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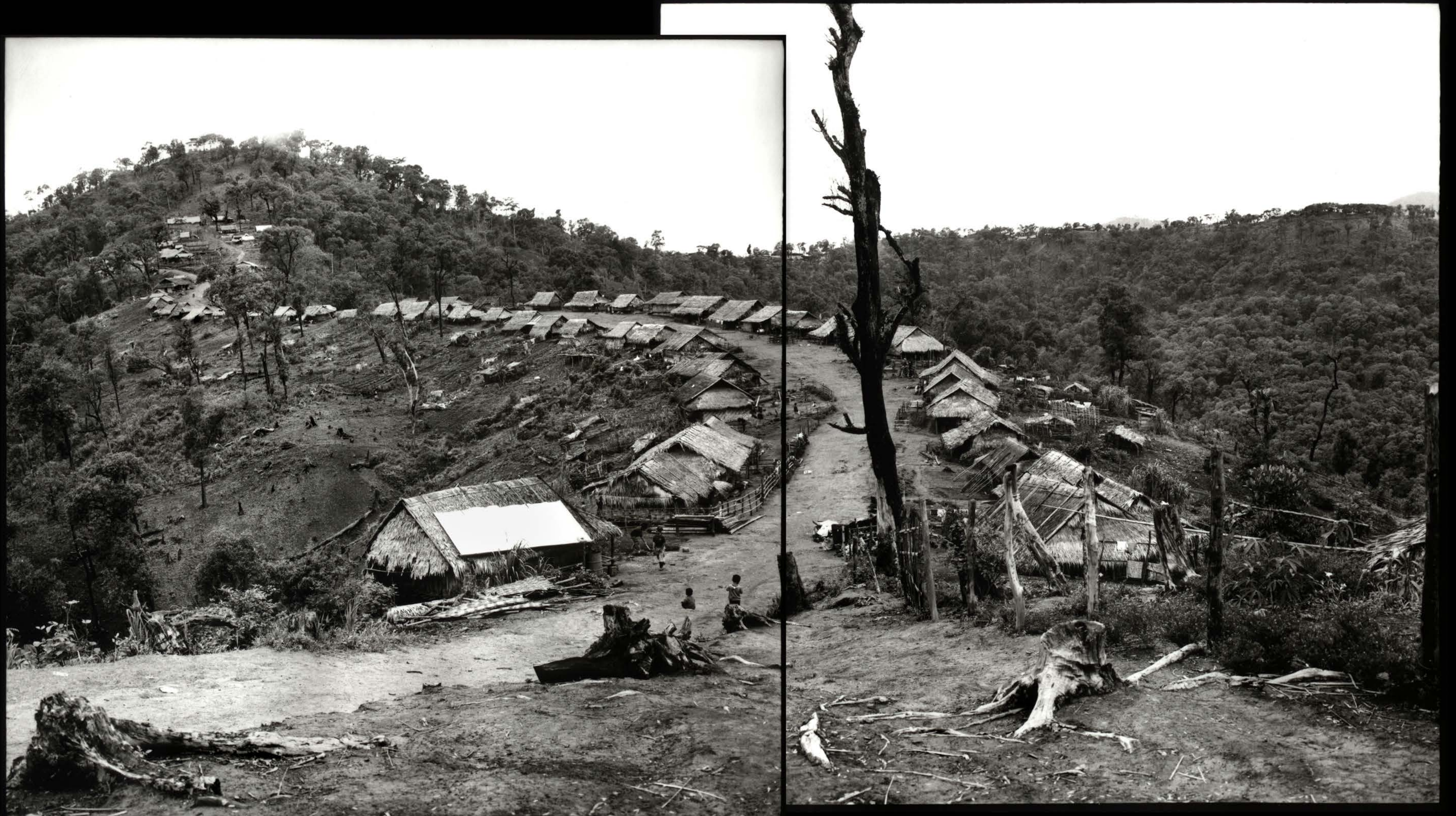
2800

# INZOMIA

2600

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VII FOUNDATION  
429 W 45TH ST, NEW YORK, NY 10036  
USA. 501C3 REG NO 510427657



The then recently erected village of Loi Tai Leng. Home to the Shan State Army. Burma, 2005



