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Upland pioneers: an introduction

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Drawing on various ethnographic case studies from upland Southeast Asia, this special issue explores uplanders' pioneering agency and challenges the stereotype of the remote and marginal uplander. We consider upland areas as dynamic sites of future-making and change – initiated by pioneering individuals or local elites who seek out and explore different potential sources of (economic and spiritual) potency. By using the figure of the pioneer as heuristic device, we realign our ethnographic gaze on uplanders by giving particular emphasis to: (1) agents of sociopolitical dynamics in Zomia, (2) questions of remoteness and pioneering mobility, (3) old and new sources of potency, from 'the state' to the religious domain, (4) aspirations and future-making and (5) pioneers of change and emergent elites.

Key words agency, aspirations, future-making, remoteness, upland Southeast Asia

Introduction

The stereotype of the remote and marginalised uplander has pervaded the history and anthropology of Southeast Asia since colonial times. Drawing on various ethnographic case studies from upland Southeast Asia, this special issue challenges this stereotype and highlights uplanders' pioneering agency instead. Upland pioneers explore new economic and cultural frontiers and experiment with varying sociopolitical configurations rather than just responding to the encroachments of external forces; thereby, upland pioneers may initiate processes of social differentiation and change for better or worse. While the term 'pioneer' evokes the concept of migration (pioneer settlers) or even the image of what was termed pioneering shifting cultivation, we use the term in a wider sense to include persons or groups that open up new terrain also in a metaphorical sense.[1] The pioneers focused on in the contributions to this issue innovatively pave the way for new practices and initiate changes – for better or worse.

Yet we are concerned not with just any pioneer, but with upland pioneers particularly. Contributions to this special issue focus on upland areas as dynamic sites of future-making and change – initiated by pioneering individuals or local elites who seek out and explore different potential sources of (economic and spiritual) potency. With this novel focus, this collection makes analytical interventions into the study of social change in peripheral areas, based on ethnographic contributions to the study of what has become widely known as 'Zomia' (Scott 2009; Van Schendel 2002; also known as the Southeast Asian Massif; see Michaud *et al*. 2016), the vast stretch of upland areas in mainland Southeast Asia that have become a paradigmatic case of a peripheral area.

[1] See also the definition provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*; according to OED, the pioneer is 'A person who goes before others to prepare or open up the way; one who begins, or takes part in beginning, some enterprise, course of action, etc.; an original worker in a particular field or department of knowledge; a founder (of some activity, industry, movement, etc.); an innovator, a forerunner.' ('pioneer, n. and adj.'. OED online. June 2020).

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From Edmund Leach (1997 [1954]) to James Scott (2009), ideal-typical images of the vagrant, stateless uplander, and essentialised upland–lowland dichotomies, though subject to much debate, shape the imaginations of the sociopolitical dynamics in upland Southeast Asia. In order to open up new conceptual terrains, we propose to substitute this image with the figure of the upland pioneer who exhibits what Pierre Petit (2015) has called a 'pioneer ethos'. Instead of discussing responses, resistance and other reactive positions towards external forces – from the developmental nation state to global capitalism – this special issue shifts our focus to proactive (both creative and destructive) attitudes and practices that shape the relationship between upland communities and the outside world (including the spiritual realm), as well as the shifting relationships and hierarchies within the upland areas.

The enormous cultural diversity of upland Southeast Asia defies simple generalisations. We are thus careful to avoid stereotypes of 'anarchic' or 'apathetic' upland peoples that have pervaded ethnographic descriptions since colonial times, and instead focus on actors that break up any simplifying narratives of 'remote' societies. By using the figure of the pioneer as heuristic device, we realign our ethnographic gaze on uplanders by giving particular emphasis to: (1) agents of sociopolitical dynamics in Zomia, (2) questions of remoteness and pioneering mobility, (3) old and new sources of potency, from 'the state' to the religious domain, (4) aspirations and future-making and (5) pioneers of change and emergent elites.

