heredity and genealogical standing lies in the way in which political success must be reconciled with the ideological rule of rightful descent. "Even a usurper," Lehman explains, "upon seizing power, attempted to show that one or more of his ancestors was of the 'royal bone' even though the usurper may have been an ordinary villager." Inasmuch as the Karenni, and Karen society in general, follow cognatic kinship, in which male and female lines are reckoned, finding the requisite connection was even easier than with the Kachin. If, then, the colonizers were looking for tribes constituted by orderly rules of descent and long histories, the uplanders they encountered were only too happy to oblige them with retrospective genealogical order in which they themselves clothed their turbulent politics.74

The tribe, as a formal social institution, appears, in other regions as well, to be more in evidence as a kind of ideological exoskeleton than as a useful guide to political realities. One of the most famous tribes in history—that of Osman, founder of the Ottoman Empire—was in fact a motley collection of different peoples and religions collaborating for political purposes. This was not an exception. Surveying the evidence, Rudi Paul Lindner claims that "Modern anthropologists' field studies [in the Middle East] show that tribal, clan, and even camp membership are more open than the tribal idiom or ideology might indicate."75 The tribe was, in Osman's case, a useful vehicle to bring together Turkish pastoralists and Byzantine settlers. And if blood ties were deemed desirable in keeping with the idea of the tribe as consanguines, then clan genealogies could be recalled to forge distant relationships. The segmentary lineage model is, without doubt, a common tribal ideology, but it is not common tribal practice except insofar as it is necessary to keep up appearances.76

The hegemony of blood ties and rules of genealogical descent, as the only legitimate foundation for social cohesion, though at variance with the facts, was so powerful as to dominate self-representations. It was, for hill people, the only way to justify actual power. Like Charles Dickens's couple the Veneerings, who were quite as determined to keep up appearances to themselves as to their neighbors, the mimicry is not a cynical ploy but a mode of reasoning about social relations. One can even think of it as a democratic mechanism in which the members of a community confer retrospective legitimacy on leaders who observe the obligations of ritual and generosity incumbent on chiefs. Tribal thinking in this special sense was as deeply embedded in highland ideology as it was in the imagination of the colonizers.

Given what we know of the ambiguity of ethnic identities, the porosity of their boundaries, the creation and demise of different identities, and the constant "power politics" taking place beneath the comparatively placid surface of genealogical continuity, a radical constructionist position on upland identities seems inescapable. At the very least, as Leach has shown for the Kachin, any hill population will have a range of social forms it can assume. Much of the determinate form applied to this flux was, as we have seen, an artifact of the imperial imagination. Thomas Kirsch, following Leach's lead, directed attention to the flux of social organization itself as an important phenomenon to be explained. He argued that "none of these various upland peoples enshrined in the ethnographic tradition of Southeast Asia has (or had) any permanent or immutable ethnographic status. Rather they are all undergoing a continuous process of change."77

The very indeterminacy of social forms in the hills, the pliability of histories and genealogies, the baroque complexity of languages and populations is not just a puzzle for rulers, ethnographers, and historians; it is a constitutive feature of hill societies. First, it is what one might expect in a zone of refuge, peoples, as in parts of Latin America, by a multitude of migrants, deserters, ruined peasants, rebels, and a preexisting, variegated hill society. The topography itself conspired to promote and preserve the cultural and linguistic pluralism of the hills. But it also seems reasonable to see this indeterminacy as an adaptive response to a context subject to radical, sudden, and unpredictable change. Noting how the Karen are spread throughout many ecological zones and adjacent to several more powerful valley kingdoms, Renard believes that the remarkable suppleness of their social structures, their oral histories, kinship patterns, subsistence techniques, cuisine and architecture is adapted for travel and change. If necessary, most Karen groups can turn on a dime. It is a quality that has great adaptive advantages and has served them well.78

