

“Up” and “Down”. “Zomia” and the Bru of the Central Vietnamese Highlands

Part I.: Are the Bru Natives in “Zomia”?

Gábor Vargyas

Institute of Ethnology, RCH, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest

Abstract: The 2009 publication of J. Scott’s epoch-making book, *The Art of Not Being Governed. An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* initiated a long-standing debate about the ethnohistory of the Southeast-Asian Highlands (“Zomia”) and, more generally, about lowland-highland relationships, “nativeness”, state evasion, self-government, and “secondary primitivism”. This article joins the discourse based on one concrete ethnographic example, the Bru, a Mon-Khmer speaking dry-rice cultivator hill tribe in the Central Vietnamese Highlands. Using detailed ethnographic and ethno-historic data, it argues that the Bru are, if not “native”, at least the oldest known inhabitants of the area inhabited by them – a fact that does not contradict Scott’s deep insight concerning their state evasion.

Keywords: Continental Southeast-Asia, Vietnamese Highlands, Zomia, ethnohistory, shatter zone, state evasion, self-governing peoples, secondary primitivism, lowland-highland relations

It’s been nearly a decade since James Scott’s epoch-making *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* was published (SCOTT 2009), a work which is persistently in the crossfire of debate, while constituting a continuous source of inspiration. For readers unfamiliar with the topic, let us reiterate briefly the main thesis of the book and what “Zomia” is.

“The thesis is simple, suggestive, and controversial. Zomia is the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states. Its days are numbered. Not so very long ago, however, such self-governing peoples were the great majority of humankind. Today, they are seen from the valley kingdoms as ‘our living ancestors,’ ‘what we were like before we discovered wet-rice cultivation, Buddhism, and civilization.’ On the contrary, I argue that hill peoples are 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 valley – slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare. Most of the areas in which they reside may be aptly called shatter zones or zones of refuge.” (SCOTT 2009:IX–X)

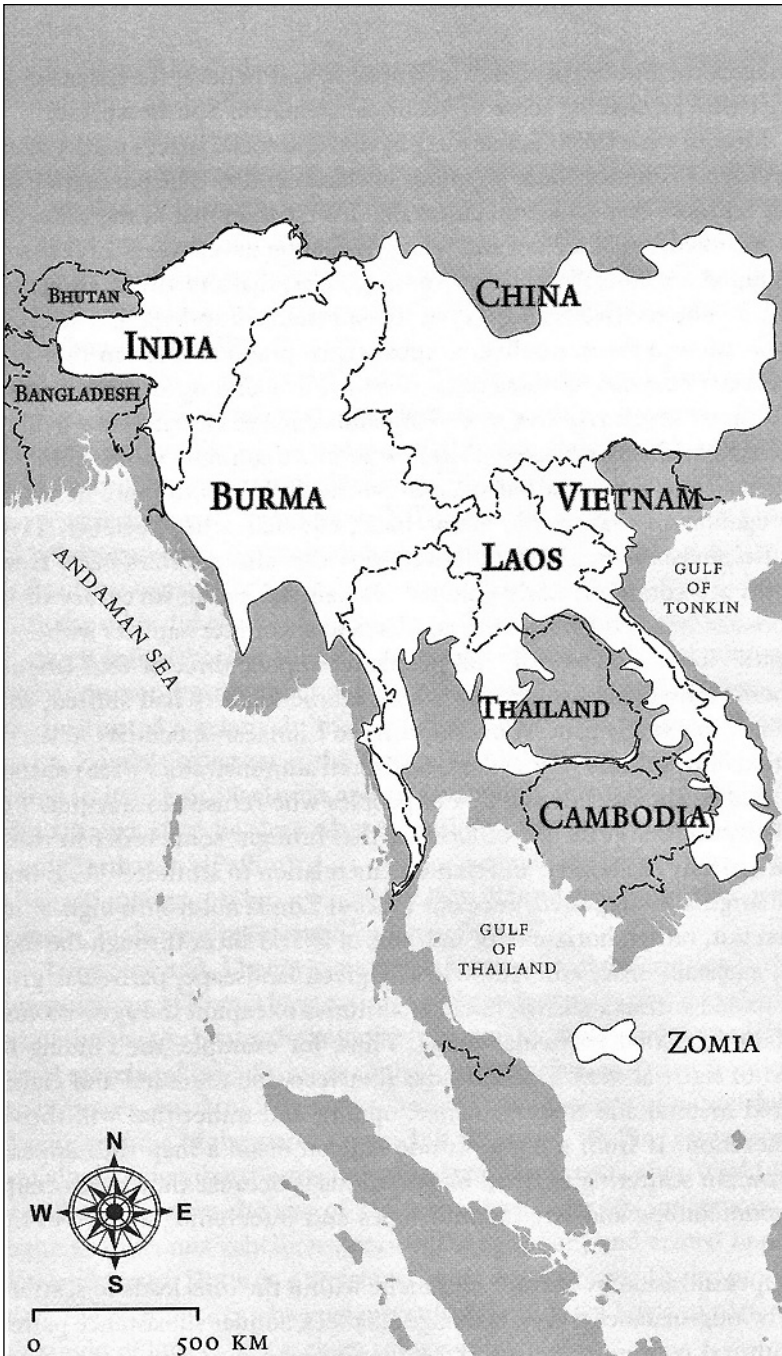


Figure 1. Scott's "Zomia". (Based on MICHAUD 2010:201)