The figure of the upland pioneer that we suggest here draws inspiration from the discussion of 'figures of Southeast Asian modernity' according to which these are 'people who loom larger than life because they alternately express and challenge conventional understandings of social types' (Barker *et al*. 2014: 1). The upland pioneers that will be presented in the contributions to this issue may also pose challenges to existing orders and come to stand for initiating social change in the uplands. Often charismatic figures, contested, some of them disputatious, they might undermine normative and other expectations or might simply be not recognisable in established terms. As they seem to exemplify the entrance of something new into the world, they are met with curiosity but perhaps also with disbelief or rejection. In general, a shared interest of the contributions to this issue is not so much the upland pioneer as an abstract category of thought – here we depart from the above-mentioned notion of the 'figures of Southeast Asian modernity' (2014: 1); instead, they are concrete persons and their trajectories against the background of the highly dynamic social landscape of upland mainland Southeast Asia.

Agents of sociopolitical dynamics in Zomia

Questions about upland people's agency and ideologies have been – at times fiercely – debated since the publication of James Scott's controversial *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Scott aims to explore and explain the history of upland Southeast Asia through the lens of lowland state-making projects and upland attempts at escaping them by retreating into 'zones of refuge' (2009: 22). The upland 'anarchist' reaction also infuses the diverse areas of upland identity and lives: upland dwelling, egalitarian social organisation and 'escape agricultures' are presented by Scott as purposeful 'state repelling' (2009: 178). Critiques from an anthropological viewpoint deplore Scott's obsession with allegedly egalitarian or even anarchic sociopolitical configurations in

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the uplands and call for more attention to be given to processes of social differentiation, upland-lowland networks and individual agency (see, e.g., Jonsson 2014, 2017; Salemink 2015). And yet, Scott's thought-provoking discussions of upland mobility and flexible livelihoods inspired more thorough (ethno-)historical inquiries into upland patterns of migration, place-making and trans-ethnic alliances (Michaud 2017; Pholsena 2018; Tappe 2018; Petit 2020).

However, the processes of decision-making and negotiations about whether to migrate or not, whether to enter relationships with other groups or not – being or not being governed, as it were – are still not well understood and deserve more empirical scrutiny. Who directs decision-making processes leading to specific strategies of migration and subsistence as described by Scott? How are these processes negotiated and contested? Which (contested) economic and religious resources constitute the foundation of pioneering mobility? Who exactly are the pioneers of social change: ambitious 'big men', powerful households and/or emerging local elites?

A pioneering study of sociopolitical dynamics in Zomia, Edmund Leach's seminal *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, published in 1954, shaped the concept of social change – in contrast to the mainstream of British structural functionalism, which focused on societies as stable systems aiming at sociocultural equilibrium (see Robinne and Sadan 2007). Apparently remote from the centres of (pre-)colonial administrative power, Leach described the social organisation of the Kachin as oscillating between an egalitarian model (*gumlao*) and a more hierarchical one (*gumsa*) with aspiring leaders, leaning towards the more centralised system of the Shan principalities in the neighbouring valleys. His ideal-typical models, however, implied systemic closure, only insinuated individual agency and largely ignored the regional political economy (e.g. opium production and trade; Nugent 1982). What makes Leach's seminal study still relevant for our discussion of upland pioneers is that he pegged out the grid for further investigations into the relationship between economic and ritual power, and political leadership.

In another key study of upland social dynamics, Thomas A. Kirsch (1973) shares Leach's concern with processes of social change that used to be masked by western preconceptions such as 'tribe' or 'social structure'. He identifies feasting as key element of an upland prestige economy marked by competing ambitious leaders – 'aggrandizers' in Brian Hayden's (2016) words.[2] As in Leach's study, individual agency and decision-making processes – in particular with regard to religious aspirations and moral conflicts – are still not fully spelt out, though. Leach's question still awaits thorough answers: 'The breakdown of a *gumsa* system into *gumlao* fragments has to be initiated by some individual, a leader, a revolutionary. What are the attributes of such men?' (1997 [1954]: 259–60).

[2] Taking the example of prestige economies as a vantage point helps us to highlight uplanders' agency and trajectories of chieftainship, corresponding with studies of Melanesian 'big man' societies (Sahlins 1963; A. Strathern 2007; Godelier and M. Strathern 2008). Studies of prestige economies in upland Southeast Asia demonstrate how success in agriculture or trade enables ambitious leaders to organise large feasts. This conspicuous ritual and symbolic practice results in social prestige and – in the long run – economic power: advantageous debt relations, more leeway in bride price negotiations, and eventually the accumulation of labour and surplus to the benefit of the extended household, lineage or other relevant kinship groups (Friedman 1979; Lehman 1989; Hayden 2016).