Never quite knowing what role they will be called on to play, what situations they will have to adapt to, hill peoples find it in their interest to develop the widest cultural repertoire possible. Jonsson refers to much of this repertoire as "tribal identity formation" and notes in particular that "tribality," being virtually the only idiom for extravillage action, was one element of that repertoire. He convincingly places the range of social and economic practices at the disposal of hill peoples at the center of his analysis: "People have moved among the categories of state subjects and non-subject clients in the forests, as well as from being autonomous uplanders, dividing in two social directions, some becoming state clients and others abandoning village life for
foraging in small bands. This relates back to the general case of a shifting social landscape, and how people move among structural categories, in and out of particular relationships, repeatedly reformulating the parameters of their identities, communities and histories. 379

We can, I think, discern two axes along which these options are arrayed; they are all but explicit in Jonsson’s analysis. One axis is that of equality-versus-hierarchy and the second is statelessness-versus-“stateliness,” or state subjecthood. The foraging option is both egalitarian and stateless, while absorption into valley states represents hierarchy and subjecthood. In between are open-ranked societies with or without chiefs and hierarchical chiefly systems sometimes tributary to states. None of these quasi-arbitrarily defined locations along these axes is either stable or permanent. Each represents, along with others, one possible adaptation to be embraced or abandoned as the circumstances require. We now turn finally to the structure of these choices.

Positionality

In puzzling through how the Karenni/Kayah came into being as an identity and a petty state, Chit Hlaing [F. K. Lehman] concluded that they could be understood only as a position or strategic relationship within the larger constellation of other Karennic-speaking groups and the adjacent padi states, especially the Shan and Burman. It followed that when that constellation was transformed or disrupted, it would prompt the Karenni to adjust their social structure or even their very identity accordingly. 380

If we then think metaphorically of the system Lehman points to as a solar system, we can talk broadly of the mass of different bodies that make it up, the relative distances between them, and the gravitational pull each exerts on the others. The largest planets in these systems are, to pursue the metaphor, the padi states. They wax and wane, they may, by their rivalry, limit one another, and the smallest of them may be hostage to its hilly neighbors, but by and large their concentration of manpower, material culture, and symbolic centrality make them centers of gravity.

Here, however, the metaphor breaks down, inasmuch as the padi state can be a repelling force as well as an attractive one, and it exerts several different kinds of influence. Its cultural charisma, its symbolic reach, is greater than any other force it exerts. Even in the most remote hill settlements one encounters symbols of authority and tokens of power that seem to float up in fragments from the valley states: robes, hats, ceremonial staffs, scrolls, copies of court architecture, verbal formulas, bits of court ritual. There is hardly any claim to extravalley authority in the hills that does not deploy some cosmopolitan trapping to enhance its assertion of authenticity. In the hills where Han and Theravada symbolic penumbras overlap, fragments from both lowland systems mingle promiscuously. These feather-light symbolic shards travel easily to the hills because they are largely ornamental—a form of cosmological bluster. They recapitulate, in miniature, the journey made by the ideas and symbolic technology of divine kingship from South India to the classical courts of Southeast Asia.

Economically, the gravitational attraction of the padi-state core is nearly as broad. The lowland court centers in the mainland, as in the Malay world, were the outlets, for more than a millennium, for an international luxury trade in which hill products were the most valuable commodities. As explored earlier, the hills and valleys, as different ecological zones, were locked in mutual economic dependence. This trade could not, by and large, be coerced. Even in the case of tribute-based exchange, the hill tributary, though nominally inferior according to valley documents, often had the upper hand, and tribute relations were welcomed as opportunities for mutually advantageous exchange. The economic integration of hill and valley was extensive because it was uncoerced and mutually beneficial.

The reach of the Southeast Asia padi state was quite modest, however, when it came to direct, political-administrative control. Topography, military technology, low population, and an open frontier conspired to limit the successful application of coercion to a relatively small core area. Where coercion did come into play was in slaving expeditions (via war and intermediary slave-raiders) designed to capture and settle a large population within this narrow sphere of control. Flight could negate that achievement.