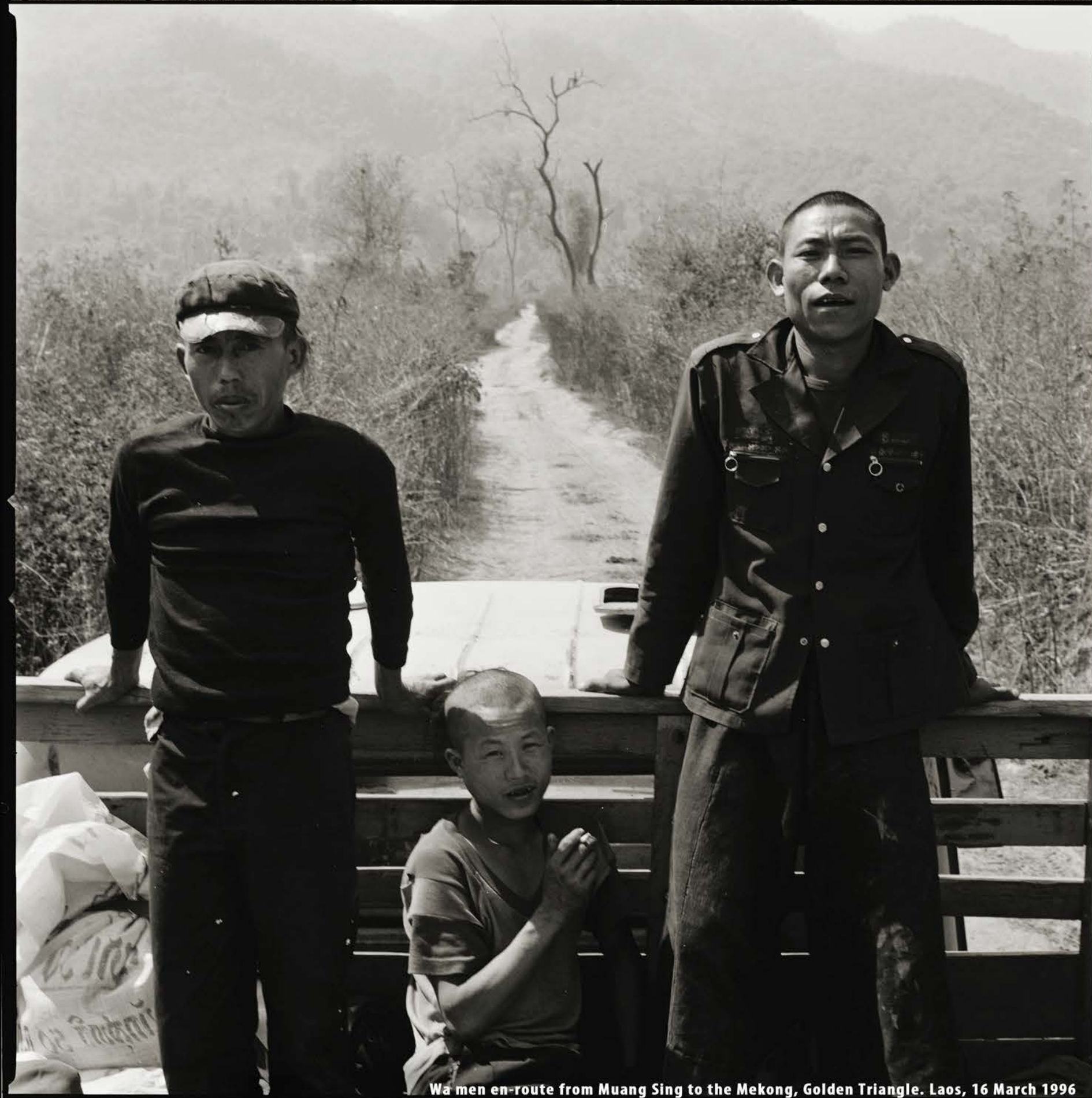
**From the Tibetan plateau** to the tropical rainforest of the central highlands in Vietnam, in an area anthropologists call Zomia, live a hundred million diverse people in 2.5 million square kilometres of land; members of communities who are the last significant numbers of people on earth who live beyond the clutches of the nation-state.

They speak multiple languages, have no written history and have different beliefs. They don't self identify as being Indian, Chinese, Burmese, Laos, Thai, Khmer or Vietnamese. These are the hill tribes of the South East Asian Massif and their languages and culture are changing rapidly.