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When Leach poses the question of what the characteristics of 'such men' were, referring to competing leaders and revolutionaries, we can assume that he chooses the word 'men' in the literal sense. Upland pioneering in classic works such as those presented here is essentially male pioneering, though the connection to notions of masculinity is often left unexamined. The gender of pioneering is a relevant issue in its own right and we can merely state here that part of the quest of locating upland agency and innovation entails a rethinking and eventual widening of the typical arenas in which we have sought for it, thus bringing into view new, including female, candidates for upland pioneering (see the contributions of Lutz and Bouté in this issue). The above quote by Leach also evokes a strategically acting individual who takes advantage of a situation that is produced by structural imbalances. Yet pioneers are not created in a vacuum. The contributions to this volume highlight the relational nature of pioneering by pointing out the (religious) networks within which pioneers develop and aim to accomplish shared goals, as well as the household perspective included in the aspirations that socially entangled persons forge.

Influential families or lineages that emerge from pioneering agency legitimately fall under a wide anthropological rubric of (local) elites that Salverda and Abbink define as follows: 'an *elite* is a relatively small group within the societal hierarchy that claims and/or is accorded power, prestige, or command over others on the basis of a number of publicly recognised criteria, and aims to preserve and entrench its status thus acquired' (2013: 1; emphasis original). With this definition in mind, we investigate various trajectories of (contested) elite formation that stem from individual aspirations and agency. The focus on influential figures and elites allows a more specific view on internal differentiations and dynamics of change in ostensibly remote areas. Pioneering, aspiring individuals or local elites tap potential sources of potency (old and new, near and far) which – as will be discussed below – constitutes the art of pioneering. The interplay between individual aspirations and competitive explorations of sources of (economic or religious) potency is inextricably linked to questions of proximity and distance, to remoteness and mobility.

Remoteness and pioneering mobility

This special issue contributes to the less often discussed but vital elements in the endeavour of 'historicising remoteness' (Saxer and Andersson 2019: 142). Following recent innovative conceptualisations of 'the remote' (Saxer and Andersson 2019; Harms *et al*. 2014), we understand remoteness as a field (or effect) of power, constantly being made and unmade, marked by relationality, and, in any case, a constructed category with real effects. The role of pioneers within the political economy of the remote is of particular interest for us. Saxer and Andersson (2019) suggest historicising remoteness (and related shifting connectivities) to shed light on how remoteness can indeed be an asset for 'remote' peoples, albeit a precarious one – echoing but also extending beyond James Scott's (2009: 279) discussion of remoteness as a 'state-thwarting strategy' deployed wilfully by uplanders to distance themselves from state centres. Risky economic opportunities and instable political meanings shape 'out-of-the-way' places (Tsing 1993), with remoteness not only being a spatial factor but in fact a way of being (Harms *et al*. 2014: 362).

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According to Saxer and Andersson, remoteness exists 'not as a vestige of an earlier, presumably less "connected" era, but as an ongoing process that involves distancing as well as the selective forging of new ties' (2019: 143). Therefore, we wish to highlight the interplay between remoteness from and proximity to (economic, political, spiritual) sources of potency – a set of diverse places, actors and relations that constitute an ambivalent field of tension. If local communities maintain a certain degree of control around their remoteness and changing (partial or selected) connectivities, they might be able to turn marginality into a kind of centrality – remoteness as potential asset (see Luo *et al*. 2019; Rippa 2019).

Hans Steinmüller's depiction of the Wa States in this issue shows how local elites turn remoteness into asset, exploiting local resources – both natural and human – to accumulate wealth while warding off external influences. In doing so, they maintain an illusion of limitless potency as basis for what Steinmüller calls an 'economy of life' (cf. Santos-Granero 2009). Taking inspiration from Pitrou's (2014) idea of a general pragmatics of life, Steinmüller aims at a unified analysis of the biological, political and cosmological arrangements that allow 'life' to emerge. In this context, the question of mythical or ethnohistorical pioneers of the sources of life is linked with ideas of sacred kingship in anthropological classics (e.g. Hocart 1970 [1936]).