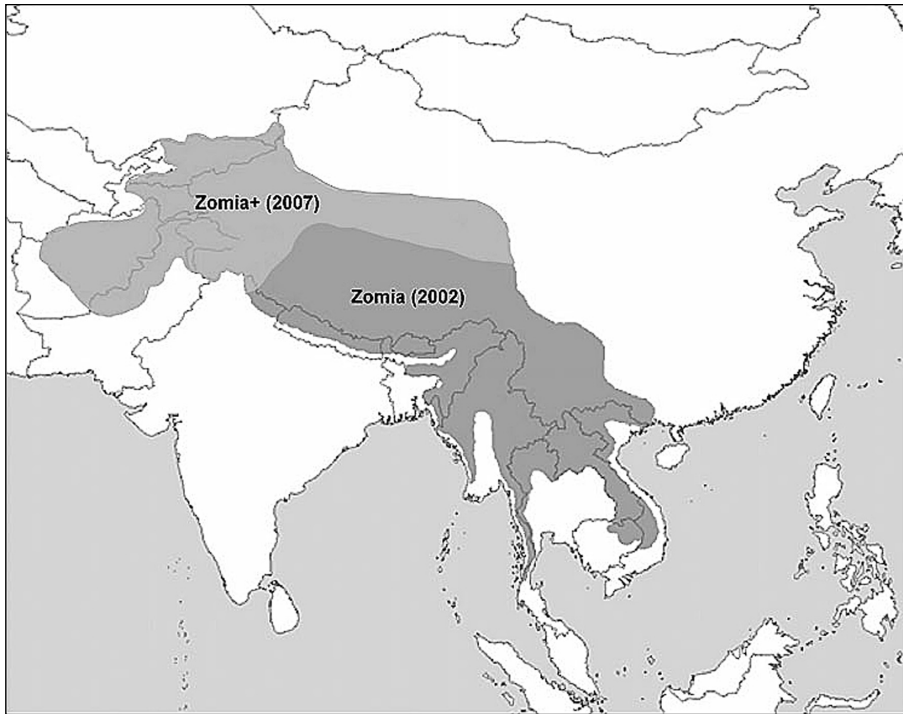


Figure 2. Schendel’s original “Zomia” and extended “Zomia”, respectively. (Based on MICHAUD 2010:188)

Zomia “is a new name for virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to Northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan)” (SCOTT 2009:IX; *Figure 1*). “Zomia”, the new – and not so fortunate¹ – name of the area encompassing some 2.5 million km² and a population of about 100 million of truly bewildering ethnic and linguistic variety comes not from Scott, but from a Dutch geographer, Willem van Schendel (SCHENDEL 2002), who, however – and this is important! – used

¹ Not too fortunate, because it extends an arbitrarily coined term based on some small Tibeto-Burmese languages and taken from a restricted geographical area on the India-Bangladesh-Burma tri-border zone onto a whole region encompassing multiple language families and spanning a huge geographical area. “‘Zo’ is a relational term meaning ‘remote’ and hence carries the connotation of living in the hills; ‘Mi’ means ‘people’” (SCOTT 2009:14–15) = that is Highlander.

Slightly more neutral collective names were used in French literature for Southeast Asian hill *tribes* (although not the regions they lived in) (e.g., “Les Montagnards” and “PEMSI”, the acronym for “Population Montagnarde du Sud-Indochinois”) – but they either did not become generally prevalent (PEMSI), or their colonial connotations called their *raison d’être* into question recently (see: The Great Montagnard Debate http://www.lib.washington.edu/SouthEastAsia/vsg/elist_1999/mont1.html (accessed May 11, 2013))

the name “Zomia” in a much broader sense than Scott² (*Figure 2*). Nonetheless, the new *terminus technicus* adopted by Scott became a well-known, popular catchword beyond the narrow circles of specialists after the publication of “Anarchist History,” so much so that today Wikipedia has a separate article addressing it, and in the French translation of the book the word “Zomia” became part of the main title!³ No matter how popular the term is, however, the fact remains: “Zomia” – at least in Scott’s understanding – means nothing more than the geographic region that was previously referred to, in the geographic and cultural sense, as Southeast Asia or “Upland Southeast-Asia”. An evidence of this is the book’s subtitle, in which Scott himself sticks to the established geographical concept. Thus there is no scientific novelty in the name “Zomia” – despite its popularity.

The main thesis of the book and its macroscopic vision, on the other hand, are all the more so!

“Virtually everything about these people’s livelihoods, social organization, ideologies, and (more controversially) even their largely oral cultures, can be read as strategic positionings designed to keep the state at arm’s length. 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.” (SCOTT 2009:X)

To sum up, “Scott proposes to read the history of these highlands as a narrative of state escape and refuge” (MICAUD 2011:1856). And although Scott disapproves the infelicitous expression “secondary primitivism” (SCOTT 2009:8), he in fact reiterates a concept that has cropped up several times in the history of anthropology:⁴ that the inhabitants of the relict areas once had a more developed culture, and only because of their displacement, they developed – through “secondary adaptation” – a culture that is seemingly primeval. “The argument reverses much received wisdom about ‘primitivism’ generally. Pastoralism, foraging, shifting cultivation, and segmentary lineage systems are of the ‘secondary adaptation’, a kind of ‘self-barbarization’ adopted by peoples whose location, subsistence, and social structure are adapted to state evasion” (SCOTT 2009:X).