Given these sharp limitations, almost every valley state had a working alliance—sometimes formalized—with one or more adjacent hill populations. It was in the interest of some hill groups to settle close by the valley core to take advantage of the often rich ecotone zone between hill and valley in an attempt to dominate, as intermediaries, the trade between them. In the case of the Yao/Mien with the Chinese court and the Lawa with the courts of Chiang Mai and Jengtung, the alliance apparently took the form of a written decree or code. 381 In essence, the “contract” depicts a kind of bargain. In return for tribute and good behavior (no rebellions!), the hill people, in the case of the Yao, are given leave to “cross the mountains” to find new swid-
dens, are exempt from taxes, corvée, and tolls, and will not be required to kneel before lords and officials. The documents are filled with civilizational discourse placing the Yao and Lawa well outside the magic circle of civilized life. As Jonsson astutely points out, they also have the effect of naming and perhaps stabilizing an identity in flux, implicitly arrogating to the court center the right to confer land and mobility rights, and go far toward demarcating a “tribal territory” and assuming that it will have accountable chiefs. The document could be considered, in Han terms at least, a formula for “cooking barbarians.”

Such valley charters for hill peoples can as well, I think, be read against the grain. It was vitally important for the valley courts to have nearby hill allies. They constituted a crucial buffer and early warning system between the valley core and its valley-state enemies across the mountains. The hill allies could guard vital trade routes and mediate trade and diplomatic relations with other hill peoples. Finally, they could become slave raiders themselves, helping to replenish the unstable core population. Though such arrangements might look like deference and submission to a valley official, they could as easily be seen as a hill achievement, insisting on their terms for an alliance, including not having to bow and scrape before valley officials. Truly “cooked” barbarians would, presumably, bow. The way in which the Yao/Mien is known to flourish the document to valley officials and outsiders suggests that it might be construed this way.

Such arrangements are legion. Located in the interstices of several lowland kingdoms, groups of Karen became, at one time or another, allies of each. They were integral to the initial victory of Mon-Pegu over Ava in the mid-eighteenth century, contributing three thousand troops under a pretender who may have been Karen or Mon–Karen. The Pwo Karen in this area were known as the Mon-Karen (Talaing-Kariang), as distinct from the more northerly Sgaw Karen, sometimes known as the Burman-Karen. When the Pegu kingdom was crushed and much of its population dispersed, the Karen fled with the Mon, seeking Thai protection. The Thai “planted” Karen on the frontier as an early-warning system and—in Burmese eyes—a fifth column. To the Tai kingdom of Chiang Mai, Karen were considered “keepers of the forest,” ritually important as first-comers to the land and valuable allies and trading partners. The identity of different Karen groups was thus marked in each location and period by the lowland society with which it was affiliated.

Every “civilized” lowland padi state required one or more hill-dwelling barbarian allies in a relationship that was often mutually advantageous. The Akha have been paired to the Tai states of Kengtung and Sipsongpanna, the Chin to the Burmese court, the Lawa to the Tai Yuan at Chiang Mai, the Wa to various Shan/Tai states, the Pwo-Karen to the Mon, the Lawa to La Na and earlier to Lamphun, the Jarai to the Kinb, the Palang to the Shan, upland Tai to the Lao, Kachin to Shan; and in the northwest, the Naga are said to have been a kind of highland auxiliary to the Manipuri court. In each case there grew up a kind of cultural symbiosis in which the hill allies, or some of them, came more closely to resemble their valley partners.

This does sound very much like a formula for “cooking” barbarians. More than that, it was a formula for absorption and assimilation. If, as has been argued, the Thai and Burmans came in small numbers as military colonists, then these and other valley populations may well have been constituted in just this fashion. Close hill allies were increasingly likely to be governed by chiefs with valley connections and to be increasingly hierarchical. They would then correspond in the Han scheme to “cooked barbarians.” The Han civilization series—raw barbarians, cooked barbarians, full subjects/“entered the map”—is structurally similar to the Shan civilizational series outlined by Leach: egalitarian/gumlo, stratified gumsa, Shan. Leach portrays ethnic succession in what might be termed a gradient. Such succession is to be found in much the same form stretching between all padi states and their adjacent hill allies. This is, after all, the social and cultural route by which hill people become valley subjects: physical proximity, exchange and contact, linguistic integration, ritual appropriateness and, in the classical case, wet-rice cultivation. It is to be stressed that this route is a gradient, not a series of abrupt, wrenching changes; it may not even be perceived at all in terms of ethnic succession!