Reflecting on these ideas, Oliver Tappe introduces a mythical king who functions as an ambiguous example of a pioneer in the economy of life – potency and wealth vs hubris and decline. The myth of Hat Ang, legendary king of the Phong in upland Laos, invites us to study the pragmatics of life that arguably informed the actions of ambitious leaders in upland Southeast Asia until recently. At present, local Phong leaders – such as village headmen and local party cadres – avoid any charismatic authority and deliberately navigate within the bureaucratic system of the Lao socialist state and its limitations (Singh 2012).

Local lifeworlds can be either disrupted or reshaped by new political or infrastructural configurations linking the 'remote' to the outside world. New opportunities emerge. Contending actors contribute to the shaping of new 'frontier assemblages' (Cons and Eilenberg 2019), including novel relationships with human and non-human entities: state authorities, natural resources, new and old gods and ghosts, and traditional and modern prestige goods linking ritual exchange systems with novel consumption patterns. Upland pioneers (re-)position themselves within such assemblages. As Saxer and Andersson observe in the context of remote places: 'positionality of a particular place in relation to a pathway of movement and exchange can be more important than its physical distance from an urban centre' (2019: 146).

Apparently at the remote end of the continuum but constantly repositioning themselves and moving within the edges of remoteness, uplanders are aware of the limitations of pioneering mobility, between stability and stuckedness (as Lutz's example of Sanjing's ambivalent 'pioneering ethos' illustrates; see Petit 2015). This relates to what Pierre Petit (2008, 2015) argues with regard to spontaneous migrations and mobility of upland populations as an expression of aspirations and a general pioneering ethos. This positioning might take place in context of different lowland states and amidst ethnic diversity in the uplands (Petit 2020).

As Sopranzetti (2018: 95–6) has shown with the example of Thailand, the state appears as spatio-temporal continuum in which 'remote' and 'backward' people are forced to reposition themselves in relation to the centre. In a similar vein, Harms *et al*. (2014) insist that remoteness is not only about physical but also temporal distance and,

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in addition, implies certain strangeness. Both temporality and strangeness indicate the relationality of remoteness: Different social groups – and different generations within those groups – do not necessarily agree on what is remote and how, and position each other differently in relation to their own reference points of remoteness.[3]

For even these apparently remote uplands, the state is anything but far away; instead, the presence of the state is manifested and performed in various ways, such as through radio broadcasting (Badenoch 2018), the ubiquity of state artefacts such as uniforms and certificates (High and Petit 2013), and is also inscribed in upland spaces (Stolz and Petit 2021). Yet, what we aim to stress here is not only the power of the centre as a centripetal force attracting mobile people, but also alternative sources of potency that have the potential to be – allegedly remote or marginal – centralities (see Horstmann and Wadley 2006). While upland and lowland certainly remain relational categories here (Tooker 2004: 246; cf. Russell 1989), or rather as constituting a social continuum reminiscent of Leach's oscillation, we would like to propose a multipolarity of Zomia, shaped by historically contingent and shifting – 'traditional' and 'modern' – sources of potency.

Exploring sources of potency

Different sources of potency enable aspiring pioneers to experiment with alternative hierarchies and moral orders, and thus to challenge existing authority. Access to such sources (titles, goods, spiritual powers, networks, natural resources, etc.) is key for ambitious pioneers and their kin to explore new, unmapped pathways of sociopolitical authority (as the contributions by Ying Diao, Tam Ngo and Seb Rumsby illustrate). Exploring sources of potency includes deliberate responses or adaptations to exogenous forces such as transregional market economies (Steinmüller, this issue; Turner *et al*. 2015; Kleinod 2020), religious conversion (Ngo, this issue) or the (mimetic) appropriation of foreign cultural elements and prestige items (Jonsson 2014; Badenoch and Shinsuke 2013; Tappe 2018, this issue).

