

American Institute of Bangladesh Studies Travel Grant Proposal
Asian Borderlands: Enclosure, Interaction and Transformation conference, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
November 5-7, 2010
Applicant: Matthew D. Rich
Paper: "Embodied borders and failures of translation: suspicion and social tension among the Khasi of Bangladesh"

The conference which I am hoping to attend in Chiang Mai, Thailand in November 2010 is the second of its kind organized by an important new research network called Asian Borderlands Research Network. These conferences, the first was held in Guwahati, Assam in 2008, are an initial attempt to gather together scholars of Asia around a shared interest in understanding the complicated dynamics that shape the lives of peoples and communities straddling state borders. James C. Scott in his new book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009), the book whose main argument has inspired this year's conference, powerfully illustrates the rich possibilities opened up when social, agricultural, religious, and demographic commonalities across the extent of upland Southeast Asia are examined while remaining attentive to the specificities of the region. His driving point, in short, is that we must look anew at the history of states and their technologies of rule from the perspective of those peoples who have most consistently and successfully kept states at arms length, peoples who, when studied across the long durée, can be seen to share certain characteristics ideally suiting them to avoiding the state, such as acephalous social structures, selective literacy, highly multilingual speech communities, agricultural methods ideal for mobility, and millenarian religious tendencies. These are the tools, as it were, of their "art."

Much of Scott's detailed argument, especially the ethnographic sources he draws upon, shed important light on my own field site and the dynamics that I see there among the tribal ("hill people" in the Southeast Asian idiom) Khasis of northeastern Bangladesh. In the paper I will present, and in the larger dissertation project of which it is a part, my point of departure from Scott's argument is on his orientation to the state. Instead of focusing on resistance and agency as seen through rejection or avoidance of the state, my ethnographic material illustrates a dialectic between desire and distrust. My evidence shows neither successful attempts to escape the state by self-assured agents nor a complete enclosure by/of

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the state through technological might, force or the lure of commodities. Instead, I've seen something more akin to what Hegel might recognize, the Khasis' struggles for identity as the outcome of competing desires, their actions as much the effect of confusion regarding their own condition as they are indices of conscious interest or agency.

I will try to illuminate this dialectic between Khasis' desire for recognition by the Bangladeshi state, and refusal to identify exclusively with that state through a description of an ongoing social conflict in my village field site. That conflict brings together the competing orders of political organization that affect the Khasis in this part of Bangladesh. In addition to the state, there are a variety of Khasi cultural organizations (NGOs), church leaders, and separatists from India who have become involved at various stages and to various degrees in an ongoing dispute over village leadership. In this paper, I will attempt to make sense of this tangling of competing authorities through study of the effects of the phantasmatic border (more hyper-real than real) on Khasi social life, and by understanding villagers' responses to this situation as translational. Translation referring here to an exchange in which difference is simultaneously effaced and inscribed.

This conference is an exciting and important opportunity. I will have finished the bulk of my fieldwork, most importantly the village ethnography portion of it, by the time of the conference. The timing is fortuitous. This gives me the chance to thematically organize my fieldwork material in terms of borderlands while the material is fresh. For young scholars like myself, to take part in this emerging network of Asian scholars, and to be able to benefit from their feedback as I move into the writing stage is a rare opportunity. In addition, I can make contacts with senior scholars in the region, introduce my larger dissertation work and long-term scholarly objectives at a crucial point a year or two before entering the job market.

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This paper, and the larger dissertation project from which it stems, represents a substantive contribution to the area of Bangladesh Studies. This contribution is original, even unique, in that my ethnography of language use and ideologies among an ethnic minority group reveals the ongoing social effects of the Language Movement and of post-independence language standardization in Bangladesh but in a form only half-comprehensible to a national frame of mind. Yet to comprehend what escapes its view one must first see what the nation sees, and only then can one stand elsewhere to see what it misses. Seeing the Khasis from the perspective of borderlands and from the standpoint of Bangladeshi nationalism is the contribution that I hope my dissertation to make. In doing so, we as scholars of Bangladesh, can begin to resituate Bangladesh Studies in a framework of regional scholarship that is informed by studies of upland Southeast Asia as much as it is by the more traditional limits of South Asian Studies.