If we can imagine this ethnic succession as a relatively seamless affair, then it follows that it could be just as seamless when the direction is reversed. The route to lowland “civilization” is also the route to highland autonomy, with innumerable way stations in between. In the case of wars or epidemics, the transition might be abrupt (though perhaps familiar), but it might just as often have been a gradual and imperceptible process as the padi state decayed, as trade routes shifted, or as taxes became more onerous. The way to the valley state was a two-way street and leaving need be no more jarring or traumatic than entering.
Egalitarianism: The Prevention of States

Blow us all up with cannons or make us all eighteen thousand of us Nawabs.
—Pashtun elders to British

The Lamet simply could not understand the concept “chief.”
—Karl Gustav Izikowitz, Lamet

Because of their savagery, the Bedouins are the least willing of all nations to subordinate themselves to each other as they are rude, proud, ambitious and eager to be leaders.
—Ibn Khaldun

A major reason why Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma* is such a durable classic is that the opposition between what he calls the autocratic factions and democratic-egalitarian factions he finds among the Kachin travels well outside its immediate ethnographic context. For stateless peoples living on the margins of states, it seems to represent a fundamental choice about positioning. In canvassing the literature of his time, especially works on the Assam-Burma border region, Leach found many other examples of the contrast between democratic-egalitarian forms and autocratic-monarchical forms within indigenous groups. He cites work on the Chins, the Sema, the Konyak, and the Naga. To these examples we could add the Karen, the Lahu, the Wa, the Karen, and perhaps a good many more if one conducted a comprehensive search of the literature.

The British-led “pacification” forces were struck by the resistance they met in egalitarian Kachin areas. “Our opponents here, were the Kumlao Kachins, whose principal characteristic is that they do not own the authority of any chief, even in single villages.” They had, it was noted, “no form of salutation or obeisance.” Acephalous communities like the gunlao were subversive to British—or any other—administration; they provided no institutional levers or handles with which to enter the community, negotiate with it, or govern it. The colonial administration accordingly would only recognize “properly constituted tracts under a Duwa” and cautioned officers, even in these villages, to be alert to “this spirit of independence” and to suppress it without delay. Thus the compiler of the *Gazetteer*, proud heir to a democratic tradition himself, can write without a trace of irony, “Such republican or democratic communities are no longer permitted within the Burma administrative boundary.”

In the case of the Kayah, as Lehman demonstrates, the democratic and autocratic principles are embedded in “two simultaneous ritual cycles and sets of personnel.” What one might call the aristocratic cult makes symbolic gestures beyond the locality and, in particular, adopts the trappings and symbols of the Shan kingdoms and the Burmese royal capital at Mandalay. Its ritual center is the center of the village where tall teak poles—a diagnostic feature of Kayah villages—which are equated with the flagstaff found in most Shan and Burmese pagodas (symbolizing the submission of local spirits to the Buddha) and are topped with an umbrella-form (kti) finial which decorates most Buddhist architecture. The hereditary priesthood devoted to this cult makes offerings to a high god whose name is derived from the Shan term for lord, as is the term sawbu. The priesthood may not mix with, intermarry with, or accept offerings from the other cult’s priests, who are devoted to the local spirits (nai) of the countryside, especially the forest.

What seems important for our purposes is that the ritual complex of the Kayah appears thoroughly amphibious. Both democratic and autocratic components are present but are ritually segregated. One complex seems, by copying lowland forms, to contribute to the ideological superstructure of the sawbas and state formation in general, while the alternative cult is purely local and makes no reference to chiefly authority. If fluidity of identity—being able to “turn on a dime”—involves shifts from hierarchical to non-hierarchical forms, then the Kayah seem fully equipped, ritually, for either eventuality.