Considering different 'Zomian' contexts, Guido Sprenger (2006b, 2007, this issue) highlights the significance of the integration of external wealth for the internal reproduction of socio-cosmic orders. Even if elite status is not (only) marked by possession of prestige goods any longer (see Évrard 2006), exploring exogenous sources of (potential) potency is crucial for ambitious individuals and emerging elites to gain prestige and (economic and sociopolitical) power. Forging connections – even if risky and precarious – with external political (state) powers and transregional trade networks is certainly one aspect of such pioneering explorations; yet, the contributors to this special issue also investigate the cosmological dimension of economic and political potency.

Potency is often associated with 'potent places' that constitute concentrations of cosmic energy in particular locations within the environment (Guillou 2017: 392; cf. Allerton 2013), which are linked to specific (animist) ritual practices aimed

[3] In her insightful study of development discourses in the Philippines, H. C. M. Bulloch (2017) discusses how different ideas of modernity and development – including hegemonial historicist narratives but also subaltern ones – compete and co-exist. In the context of Zomia, these might entail local (upland) notions of growth, prosperity and becoming. The stance on spatial and/or temporal remoteness certainly varies in the different cases presented in the contributions to this issue.

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at harnessing this energy (Sprenger 2016). Such spiritual centres may be infrastructurally remote from a centrist lowland perspective and call for different 'mappings' and ambivalent explorations of overlapping topographies of potency – cosmological alongside techno-political ones. The art of pioneering requires the careful assessment and balancing of different sources of potency, as in the case of newly established or reinvented religiosities.

Religion and religious discourses themselves are sources of potency. Prosperity gospels, charismatic churches, and also spirit beliefs and spirit mediums are flourishing in Southeast Asia and beyond, partially enhanced by new media (Endres and Lauser 2011; Jackson 1999; Johnson 2014; Taylor 2007). With regard to upland religiosities, specifically, the political underpinnings need to be considered. State policies with regard to 'backward superstition' and 'wasteful' animist ritual practices are inscribed in present-day projects of promoting tradition and cultural heritage (Bouté 2006; Goudineau 2015; Petit 2013; Sprenger 2006a). Though under pressure from state policies and conversions, animist practices remain alive and well (Sprenger 2016; Stolz 2018). Another important element in the context of Southeast Asia is the prominence of Christianity among uplanders. Not surprisingly, three of the contributions to this special issue are located in Christian contexts. The appeal of Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, among uplanders is connected to its distance from the religion of the majority population, its potential for 'redrawing ethnic boundaries' (Ngo 2015), and its transnational and modern character (see, e.g., Salemink 2015; Scheer 2017).

Upland sociocultural identities are forged not merely against or in spite of state presence, as a simplistic understanding of Zomia would have it, but in relation to states – alongside other economic and spiritual sources of potency. Here, religion and emerging concepts of culture play an important role. Ying Diao's contribution to this volume explores how Christian Lisu elites attempt to re-coin a notion of 'culture' (*litpix*) as distinct from 'religion' in order to produce an identity that is legitimate from the state's point of view in a process of self-folklorisation as a proactive response to statecraft. Discussing uplanders' religious and ethnic identities *vis-à-vis* the state, Tam Ngo (this volume) focuses on pioneering ritual performances. The staged competition between what is presented as Hmong traditional religion, ambivalently encouraged by the state, and Hmong Christian rituals acquires new and unintended sets of meaning after appropriation by young Hmong performers.

Seb Rumsby gives this topic a new take by discussing intra-elite competition after the emergence of a new religious elite that successfully occupied important – albeit precarious – political positions as brokers between the Hmong and the Vietnamese state. While Tam Ngo describes the contestations between new and 'traditional' religiosities – and the state's interference in this specific expression of local sociocultural differentiation – Rumsby focuses on how newly established religious networks and infrastructures shape novel pathways for ambitious individuals and would-be 'big men' as in classical studies of prestige economies (see above).

As these case studies demonstrate, pioneering aspirations are an ongoing process, in migration/mobility as well as in the context of religious transformation. The 'pioneering mobility' variant of religious/ritual plasticity indicates quite pragmatic approaches to questions of potential social and moral shifts: emergent religiosities may constitute new, ambivalent sources of potency, carefully explored by present or future ritual experts who open up new horizons of cosmological interaction and eventually self-empowerment. Again, this process of sociocultural change is not a one-way street.