Thus, according to Scott, the highlands of Southeast Asia are a “relict area”, as well as an ecological “niche”, populated continuously through thousands of years by peoples retreating under the growing impact of state formation. In his view, the socio-cultural-political dynamics of the lowlands/highlands dichotomy are formed by conflicting (binary) centripetal and centrifugal forces: one creates centralized systems, the other segmented socio-political classes. The dominant force in this process is the

² Beyond the regions of Northeast India and South China that border Southeast Asia (which are usually considered “Southeast Asia” anyway, except for “certain parts of Sichuan”), he also includes Nepal and the entire Tibetan highlands, the Himalayan countryside, i.e., “High Asia”. In fact, later on, in the wake of the debates and reflections prompted by his study (MICAUD 2010:188), he extended the boundaries of “Zomia” even further, which in its current articulation includes the southern areas of Qinghai and Xinjiang provinces within China, as well as a significant part of Central Asia, the highlands of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

³ *Zomia, ou l’art de ne pas être gouverné* (SCOTT 2013).

⁴ In relation to South America, see: e.g., BELTRÁN 1979 and CLASTRES [1974] 1987. For the Borneo hunter-gatherers, see: SELLATO 1994:115; the examples are numerous.

state; Scott is not interested in the formation of the state, because the state “is there”, and he thinks it mobilizes the highlands as a *deus ex machina*. Culture is for him a protective mechanism responding to the surrounding socio-political reality. Highland socio-political systems, therefore, historically developed due to a *conscious* effort to evade the impact and scope of state organizations, that is, Scott attributes “agency” and “intentionality” to the highland peoples, of whom this has been so far denied for reasons of their “primitiveness” and subordinate position. In the spirit of the Pierre Clastres motto quoted at the beginning of the book,⁵ instead of the history of *class struggle*, Scott writes the story of a more romantic kind of resistance, the *fight against the state* – hence the reference to “anarchism” in the subtitle.

As expected, Scott’s views stirred up heated discussions: in addition to a number of reviews (COYNE 2010; DAVIS 2010; SADAN 2010; SUBRAHMANYAM 2010; TAPP 2010; BRASS 2012), the *Journal of Global History* devoted a special issue to “Zomia” (MICHAUD 2010), and the debate continues today. While most of his critics admitted that his theses are actually stimulating, and that the book’s “paradigm-shifting” vision is “quite something”, almost everyone has hit a critical tone – castigating him for overgeneralizing his theses; for relying, as a “historian”, upon secondary (anthropological) literature rather than primary, first-hand sources; for his “macroscopic” vision gliding over the “microscopic” local facts and events; for his use of vague and debatable definitions; and for his vision being basically a romantic antigovernmentism that turns social evolution on its head.

How do the Bru of Central Vietnam that I have studied in 1985–1989 and 2006–2007, fit into this picture, or do they fit in at all? Do they confirm or refute Scott’s eminent hypothesis? Given that most of the problems raised by Scott I myself have dealt with thoroughly more than a decade before the publication of the “Zomia” theory in connection with the Bru (VARGYAS 2000; 2002; 2008a) and several times since (2010a; 2010b; 2012), picking up the thread of the discussion started in the *Journal of Global History*, I wish to comment above all on Scott’s essential thesis (“nativeness” and “state evasion”) with the help of “micro-historic” data that the critics found insufficient. Because of the wealth of data available to me but for lack of space necessary for their explication, in this first section I will only focus on the problem indicated in the title: are the Bru native to their current territory? Are there any sources or data that would support Scott’s theory that the Bru originally lived in the lowlands in historical times, before they retreated into the mountains trying to evade the (Vietnamese) government? In part two, I will explain the other side of the issue: the issue of state evasion, proving that even if the response to the first question is negative, Scott still provides a deep insight into the Bourdieu-esque habitus of the mountain-dwellers, including the Bru, and that his thesis is much more than just a “populist post-modern history of nowhere” (BRASS 2012).

⁵ “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.”

“NATIVES” VERSUS “NEWCOMERS”

The question of “natives” *versus* “newcomers” (refugees evading the state organization) is, as we have seen, one of the main – although highly contested – theses of Scott’s book, to which he explicitly and firmly commits himself over and over again. One should note immediately that Scott does not use the term “indigenous” in his book; the terms “natives”, “autochthonous population”, “original inhabitants”, and especially “aboriginal” do not even appear. But the idea that peripheral areas are populated by runaway people having fled the state-building processes, who again and again push in front of them the populations already living there, or the fact that, he repeatedly refers to the negative stereotypes that label the highlanders as the “living ancestors” of the lowland peoples (“what we were like before we discovered wet-rice cultivation, Buddhism, and civilization”), make it clear that Scott implicitly refers here to Southeast Asian highland populations conventionally called “indigenous”, or “aboriginal”. In any case, using his excellent analogy of “you cannot clap with one hand”, there are always two elements in an oppositional set. Anyone who posits newer and newer waves of refugees must at the same time implicitly take for granted populations that are “native”, that have already been “living there”, or at least have lived there “longer”. This, of course, raises the question of *who* is aboriginal to a place – because it is obviously almost impossible to find an area on Earth where there had not lived another population before the people currently living there, which is now perhaps extinct, assimilated, emigrated, etc. I will return to this question later.