A final comparison of egalitarian and hierarchical social formations points to some of the cultural practices that work to hinder the development of permanent hierarchies of state and power. The Lua/Lawa, a relatively stratified hill society, and the Lisu, a relatively egalitarian group, are illustrative. Among the Lua there is strong emphasis on the ritual and feasting superiority of elite (samang) lineages, which, at the same time, control access to land. The ruling lineages have elaborate and deep genealogies emphasizing their status and their connection with powerful lowland courts—Chiang Mai, in particular. Prominent in that connection is a “charter” somewhat like that of the Mien, exempting them from corvée, conscription, and supplying fodder for elephants and horses, and confirming their right to swidden. The Lisu, on the other hand, emphasize equal access of all lineages to competitive feasting, open access to land, and the lack of essential differences in rank or status.

For our purposes, however, two features of the egalitarian Lisu are notable. First, they have short and truncated genealogies, in what amounts to a refusal of history. The purpose, after all, of most lineage histories, oral
or written, is to establish a claim to distinction and rank—to establish a “lineage” for those claims. If, then, lineage histories are abbreviated or ignored altogether, it amounts to something of a cultural discouragement, if not prohibition, of historical claims to superiority. To have little or no history is, implicitly, to put every kin group on roughly the same footing. We have seen at some length how the absence of a written textual history and written genealogies may have the same strategic and adaptive advantages for subaltern groups. Oral genealogies, however contrived and invented, are also claims of the same genre, and to repudiate them is also an egalitarian move. It is often and correctly noted that text-based civilizations have consistently seen the stateless people outside their grasp as peoples without history. But what we encounter here is the practice of disavowing status-building histories in the name of preventing hierarchy and its frequent companion, state formation. The Lisu are without history not because they are incapable of history but because they choose to avoid its inconveniences.

The absence of history in this sense contributes to the fact that in egalitarian groups, each lineage—or, for that matter, each family—has its own particular customs and usages. There is, however, one “tradition” to which most Lisu proudly point: namely, the tradition of murdering headmen who become too autocratic. As Paul Durrenberger puts it, “The Lisu loathe . . . assertive and autocratic headmen,” and the “stories Lisu tell of murdered headmen are legion.” Such traditions can also be found among a good many egalitarian hill peoples. How frequently these traditions are acted upon is hard to establish, although the original gumlao revolt against Kachin headmen reported in the sources appears to have been a case in which they sustained something of a political movement. Such cautionary tales are, in any event, a kind of egalitarian, structural prophylactic warning of the possible consequences to any would-be autocratic headman bent on cementing his lineage’s power.

Among the hierarchical Lua, lineages are ranked; they jockey for status; and part of the jockeying rests on claims to superiority based on different, and fabricated, origin myths and genealogies. The Lisu, like the gumlao Kachin, deny lineage ranking and ranked feasting, deny history, and, more directly, thwart the emergence of ambitious headmen who might take them in that direction. The egalitarian Lisu have, in effect, created a culture that is a fairly comprehensive program of state prevention.