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Religious change is the subject of Vanina Bouté's contribution to this volume, in which she shows that for the residents of a multi-ethnic, large village, ritual 'flexibility' is part and parcel of local ways of engaging with changing social and economic environments, as new or 're-invented' animist rituals and spiritual 'tools' are deployed to assess and shape the future.

We identify tensions between exploring new religiosities and 'old', 'traditional' ones – the latter objects of debate and contestation. As Tam Ngo's discussion about the re-interpretation of Hmong 'traditional' ritual – *vis-à-vis* the dynamics of Christian conversion – reveals, the Vietnamese state attempts to transform selected parts of the allegedly 'backward' ritual practices of ethnic minorities into 'beautiful customs'. The temporally remote, as it were, is turned into a contested asset. In a similar vein, Ying Dao's contribution discusses the reconstruction and valorisation of a specific Lisu 'culture' that is exploring both the past and the future to carve out a unique Lisu cultural space in the ethnically heterogeneous uplands of Myanmar. Both case studies aim to show how shaping the future implies exploring the imaginary potentials of past and present socio-cosmological and sociocultural configurations.

Potency is linked to potentiality – to anticipation and uncertainty. Pioneering across geographic, political or ontological divides produces tension – with pioneers almost physically enduring this tension. Pierre Petit (2020) characterises 'pioneering mobility' as bearing both opportunity and considerable social costs. This important observation is confirmed by other studies of resettlement dynamics that include state-orchestrated displacement and spontaneous follow-up migrations (see Bouté and Lutz, this issue). In other words, upland pioneers not only endure but can also be described as producing new tensions while they aim to put their future aspirations into practice. Assessing these aspirations and the social practices of pioneers is key to understanding the inherent tensions and dynamics of social mobility in allegedly remote societies – which in Southeast Asia are often marked by the co-existence of narratives of cultural backwardness and socio-economic progress.

This is particularly true in the broad context of global modernities and corresponding desires and aspirations (High 2014; Salemink 2015; Yang 2020). As Charles Piot warns us, romantic visions of the 'remote village' often fail 'to come to terms with the agendas and aspirations of peoples like Kabre who are today, and have long been, an integral part of the modern world' (1999: 178). Aiming to explore the role of local aspirations for social change and emerging 'vernacular modernities' (1999: 178), we ask how pioneers envisage and aim to shape their futures.

Aspirations and future-making

In her insightful and timely study of a resettlement village in Laos, Holly High (2021) discusses the ambiguities and contestations of desirable futures in upland communities *vis-à-vis* state discourses of development. Different notions of 'culture' are clashing here, of what to preserve or change, those notions certainly implying eclecticism and improvement (see Diao and Ngo, this issue). In order to understand dynamics within the uplands of mainland Southeast Asia, it is necessary to take upland aspirations and changing visions of the 'good life' into consideration (High 2008, 2021; Huijsmans and Mr Piti 2020; Sprenger 2021; Stolz 2019; Wilcox *et al.* 2021). Accordingly, exploring

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hopes, aspirations and future-making attempts more widely can open up new ground for analysis (Ringel 2012).

This approach serves as antidote to the 'lense of pastness' – predominant, according to Arjun Appadurai (2013: 285), in the anthropologist's concept of culture – through putting a stronger emphasis on the future and future-making (see Bryant and Knight 2019; Miyazaki 2004). Another (self-)critical outlook on existing paradigms in the ethnographic representation of upland dwellers concerns what Joel Robbins (2013) has called the 'suffering slot' in analogy to yesterday's 'savage slot'.

Instead of neglecting suffering and its origins, we understand his argument as an encouragement to reflect on the vantage points according to which someone's hope is perceived and represented as irrational or, in the words of Laurent Berlant (2011), as 'cruel optimism'. When Holly High (2008) introduced the focus on local aspirations into the debate on resettlement in Laos, she provoked considerable critique; a focus on subjective desires, according to the critics, allegedly obscured coercion and marginalisation (see Baird *et al*. 2009). As her later works (High 2014; 2021) make clear, however, she rather hints at the ambiguities of desire, how people adhere to them despite the vivid memory of failed aspirations and betrayed hopes. Taking uplanders' aspirations seriously does not mean ignoring the limits encountered when aiming to realise aspirations, and the eventual emerging feelings of 'stuckedness' (Hage 2009) and disappointment (Zigon 2017). Anthropologies of the good, Sherry Ortner (2016) commented, should not lose sight of the workings of power and inequality.