Being aware of all this, Scott then uses in several places a somewhat more permissive, less exclusive language: “*Many, perhaps most* [my italics, G.V.], inhabitants of the ungoverned margins are not remnants of an earlier social formation, left behind, or (...) ‘our living ancestors’” – he says at one point (SCOTT 2009:8). Another example: “The history of the various non-state peoples of this region can (...) be written as the bifurcation between those *who had long been in the hills* [my italics, G.V.] (for example, the Wa people) and those who sought refuge there” (SCOTT 2009:23). Or: “Such areas represented a reliable zone of refuge for those *who lived there* [my italics, G.V.] or who chose to go there” (SCOTT 2009:63).

So even despite his own polarizing statements, Scott himself does not rule out completely the possibility that “indigenous peoples”, that is, peoples who were historically likely to “remain on site”, could also have populated or at least inhabited “Zomia”.⁶ “Floating” the question in this manner – even despite the main thesis – is not without reason: though this process of retreating into the mountains may be true, well documented, and lasting to this day within the whole of Southeast Asia (think of the gradual expansion within the last centuries of the Chinese, the Viet, the Thai, and of what demographic pressure this may put on neighboring peoples!)⁷ – the fact is, that because of the lack of written documents almost nothing concrete from the history (and especially the *early* history) of these highland ethnic groups is known, save for a few exceptions, and in the last few centuries. We cannot generalize saying that they were living always

⁶ Although I myself consider the name “Zomia” an unfortunate designation, for the sake of simplicity, I kept the term in quotation marks here and hereafter.

⁷ For this, see: for example, MICHAUD 2000; 2006.

where they are today; just as we cannot say that they are all relatively “new” newcomers fleeing the state. In each case, the answer must be based on concrete data and analysis.

The Bru, for example, when they first appear in Vietnamese historical sources in the 16th century, are already living in their current territory. Naturally, hypotheses can be formulated about where they lived before this period and what effects they may have been exposed to there – I myself have attempted such⁸ – but it must always be taken into account that there is practically no data about the region’s history, even about larger states, and in particular about their demographic and ethnic composition, or about the relationship between the local populations and the surrounding nations.

THE BRU AND “ZOMIA”

Let us now turn to the details of Bru ethnic history, and to the geographic, historical and political contexts that constitute its framework. Although the Bru have until quite recently led a relatively enclosed self-sufficient life in the Vietnamese central highlands, their isolation in the historically traceable times was only relative.⁹ This fact can be explained by geographical, historical and geopolitical reasons. First of all, the strip of land between the coast and the central mountain range is the narrowest here in Vietnam: in certain places it barely exceeds 30 kilometers. The place of my fieldwork, Khe Sanh, in the heart of Bru country lies only about 40 kilometers as the crow flies from Đông Hà by the sea, and merely 150 kilometers from Hue, the imperial capital of Vietnam! On such a narrow land, contact and interaction between the otherwise secluded lowland and mountain peoples can hardly be avoided (*Figure 3*). Secondly, this is where one of the three strategic passes through the Vietnamese highlands can be found,¹⁰ the Ai Lao Pass,¹¹ which happens to be the lowest and most easily walkable, as well as the shortest (commercial and military) route between the coast and the Mekong valley. The area inhabited by the Bru is therefore of strategic importance geographically. In the 20th century, the Vietnam War contributed one more political factor: this is where, along the 17th latitude, the so-called “demilitarized zone” separating the two Vietnams was established – a demarcation zone that split in two the area inhabited by the Bru, and so they became North Vietnam’s southernmost and South Vietnam’s northernmost ethnic group.

⁸ Such hypotheses can be made based primarily on linguistic and accurate historical data (see: HAUDRICOURT 1966; HOSHINO 1986; and in their footsteps VARGYAS 2000:149-152; 2002; 2008a); but in relation to the bilingual (Bru + Phutai) nature of Bru ritual and folklore genres, I also raised the possibility of influences from earlier Laotian historical events.

⁹ The following historical part is a summary of the reasoning detailed in VARGYAS 2000; 2002; 2008a. See also HICKEY 1982a; 1982b.

¹⁰ Elevation: Keo Nua: 722m; Mu Gia: 591m; Ai Lao 410m above sea level.

¹¹ By no accident does Sadan say that “One man’s mountain is another man’s hill” and that “Mountains themselves, as with the distinctions between uplands and plains, are also culturally constructed, partly subjective categories” (SADAN 2010). The Bru live on the mountainous plateau rather than in the “mountains” anyway: their villages (unlike, say, the Hmong’s) are never built on the mountaintops or the hillside but in relatively flat areas.