The incorporation of egalitarian and hierarchical models of social organization within a recognizably single culture is by no means confined to the Kachin-Shan context. It is found throughout much of Southeast Asia. More speculatively, there is some reason to suppose that it is a structural regularity of many stateless peoples living on the borders of states. Thus Robert Montagne's classic thesis on Berber society in Morocco proposed that “Berber society oscillates between two rival and opposed social forms, between, on the one hand, democratic or oligarchic tribal republics ruled by assemblies or hierarchies of assemblies, and, on the other hand, ephemeral tribal tyrannies, exemplified in modern times by the great Caids of the South.” As was the case with the Kachin, the Berbers had no indigenous model of state-making, and their form, when states did first arise among them, was based on the Hellenic model of the states they abutted. To mention just one of many parallel cases, Michael Khodarkovsky's study of the Kalmyk nomads and the Russian state posits the same oscillation. The nominally ruling lineage, along with the clergy, was devoted to creating a dynasty by hereditary succession and centralized power. Other tribal leaders favored decentralization and “indeterminacy” of succession rules: that is, open ranks. “Two structurally antagonistic tendencies, one compelling the top of the society toward increasing centralization, the other consolidating a separatist tendency, may explain the endless cycles of civil wars so often associated with nomadic society.” What Khodarkovsky makes clear, however, is that the centralizing tendency was closely associated with accommodation to the adjacent state. Thus the tsarist regime promoted Kalmyk khans as a form of institutional linkage and control. As it was for the British and imperial China, tribal anarchy was anathema to the tsars. Centralization and autocracy depended on a combination of the power of the tsarist state—including the benefits it could bestow—and the political ambitions of Kalmyk khans.

Egalitarian, acephalous peoples on the fringes of states are hard to control. They are ungraspable. To the command “Take me to your leader” there is no straightforward answer. The conquest or co-optation of such peoples is a piecemeal operation—one village at a time and, perhaps, one household at a time—and one that is inherently unstable. No one can answer for anyone else. Acephaly is therefore, like the “jellyfish tribes” of the Middle East described earlier, itself something of an escape social structure. The logical corollary of acephaly is typically the inability to unite except under very special circumstances (for example, charismatic religious leadership and brief military confederacies). A social structure that thwarts incorporation by an outside state also inhibits crystallization of any internal statelike structure.

What are the material conditions that underwrite such egalitarian social
structures? The circumstances of the gumlaao Kachin, Lisu, Berbers, and Kalmysks are suggestive in this respect. An open common property frontier seems particularly vital. Just as fixed, inheritable property in land facilitates permanent class formation, a common property frontier equalizes access to subsistence resources and permits the frequent fission of villages and lineages that seems central to the maintenance of egalitarianism. The farther away, in terms of friction of terrain, such peoples live from state centers and the more mobile their subsistence routines—farming, pastoralism, shifting cultivation—the more likely they are to maintain the egalitarian, stateless option. Enclosure of the commons and encroachment by the state are everywhere a threat to such arrangements.

Much of the logic behind the exceptionally complex checkerboard identities in the uplands and the movement between them is best understood as a strategic choice of position vis-à-vis lowland states. Relative altitude and agro-economic niche are often indicative of such positioning. This perspective is most obvious with identities invented by lowland states to suit their own administrative purposes. Following the mid-Ming dynasty "Yao wars," those who collaborated and settled under imperial rule became "min," or subjects, and those who did not become, by definition, "Yao."100 The ethnic term meant nothing beyond non-taxpaying hill people; it had, initially, no cultural or linguistic coherence. The term Miao, as we have seen, was similarly often applied comprehensively to all those in an area who were still defiantly beyond the state's grasp. And, of course, the terms raw and cooked, wild and tame, jungle and house (as applied to the Karen) can be understood as references only to the degree of political submission.

Quite apart from state-applied exonyms, ethnic identities, subdivisions, and even villages—as in gumlaao and gumsa Kachin—came to acquire reputations for relative degrees of hierarchy and linkage to states. The highland Akha, according to von Geusau, chose subsistence routines that maximized their autonomy and specifically chose locations that put them beyond easy reach of states and slave-raiders.101

We should distinguish here between state-repelling characteristics and state-preventing ones. They are related but not identical. State-repelling traits are those that make it difficult for a state to capture or incorporate a group and rule it, or to systematically appropriate its material production. State-preventing traits, on the other hand, are those that make it unlikely that a group will develop internally durable, hierarchical, statelike structures.