Through history these people have been regarded as savages<sup>1</sup> or preliterate peoples who are the aboriginal descendants of more highly evolved plain dwellers. In a recent book<sup>2</sup> Yale Professor James C Scott argues that on the contrary these tribes are highly evolved communities who live beyond the tyranny of taxation, colonisation, conscription and disease and that the mountains allow for sanctuary and self determination beyond the control of invaders and nation states, keeping the outside world at arm's-length.



Shan State Army Position. Burma 2005



Wa men en-route from Muang Sing to the Mekong, Golden Triangle. Laos, 16 March 1996

**Shortly after World War II**, when technological advances provided nation states the means to occupy and subjugate the highlands for the first time in history, politics intervened.

Decades of war in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, and war between newly independent India and newly communist China delayed the inevitable shattering of over two millennia of indigenous life.

That time has now come and the homogenisation of these cultures is happening as I write.

Now that decades of conflict in Myanmar has ended, trade between China, India, ASEAN and the West has started to migrate through the mountain borders of Myanmar and its neighbours - home to the highlanders, and the effects on the indigenous people who occupy this land is already staring to be felt dramatically.

States are eager for tax revenue and to consolidate sovereignty, corporations are hungry for new markets and are encroaching on this last significant market vacuum at a rapid pace, (trade between the USA and Burma has increased by 1400% in 3 years)<sup>3</sup>

Christian churches, eager for new converts, are in on the game, converting uneducated animists and spiritualists with the promise of everlasting life and salvation from pain and disease.





There are precedents all over Asia. No sooner was the war in Vietnam over than the Vietnamese government set about a process of Vietnamization in the Central Highlands, eradicating indigenous belief and language.

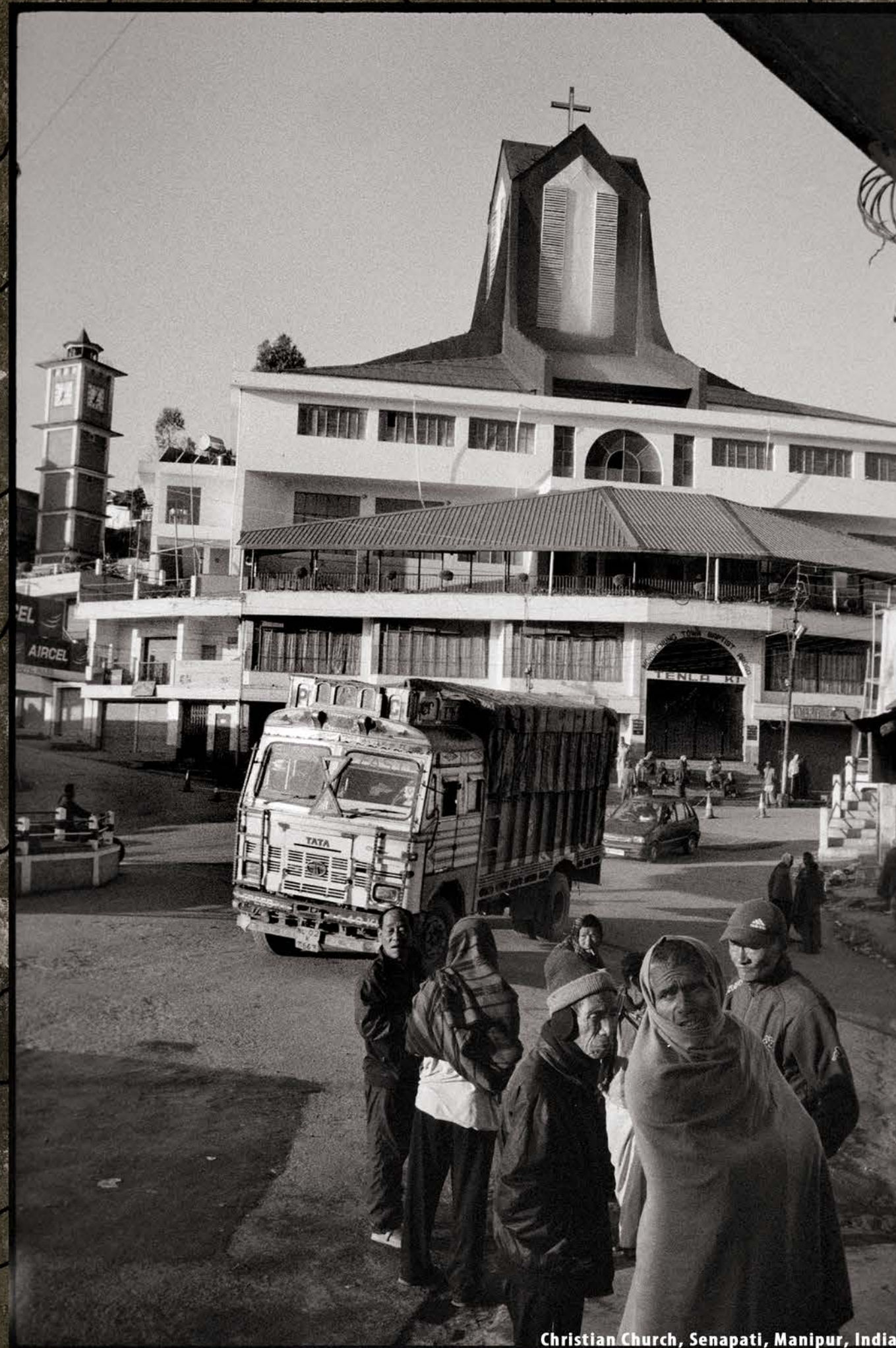
In Tibet the Peoples Liberation Army smashed resistance and paved the way for colonization by lowland Han Chinese and in Bangladesh the Chittagong Hill Tracts were turned into a militarized zone when highlanders resisted the resettlement of lowland Bengalis.