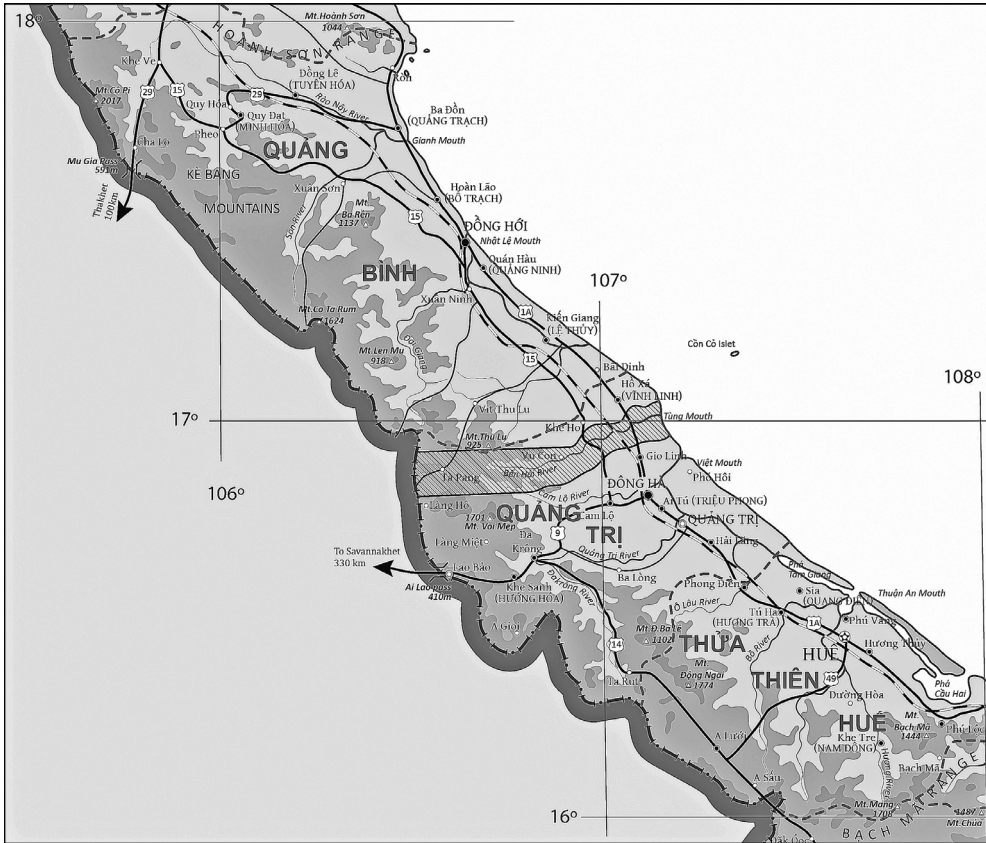


Figure 3. The area inhabited by the Bru. Based on an enlarged detail of the relevant parts of *Vietnam Tourist Map Northern Section 1:1,500,000*, Third Edition, 2002. (Made by Zsolt Horváth, 2016)

I have summed up several times the data and literature regarding the area's history.¹² Suffice it to say that the passage through the Ai Lao Pass has been known at least since the 13th century: the Mongolian troops that ravaged Vietnam and the Champa Empire marched through here in 1282, on their way from the seaside to the Khmer Empire. Starting in the 14th century, the Vietnamese empire gradually expanding to the south, to the detriment of the Champa Empire, then gradually took control of this area and the populations inhabiting it.¹³ The first mention of "Viên Kiêu" as the highlands populated

¹² VARGYAS 2000; 2002; 2008a.

¹³ For the following, refer to the appropriate map sheets in Pluvier's historical atlas (PLUVIER 1995).

today by the Bru goes back to 1553,¹⁴ and is probably the source of the Vietnamese name still used for the Bru, “Vân Kiều”.¹⁵ A later, 18th century Vietnamese source¹⁶ already provides detailed descriptions of the commercial routes leading through the Ai Lao Pass into Laos and Thailand, as well as the mountain “hinterlands”, mentioning the “barbarian peoples” living there, recounting military and administrative infrastructure, roads, duties, forts, markets, the goods exchanged in the markets, the products submitted as tax payment by the mountain peoples, etc. Given that some of these descriptions refer specifically to the Khe Sanh neighborhood and the Bru population living there, *it is possible in some cases to project the “ethnographic present” back at least several centuries based on these sources.*

The Bru, nominally Vietnamese imperial vassals since the 16th–17th centuries, came under direct Vietnamese control in the early 19th century during the Siam [Thai] – Vietnam rivalry for the left bank of the Mekong: in 1827–28, Vietnamese emperor Minh Mạng, to compensate for the Siamese expansion, extends the limits of his empire and places the mountain “hinterland” under direct Vietnamese management. Continuing the expansion, by around 1830 the two empires practically divide among themselves the Laotian buffer zone: the boundary between them is the Mekong valley.¹⁷ The war for the Mekong valley continues, with alternating success and boundaries being shifted back and forth, for another half a century, when – in the second half of the 19th century – new players take to the stage: the French. Their presence results in a radical change in the geopolitical situation: the French use the 150-year-old Vietnam – Siam rivalry for

¹⁴ See the work written around 1553 by the mandarin Dương Văn An (1513–1591), and the modern transcription published in 1961 as *Ô Châu Cận Lục* [Description of the region of Ô châu] (Part I:17). To understand the title of the book, one needs to know that “Ô Châu” and “Rì Châu” were two Cham provinces which in 1306 the Cham king Chế Mân gifted to the Vietnamese ruler Trần Nhân Tông as bridewealth in exchange for his daughter Huyền Trân, who was married to the Cham king. A year later, in 1307, the two provinces, which largely correspond to the present-day Central Vietnamese provinces of Quảng Trị – Thừa Tiên, were assimilated into the ever expanding Vietnamese kingdom as Thuận Châu and Hóa Châu (aggregate: Thuận-Hóa). The book in question contains the geographic, administrative, historical and cultural descriptions of this region (DƯƠNG 1961).

¹⁵ See: VƯƠNG 1963:71; VARGYAS 2000:136–139.