The state-repelling features we have repeatedly encountered in the foregoing analysis can be summarized in general terms. First, a society that is physically mobile, widely dispersed, and likely to fission into new and smaller units is relatively impervious to state capture for obvious reasons.102 These features are, in turn, highly correlated, not to say mandated, by the choice of subsistence routines. Foraging, hunting, and gathering (land-based or maritime) encourage mobility, dispersal, and fission. One can easily stipulate a series or gradient of declining mobility, dispersal, and fission that moves from foraging to swiddening and then to fixed-field crops and irrigated rice. For crop-planting societies, as we saw in Chapter 6, versatile, unobtrusive root crops of staggered maturity are far more state repelling than aboveground grain crops of synchronous maturity. Outside Southeast Asia, the series would also include nomadic pastoralism, with its great advantages in mobility and dispersal.

A third state-repelling feature is a highly egalitarian social structure that makes it difficult for a state to extend its rule through local chiefs and headmen. One of the key material conditions of egalitarian structure—necessary but not sufficient—is open and equal access to subsistence resources. Common-property land tenure and an open frontier are, in this respect, the material conditions that underwrite egalitarianism. In fact, the two major state-repelling subsistence routines, foraging and swiddening, both of which promote mobility and dispersal, are virtually unthinkable without an open, common-property frontier. Its disappearance is a mortal blow to autonomy.

A final state-thwarting strategy is distance from state centers or, in our terms, friction—of—terrain remoteness. Until nearly the twentieth century, remoteness alone sufficed to put some groups definitively outside the reach of the state. As a distance-making strategy, remoteness could, in fact, substitute for other state-repelling strategies. The Hani and Ifugao could safely grow irrigated rice in their remote highland terraces precisely because they were at such a great remove from state centers.

Certain peoples have for so long manifested these state-repelling characteristics that the invocation of their very name conjures up statelessness—often glossed by nearby states as "wildness" or "rawness" or "barbarity." The Lahu, Lisu, gumlaao Kachin, Akha, Wa, Khmu, and Hmong, to mention a few, largely fit this description. Providing that one allows for variation over time and the various subdivisions of many ethnic groups, one could, if so inclined, devise something of a nominal scale of state-repelling characteristics along which any particular group might be ranked.
The other pole of the scale would be anchored by what might be called "state-adapted" characteristics: densely settled, sedentary, grain-growing societies marked by property in land and the disparity of power and wealth that it promotes. Such characteristics are, of course, socially engineered into state space. The peoples manifesting these state-adapted features and therefore indelibly marked by their "statelessness" are the Shans, Burmans, Thais, Mons, Pyus, Khmer, and Kinh/Viet. To paraphrase Fernand Braudel, not all the human traffic in the world moving back and forth between these poles is likely to erase these indelible associations. At the stateless extreme we get dispersed, mobile foragers or small clusters of people along remote ridges far from any state center; at the other, taxpaying, padi-planting peasants near the state core.

What is surely most important in this ethnic positioning vis-à-vis the state is the constant movement of individuals between these positions and, indeed, the shift over time in what, say, the position "Karenni," "Lahu-nyi," or "Kachin" might mean. At any one place and time, historically, the ethnic identities on offer might be seen as a bandwidth of possibilities for adjusting one's relationship with the state—a gradient of identifications which may be, over time, fitted to the prevailing economic and political conditions. To be sure, it makes eminent economic sense for padi planters to drop everything and take up foraging when the price of resins, medicinal plants, or edible birds' nests shoots up. But the move to foraging can as easily occur because it is a state-evading strategy. Similarly, the choice between padi planting and swiddening is more likely to be a political choice than a mere comparative calculation of calories per unit of labor. Insofar as the choice of subsistence routines, altitude, and social structure are associated with particular cultural identities and a "positionality" vis-à-vis the lowland state, then a change in ethnic identity may represent, first and foremost, a political choice that just happens to carry with it implications for cultural identity.103

