very real oppressiveness notwithstanding, had a lot to offer, however unintentionally, to those living in the relatively unproductive hills.

Scott's account of deliberate state evasion is in line with a widespread theoretical disposition in the anthropological literature on state and resistance in which, following Spencer's critical assessment (2007: 45-6), the state, or its pre-modern manifestation, is reconfigured into an absolute externality. It is essentialised as a source of apprehension, coercion and

fear, one that imposed itself without leaving any spaces for negotiation. Thus, Scott paints the pre-modern valley state as a constellation of power from which nonstate people had nothing to gain other than oppression and misery. This analysis corresponds with Subrahmanyam's characterisation of Scott's work as, above anything else, that of a 'pessimistic romantic' (2010: 26), but it departs from the analysis presented here which, on an abstract level, rather aligns with Ortner's view that 'in a relationship of power, the dominant often has something to offer, and sometimes a great deal' (1985: 175).

The case of Northeast India shows that the fertile soil of the Brahmaputra Valley, and the abundance it produced, attracted hill groups down to the plains. For nonstate peoples, it provided an opportunity, so that accessing these resources and possessing fertile lands in the valley became objects of aspiration for them. This desire translated into brisk flows of trade and persons in some times and places; in others, however, it erupted into fierce conflicts over land-holdings in the plains. Whereas Scott insists that the history of hill peoples is the 'history of deliberate and reactive statelessness' (2009: x), this article argues that the history of those dwelling in the hills can equally be read as the history of their deliberate attempts to access state resources. A consequence of this is that the survival of a valley state depended on its ability to keep marauding hill tribes at bay.

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