**During a visit to Ziro**, a small thriving town in Arunachal Pradesh, I was told by local village leaders that they are trying to construct an alphabet using the roman alphabet. Most hill tribes do not have alphabets and their histories and narratives are oral. Most of the countries that host hill tribe communities prevent the teaching of their languages in schools and the consequence is that the languages are dying and along with them much of their cultural identities, save for symbolic gestures, such as clothes worn on special occasions. Peoples without their own histories are no longer identifiable as being unique or different, they become a part of the homogenous whole.

My guide to Longwa Village was a young man called Nameih Konyak who had been born there 22 years ago. His father was one of the men with the tattooed faces building the new house. Nameih was raised to live a life like his father, practicing slash and burn agriculture, hunting for wild animals with a musket and providing for his family by growing root vegetables.

In 2005 the Indian Government built a road to Longwa, a strategic village that straddles the border with Burma. Nameih saw opportunity down that road and went to the nearest town 40 kms away.



Christian Church, Senapati, Manipur, India

He found himself an education, married and plans never to return to his previous way of life. The footballers the skinny, jeans-clad girls were watching were all young men like Nameih, men who had left the village, returning only to play football on weekends.

The young people are leaving, the village is changing. Traditions are lost.

Today, in communities all over the region, a way of life similar to that of the current highlanders' ancestors is rapidly evolving to one imported from the plains and cultures thousands of miles away.

The chance to document these unique and important cultures is receding fast.

Sources:

- 1 Man Shu, Book of the Southern Barbarians
- 2 The Art Of Not Being Governed. Yale University Press.
- 3 Unites States Census Bureau.  
<http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5460.html>



On the Burma Road near Baoshan, Yunnan. China, 22 January 1998



Northern Laos 1996



## EDUCATION



Shan coming-of-age ceremony. Thai/Burma border 1995

*The organizing structure for all the visual, written, oral and statistical data we collect will be the Tufts University Library system which will make the materials available to scholars worldwide and will be distributed to local communities for their own archival and study needs.*

Under the oversight of the Program for Narrative & Documentary Practice (PNDP) at the Institute for Global Leadership at Tufts University in the USA we will create an immersive program of education through practice for US and Asian students, particularly students from the communities that are the subject of the Zomia project.

Students will work in the visual, oral, and written and mixed media documentary traditions in the Zomia region under the instruction of educators and practitioners on non fiction storytelling projects and in collecting oral histories (the latter with local interlocutors and academics). Gary Knight, the founder and Director of the PNDP has extensive experience creating and managing such programs in Asia, Africa and the Middle East over the last decade with Tufts University, Canon Camera Inc, The Open Hands Initiative and The GroundTruth Project





New recruits of Shan Warlord Khun Sa's MTA Mong Tai Army. Ho Mong. Burma 1994



# INZOMIA

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Images: Blenkinsop / Knight / Schwartz - Text: Knight - Design: Blenkinsop © 2016  
Zomia Skulls from the private collection of Philip Blenkinsop