Some Lahu, for example, have moved to remote mountains and to foraging and, on other occasions, to settled village life and cultivation. As recently as 1973 many Lahu left Kengtung, Burma, for the hills, following a failed revolt against taxation and corvée imposed by the Burmese regime.104 The Khamu have a comparable, though less rebellious, history; some have abandoned village life for foraging at times, and some have moved to the valleys to become Buddhist padi planters.105 And of course, as Leach discovered, many Kachin had been moving between different social forms, each of which expressed more of a positioning vis-à-vis the Shan valley state and hierarchy than it did any momentous cultural shift. To reiterate what should now be obvious, swiddening and foraging as practiced for the past few centuries in Southeast Asia are not prior to padi planting in some scheme of social evolution; they are, instead, "secondary adaptations," indicative of a largely political choice.106

Jonsson has noted astutely that "ethnic distinctions may primarily have to do with lowland affiliations." In this respect, he claims that "Ethnic groups do not have a [determinate] social organization," by which he means to imply that a particular named identity can, in terms of subsistence, cultural affiliations, internal hierarchy, and above all its relationship to lowland states, vary widely.107 In other words, not only are individuals and groups moving between ethnic identities as a consequence of positioning themselves, but these identities themselves are labile, as the aggregate of decisions their bearers take has the effect of repositioning the very meaning of that ethnic identity.

If hill peoples have at hand a bandwidth of identities that they can take up, and if each of these identities calibrates a different relationship to lowland states, what can one say about historical trends? Here the shift in the past half-century has been momentous. Until then, as we have seen, Zomia was largely a zone of refuge for societies and fragments of societies fleeing or choosing to place themselves beyond the grasp of valley states. The mosaic of named ethnic identities is testimony to a long and complex history of migrations and remigrations marked by rebellions, war, and cultural reformulations. Originally, much of Zomia's population came from the lowlands, particularly from China, and, however they came by their ethnic name, they kept it largely because they had left the realm of state power. Those who stayed—perhaps a majority—became part of the lowland cultural amalgam and were no longer called Miao, Yao, or Tai. This history, together with the exceptional ecological diversity and the geographical isolation of the region, has produced perhaps the largest mosaic of relatively stateless peoples in the world.

For the past half-century, however, the gradient of available identities has, as it were, been radically tilted in favor of various degrees of state control. The classical narrative of "raw" barbarian peoples being brought to civilization has been replicated by a narrative of development and nation-building. While the older narrative was, owing to the limitations of state power, more an aspiration than reality, the new narrative is more imposing. At least three factors account for this. First, the modern idea of full sovereignty within a nation-state and the administrative and military wherewithal to effect it means
CHAPTER 8

Prophets of Renewal

And since it would be good to give a name to this seeker of salvation in Burmese Buddhism, however unclassifiable he may be, why not—inspired once again by the Weberian expression—simply call him the enchanter of the world.
—Guillaume Rozenberg, Renoncement et puissance

But it is a world permanently in quest of opportunities for enchantment, and often ready to identify and respond to the most fugitive of cues: not just the youth, energy, and the determination of Tony Blair but the cinematic vigor of Arnold Schwarzenegger or the entrepreneurial momentum of Silvio Berlusconi.
—John Dunn, Setting the People Free

The mere enumeration of the hundreds, nay thousands, of rebellions mounted by hill people against encroaching states over the past two millennia defies easy accounting. Cataloguing them in some tidy Linnaean classification scheme seems even more daunting.

These uprisings, usually led by people styling themselves (and/or taken to be) wonder-working prophets, shoulder their way to the front of the historical record by virtue of how large they loom in the archives. Precisely because they menaced the routines of administration and tributary relations and because they contradicted the civilizational narrative of a peaceful ingathering of peoples, they have demanded attention. Each uprising provoked its own particular blizzard of military and police reports, finger-pointing, trials and executions, commissions of inquiry, policy changes, and administrative reforms. Thus it is that most uplanders appear in the archives of Han, Viet, Siamese, and Burman states either as contributors to the routine statistics on tribute, corvée labor, and taxation or as barbarians in open rebellion against the state. The sheer volume of the paper trail dealing with uprisings makes it possible for an unwaried scholar to write a history of many a hill people as if it consisted largely of rebellions—and, of course, to narrate that history largely from the perspective of those charged with suppressing them.

The study of rebellion in Zomia has, as we shall see, much to teach