¹⁶ Lê Quý Đôn: *Phủ biên tạp lục* [Frontier Chronicles]. The author of this work was an outstanding political statesman of the Lê Dynasty (1428–1788), military leader, mandarin, historian, neo-Confucian philosopher, etc., who wrote his work after the Thuận-Hóa (see Footnote 13) and Quảng-Nam regions (then considered part of the Vietnamese Empire) were recaptured in 1775–1776 by the Trịnh, who governed the northern part of the country on behalf of the Lê, from the separatist Nguyễn rulers who for about two centuries considered themselves an independent dynasty. Lê Quý Đôn was one of the leaders of the invading army, later military governor of the reclaimed land, who was responsible for restoring Vietnamese “morals” and “harmonious administration”. As such, “like a curious West German functionary from Bonn who in 1991 travels to East Germany to look around and then settles in Leipzig, where he writes down everything he had seen” (WOODSIDE 1995:158), in his work he provides exceptionally detailed and in-depth descriptions (geographical, political, administrative, economic, demographic, cultural, etc.) of the whole region we are talking about, which by now, due to two centuries of separation, possessed very different habits and “morals” than the northern part of the territory.

¹⁷ The above discussion is based primarily on Nguyễn Thế Anh 1997. See also Pluvier 1995: “Mainland South-East Asia in the first half of the 19th century” map. This was the largest historically known westward expansion of the Vietnamese Empire. If current demographic trends and population movements continue, in a few generations the Socialist Republic of Vietnam will once again reach this border.

the Mekong valley as an excuse to interfere; in the 1893 Bangkok Peace Treaty Siam finally renounces its claim to the left bank of the Mekong; the French troops conquer the entire Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Indochina, the “gem” of the French colonies is born (1887, then 1893). The highlands and its inhabitants heretofore “trapped between the Annamese anvil and the Siamese [Thai] hammer” (HARMAND 1879–80:298), including the Bru, now become part of the globalized colonial world. What follows is well-known from historical literature. After a relatively peaceful French era in the first decades of the 20th century comes the Japanese occupation, World War II, then the first Indochina War (Vietnam – France, 1946–1954) and the second Indochina War (late 1950s–1975, USA – Vietnam) which sweep across the mountainous hinterlands inhabited by highland ethnicities, the Bru among them, and in which the Bru become involuntary participants and victims; finally, the country’s reunification under communist rule (1975) and the subsequent period of political, economic and demographic upheavals.

During this period encompassing approximately four centuries and replete with historical cataclysms, we see the Bru from the beginning where they have been and where they still are today: along the 17th latitude, in the Vietnamese Cordillera, on both sides of the Vietnam – Laos border, around the Ai Lao Pass; in Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên provinces in Vietnam, in Savannakhet and Khammuane provinces in Laos, located in relatively compact, coherent areas, although sometimes surrounded by other populations, mostly mixed with Phu Thai, Vietnamese and Lao. Yes, it is historically documented that certain groups have fled the area, left the “original” residential territories – but they usually did not do it of their own will.¹⁸

So the question is: are the Bru “natives,” that is, are they a population that have historically “stayed in place” in “Zomia”? Is there a trace of anything in their culture

¹⁸ We know of three such “outbound flights”, of which the first two are major and large scale, and the third less important; this latter can be detected from ethnographic data.

a) In the 19th century, during the Siamese – Vietnam wars, a larger group of Bru were deported as slaves to the right bank of the Mekong, the territory of present-day Thailand (the details will not be reproduced here).

b) During the 2nd Indochina War, after the Battle of Khe Sanh (January 21 – July 9, 1968) and the dramatic defeat of the American and American-backed South-Vietnamese troops, in April – May 1972, to evade the advancing Viet Minh troops, 2,588 people were relocated by aerial bridge to Ea Hiu rural village (*xã*) in present-day Đắc Lắc province (*tỉnh*) [Krông Pắc region (*huyện*)], in a well-organized military action that also served propaganda purposes. They still live in this village today; in 2007, I spent six months among them doing fieldwork (VARGYAS 2010a; 2010b). Based on Nguyễn Trắc Di’s map ([1972]: 74) (*Figure 4*), we know that the air operation was conducted in two batches: on April 19 and 21, 1972, a total of 2,481 people, on May 24–25 another 107 people, thus a total of 2,588 people were rescued from the North Vietnamese troops and resettled. The vast majority of these people fought on the side of the Americans and the South Vietnamese government troops in the war. Ea Hiu was otherwise originally a Rade village, Buon Jat, at the time in the Phuoc An district. Today the name Buon Jat has been practically forgotten, only some of the elders remember it.

c) For unknown reasons, probably as a corollary to a spontaneous outbound migration, toward the end of the 19th century a group of “Vân Kiều” moved from Quảng Trị province to Quảng Bình province, the northernmost part of the current settlement area inhabited by the Bru. The author reporting on them (VƯƠNG 1963:71) tells us, based on his own fieldwork, that the “Vân Kiều” living today in Ham Nghi and Dinh Phung *xã*s in Lê-thuy district claim that they moved there 80 years earlier from Quảng Trị. Since the work was published in 1963, and the fieldwork took place “in the previous three years”, the data refers to the end of the 1880s.