Aspirations, as well as the ways in which they are voiced, are relational. Again, rather than evaluating aspirations from their endpoints (see Pedersen 2012), the study of the ways in which aspirations are narrated and commented on by others is a promising line of enquiry (Liberatore 2016; Stolz 2019). The multiplicity and relational character of aspirations is illuminated in Paul-David Lutz's (this issue) intimate ethnographic account of the aspirations-in-the-making among his Khmu interlocutors, who are presented not as backward-looking traditionalists but as future-oriented aspirants. In voicing and putting aspirations into practice, his interlocutors' articulations of aspirations exhibit an internal diversity along intergenerational lines, among others.

Paul-David Lutz shows that the pathways of aspirations are non-teleological but that they entail a degree of contingency and are, furthermore, often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty. Coping with uncertainty and aiming to inquire into the future are strivings that Vanina Bouté describes in her article (this issue) on the ritual and divinatory practices among the multi-ethnic residents of a growing village, also in upland northern Laos. She argues that the changing aspirations and shifting horizons of hope among relocated villagers are mirrored in changing ritual means of investigating and influencing the future.

When studying (upland) aspirations, their multiplicity is striking. Not only do aspirations vary among our interlocutors but interlocutors might nourish different, sometimes contradictory, hopes over time or even at the same time (Haug 2020; Jansen 2016). Here, occasionally, coping with ambivalences appears to be part of aspirations and future-making processes – as Rosalie Stolz (2019) has shown with regard to the co-existence of aspiring to live in a house that is good, in the sense of being made of concrete, on the one hand, and good, in the sense of being socio-ritually complete and safe, on the other. However, new aspirations might come along with new, perhaps, conflicting sets of values that can contradict conventional and shared norms and values (Callard 2018; Rumsby 2021, this issue). Thus, pioneers emblematise the ambiguities

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of struggles between desires for development and modernity and concerns about moral order and social ties.

Pioneers of change and emergent elites

The upland pioneers presented in the contributions to this volume are involved in initiating change. Beyond the resistance paradigm (Scott 2009), there are a multitude of upland agendas that cannot be reduced to a response to external change and threat (see Ortner 1995; cf. High 2014). Not only might the state be rather pertinent in upland future-making in one way or another, as the contributions to this issue suggest, but the question of defining a transformation as exogenous or endogenous might also not be that straightforward. This pertains to the observation that changes eventually regarded as driven externally are presented by actors as locally initiated or at least voluntary changes (see Sprenger 2006a).

In her contribution, Rosalie Stolz shows how the shift to building concrete houses in a Khmu upland village in northwestern Laos is presented as the conscious decisions of individuals. By focusing on local lay builders who have contributed to the erection of concrete houses in influential ways, she shows the ways in which they emphasise the self-taught nature of their skills, their creativity and innovativeness. Interestingly, upland self-representations as active, not merely reactive, initiators or at least appropriators of change often go unnoticed in ethnographic accounts and pose a challenge to simplified understandings of change. Special cases are influential groups, deliberately designated 'upland elites' here, that shape upland transformations considerably and, thereby, might contribute to power imbalances and marginalisation of other upland groups or actors.

Elites, such as the Christian and non-Christian Lisu elites presented by Ying Diao (this issue), play a lively role in co-shaping Lisu self-representations and their striving for recognition. Yet these elites and influential figures among them might become subject to contestation or might see the basis of their power vanishing. The charismatic Hmong pastor Seng, intimately presented by Seb Rumsby (this issue), is a controversial figure about whom there are rumours and suspicions – the latter rather manifesting his status. Here, a long-term perspective makes visible the shifting grounds of elites: Vanina Bouté (this issue) hints that prior elites were successfully contested by pioneers of the resettlement process. Generally speaking, the ethnographic relevance of elites for understanding religious, social, as well as economic change for vast upland areas points to a lacuna in the anthropological study of elites. The Lisu elites described by Ying Diao, for instance, appear a far cry from our commonsensical present-day understanding of elites that is connected to notions of urbanity and globalisation, and contrasted with notions of margins, remoteness and rurality.