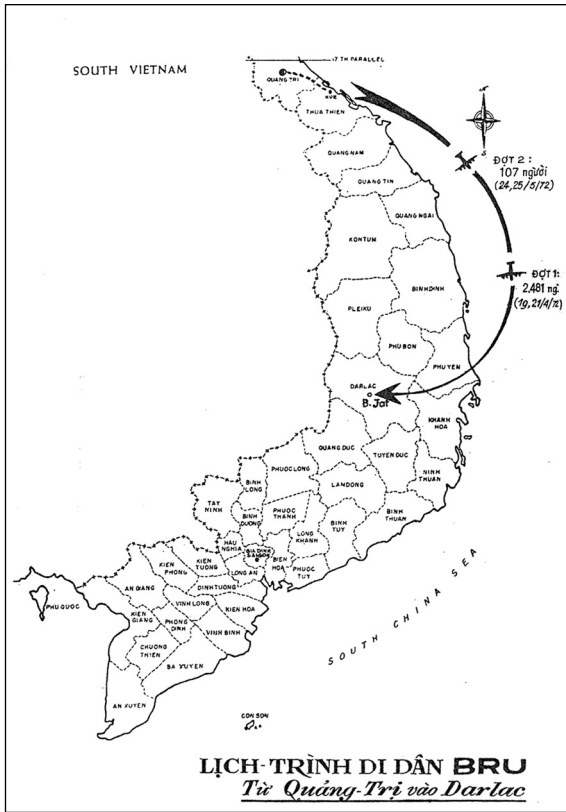


Figure 4. The relocation of the Bru in April – May, 1972. (After Nguyễn Trác Dĩ [1972]:74)

were analyzed separately. Six of the nine cantons mentioned by Lemire and Valentin are still known by the same name and located in the same place as a century ago.²⁰ I was even able to identify some of the village names in these cantons, although the somewhat arbitrary transcription of Bru/Vietnamese/Phutai/Lao names caused no small difficulties in deciphering them. And even so, of the 18 village names in Viên Kiêu canton described by Valentin, I could identify seven (Huc, Huc Nghi, Ca Lu, Cat, Con, and their subclasses); in Miet, another canton, four of the seven village names (Miet, Tan and Cat, as well as their subclasses), etc.

Examination of the village names and geographical names provided by Lemire yielded similar results of 40–50%. Here the difficulty in identification rested on having to know not only the names of the largest rivers and the best-known villages, but also the names of smaller streams, springs, creeks, hills, farms, thus the entire local toponymy,

or their known history that would indicate they are a “refugee” people fleeing valley or lowland states?

In my search for data shedding light upon the ethnic history of the Bru, I examined in my book (VARGYAS 2000) more than a decade before Scott’s book and the “Zomia” theory around one 140 years (and if I add in the Sino-Vietnamese chronicles, 400 years) of published material about the Bru, including maps, with special attention to the names and locations of villages and administrative units, as well as the geographic names (of hills and rivers). The total material was then compared with the results of current maps and any other administrative data from other sources.¹⁹ Based on the above, I came to the conclusion that *the majority of the Bru still live where they lived 100 or even 400 years ago.*

Three authors (DAMPRUN 1904; LEMIRE 1904; VALENTIN 1905), who in their writings provide more than average geographical data,

¹⁹ See a summary in VARGYAS 2000:153–154.

²⁰ 1) Viên Kiêu – this does not exist today, but it is identifiable through the ethnonym “Vân Kiêu;” 2) Lang Thuân = Thuân; 3) Lang Sen = Huong Son; 4) Tâm Linh = Huong Linh?; 5) La Miet = Miet/ Labuiq; 6) Adi = A Gioi; 7) Tâm Thanh = Thanh; 8) Lang Ha = ? 9) O Giang = ?

which would require not only a large-scale, good map, but also extensive own thematic data collection. Just as an example: in Viên Kiêu canton, Lemire mentions a village called Xom Wat. The 1:100,000-scale French map from 1913 and the 1:200,000-scale American map from 1954 (1962) do really show such village names. Today, however, they do not exist. At the same time, my research shows that in this same place, in this same area, the oldest clans (*mu*) are the *mu* Xom, whose members today live scattered in the surrounding villages. Thus, the village name of Xom was justified by my own ethnographic material.

I was able to identify a Vân Kiêu group in Quảng Bình province described by Vương Hoàng Tuyên in the same way. The ancestors of this group (see Footnote 18/c), according to their own traditions, arrived from Quảng Tri towards the end of the 19th century, and one of their most important clan names is *mu* Xom. From what we know so far, it seems very likely that these people migrated from the Khe Sanh region, where their religious center, the *mu* Xom clan shrine still exists. Such results lend a historical dimension to the data collected in the field.

Having analyzed the geographical names of Savannakhet province in Laos provided by Damprun, I arrived at even more satisfactory results. Of the fourteen *muongs* he described in 1904, five concern us, as these are a direct continuation of the region inhabited by the Vietnamese Bru across the border – that is, they must have Bru populations, among others. They are as follows: *muong* Tchépone, *muong* Vang, *muong* (Vang) Angkham, *muong* Phabang, *muong* Xienghom. I identified the names with the help of a 1972 1:200,000 map of Savannakhet province, with the following results (first comes the number of villages given by Damprun, then the number of villages identified by me): *muong* (Vang) Angkham: 14/10; *muong* Vang: 39/16; *muong* Xienghom 6/5; *muong* Phabang 8/7; *muong* Tchépone 53/18. The data show clearly that the ratio of identifiable villages grows exponentially with the diminishing size of the *muong*: *muong* Phabang 87.5%, *muong* Xienghom 83%, *muong* (Vang) Angkham 71.4%, *muong* Vang 41% and *muong* Tchépone 34%. In the case of *muongs* containing fewer than twenty villages, then, more than three-quarters of the villages are identifiable, despite the past 70 years! It is, however, not yet clear what causes the relatively lower ratio in the case of larger *muongs*.