Yet pioneering can have its dark side: upland dwellers are not only actively involved in the larger polities, but processes of internal differentiation can also be triggered or at least aggravated by influential upland figures and elites. A well-known example are the upland dwellers of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, that, according to Tania Li's (2014) account, have produced internal inequalities. For the Wa States in upland Myanmar, Hans Steinmüller traces the factors that have led to the emergence of Wa elites who have established enormous plantation estates, based in part on the dispossession of local residents. This elite, who have managed to amass enormous riches that they do

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not shy away from displaying, face commoners whose success depends on being able to foster ties to members of the elite in order to secure work as manual plantation labourers or as servants on their estates. Dispossessed villagers might have no other option than to vote with their feet and flee. The case of the Wa elite drastically underlines the negative or at least ambivalent effects of pioneering elites.

Another conclusion that Hans Steinmüller draws pertains to the legacy of the military state and the role of the Wa elite: the present-day forms of 'the logic of capture and care', that is the tension between coercion and benevolence, that connects commoners and elites ties the villagers more closely to the military state. Beyond 'classic' power elites (Mills 1956), 'remote' local elites often act as brokers between marginal communities and the central state, for instance by aiding state control in return for state authority passed on by the ruling power (Pholsena 2018: 1306; Bouté 2018; Tappe 2018). Besides being the 'object of contestation and challenge' (Salverda and Abbink 2013: 7), local elites face the ambiguities between their position of power and their social mobility, as well as challenges of access to and control of resources or, rather, sources of potency. Elite building is historically contingent and does not follow clear trajectories. This is not only true of the political–economic nexus, but also in the field of religion, which offers a specific arena for aspiring individuals and emergent elites to claim social status and eventually to shape the future of an entire social group.

Conclusion

This collection of articles offers a new take on upland dynamics that focuses on what is suggested here as the figure of the upland pioneer. The figure of the upland pioneer functions as an invitation to rethink the ways in which upland dwellers are presented in our writings and to focus on upland aspirations and upland agents of change. Thus, the aim is not to construct an ideal-typical upland pioneer but rather to foreground specific actors, their trajectories, entanglements and internal viewpoints. Amid the striking diversity of actors, their commonality is that they are involved in practices that can be regarded as pioneering. Pioneerism comes here in various guises, including economic (Lutz, Steinmüller), ethno-political (Diao, Ngo), religious (Bouté, Rumsby), mythological (Tappe) and architectural (Stolz). Pioneers might comply with non-upland authorities, might challenge them, or might reshuffle existing intra-upland hierarchies. What these articles show, thus, is a close-up of dynamics that have too often escaped the ethnographic attention. By focusing on upland pioneers' aspirations and corresponding assessments of remoteness, sources of potency and potential futures, the contributions to this special issue provide lenses to better understand 'Zomian' lifeworlds in both the past and the present.

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Les pionniers des hautes terres: une introduction

En s'appuyant sur diverses études de cas ethnographiques des hautes terres d'Asie du Sud-Est, ce numéro spécial de la revue *SA/AS* explore l'action pionnière des habitants de ces terres. Nous mettons en question le stéréotype de l'habitant des hautes terres éloigné et marginal. De plus, nous considérons les zones de montagne comme des sites dynamiques de création d'avenir et de changement, initiés par des individus pionniers ou des élites locaux qui recherchent et explorent différentes sources potentielles de puissance (économique et spirituelle). En utilisant la figure du pionnier comme outil heuristique, nous réalignons notre regard ethnographique sur les habitants des hautes terres en accordant une importance particulière à: (1) les agents de la dynamique socio-politique de Zomia; (2) les questions d'éloignement et de mobilité des pionniers; (3) les anciennes et nouvelles sources de pouvoir, de « l'État » au domaine religieux; (4) les aspirations et la construction de l'avenir; et enfin (5) les pionniers du changement et les élites émergentes.

Mots-clés aspirations, construction du futur, élites, pionniers, Zomia

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