In light of all this, the sum of my book was as follows:

“The descriptions presented here provide more than one hundred years of insight into Bru culture. Their importance is that they show a fundamental coincidence with data collected in the field today. The villages’ locations, names, geographical names, etc., essentially correspond to the current situation, thereby demonstrating the temporal continuity of Bru culture despite historical shocks, even cataclysms.” (VARGYAS 2000:154)

The same conclusion about the temporal continuity of Bru culture and identity can be drawn from the example of the three “disjoined” groups detailed in Footnote 18: the first group (the slaves hauled off to the right bank of the Mekong) has maintained its “Bru” language and perhaps even “Bru” identity despite 150 years (THERAPHAN – PUENGPA 1980); for lack of ethnographic data, we cannot know any more than this about them. The other two groups have – for now at least – preserved their language, ethnic denomination, ethnic identity and ethnic organization in spite of a distance of a century

and four decades, respectively, and even after having had been resettled or relocated, living in a depressing minority among the Vietnamese, and pauperized.

In ethnicity, identity, culture, social organization, etc., despite the flexibility and situational nature – that Scott speaks about, – there is then so much more permanence beneath the surface than it is commonly assumed! Looking at just the last 100–150 years, the Bru have been hit with a dramatic amount of trauma: they were hauled off as slaves; states and military troops came and went over their heads; willing or unwilling, they participated in perhaps the most devastating war of the era after World War 2: they – or their territory – were showered with hundreds of thousands tons of bombs, napalm, chemicals (Agent Orange), their villages, houses and fields were scorched, their domestic animals and valuables were annihilated, they were temporarily or permanently evacuated or relocated, locked in “strategic hamlets” fenced in by barbed wire, and we cannot even estimate their dead;²¹ all in all, world history has not been kind to them – *yet, as soon as the situation allowed for it, they returned, and, stubbornly stuck to their territory, to their language, culture, ethnic identity, they remained what they were – Bru!* This image or pattern is completely at odds with what we know from the history of many other Southeast Asian nations, such as the Hmong, who were able to populate all of Southeast Asia in 100 years of migration. There is not enough space here to go into further detail about this issue; yet that much seems certain from the above that in “Zomia” at least several types of “habitus” are to be expected as far as attachment to the territory and socio-cultural plasticity and flexibility are concerned!

In this regard, I must point out that, interestingly, Scott does not even bring up the possibility of resettlement of the “original” residence area. Yet in Bru oral history, which I cannot take into account here for lack of time and space, there are many examples I know of in which the Bru that were displaced by war settled back in their original place of residence after the event concluded. Nevertheless, most of my Bru informants were capable of listing 3–5 or more former village locations (*rangūal*) where they or their ancestors lived: the pattern of these places transferred onto a map shows that despite the temporary migrations and resettlements, the Bru only move *within a defined* area! And even if wartime cataclysms upset this pattern at times, the bottom line does not change.

As far as one can tell, therefore, the Bru are – if not “native” – at least *the oldest known* inhabitants of this area. They appear in historical sources where they are still living today, and in these sources they seem just as they are today. They started interacting with surrounding states in historical times, some 400 years ago, which is well supported by data;²² and though in my personal experience their value systems, behavioral patterns, habitus (e.g., fears) show many signs that their history is inseparable from the histories of these surrounding states, they are not a people fleeing from – and only partially because of – the latter. The kind of questioning that asks whether, beyond the history observable

²¹ Hickey, who as an anthropologist is considered one of the crown witnesses of the Vietnam War, says that of the approximately 220,000 highlander-ethnic victims, “as a result of the ecology of war, in all likelihood most of the civilian casualties were among the Bru, as well as the Pakoh, Katuic, Sedang, Halang, Jeh, Stieng and Ronglai people” (HICKEY 1993:267).

²² This means first and foremost the Vietnamese state that has been continuously expanding over the past half-millennium. The Champa Empire, which existed in this area until approximately the 14th–15th century, did not affect the highlands inhabited by the Bru; there are no Cham ruins, epigraphic monuments, etc. there. See HARDY et al. 2005; Hardy et al. 2009.

through micro-historical data, the Bru are “indigenous” to this area in the true sense of the word or “newcomers from somewhere else” cannot be answered on the basis of our current knowledge, or rather it is too simplistic. However this does not detract from the significance of Scott’s thesis, the eminence of his macroscopic vision, the depths of his empathy; part II. will provide proof of this, where I will speak in more detail about the state evasion of the Bru.²³

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²³ The second part of this article will be published in the next issue of *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*.

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Gábor Vargyas is scientific councillor at the Institute of Ethnology of the RCH of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, and Professor at the Department of European Ethnology – Cultural Anthropology at the University of Pécs, heading the Doctoral Program. He specializes in the peoples and cultures of Southeast-Asia and Oceania with special interest in religion, ethnohistory, culture change, material culture and tribal art. Besides shorter field trips to Australia and Papua New Guinea (1981–82), Congo (Brazzaville) and Angola (1987), Korea (1991), Irian Jaya (1993), Laos (1996), and China (1999), he conducted extensive long-term ethnographic fieldwork among the Bru in the Central Vietnamese Highlands (1985–1989 and 2006–2007). He is the author of, among others, *A la recherche des Brou perdus* (2000) and a number of articles dealing with different aspects of Bru culture. Email-address: mpaqtoan2@gmail.com
