

# Anthropologist studies unifying potential of diversity

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Southeast Asia is about as far as one can get – geographically and culturally – from Iceland, where Hjorleifur Jonsson was born and raised. Yet it is this region that drew his interest as a budding anthropologist, and the area where his focus has remained.

Jonsson has spent well over two decades researching the cultural dynamics and ethnohistories of the diverse peoples of Southeast Asia, particularly ethnic minorities of the mainland. One thing he has discovered in his work is the unifying, not divisive, nature of difference.

The Arizona State University associate professor's latest book, based on this premise, is being released this month from Cornell University Press.

Jonsson calls "Slow Anthropology: Negotiating Difference with the Iu Mien" a guided tour through the human past and present, from ancient China through Laos and Thailand in the nineteenth century, to the contemporary United States.

"My case is that this region's peoples have not only a long history of negotiating difference for mutual benefit, but that Southeast Asians have also made up or exaggerated their differences in order to find creative and enriching ways of bridging them," Jonsson says. "Difference is not an obstacle, but an invitation to creative solutions to practical problems of getting along; it is a resource that is often ignored, it seems."

He points out that recent research in linguistics and archaeology supports

his case, as well as the idea of Southeast Asian diversity arising in the last 10,000 years.

## Rethinking the past

The Mien of Thailand were the subject of dissertation research and a book by Jonsson several years ago, and he thought he had wrapped up his work with that culture. Then, he came to know some Mien refugees from the war in Laos that ran from 1962-1975.

As he learned about their lives and histories, and through sporadic research over the last few years, he was forced to rethink everything he knew about Southeast Asia, [anthropology](#) and how we make a case based on an ethnic group.

He explains, "I focus on the Iu Mien because I know something about them, but the book is also on Southeast Asia as a region, and on academic ideas about tribal peoples and how this has come out differently in U.S., French and Japanese scholarship."

Being Icelandic helped give Jonsson a neutral perspective in dealing with an area of the world that has seen internationally invested conflicts that still evoke difficult sentiments decades later.

The Iu Mien at the center of Jonsson's book were farmers who were brought into war as a CIA-sponsored militia. When the Lao communists won the war in 1975, these people became refugees, and lasting divisions were created in Laos.

## Building connections

As with much of his published work, this book began with conversation.

Jonsson finds that when he starts talking to people, interesting things happen.

In the field, Jonsson has been asked to tag along to weddings, funerals and various social events, bestow awards at sports festivals and participate in worship services. He observes that it often takes people a while to size up the stranger in their midst, but that engaging in conversation, rather than direct interviews, usually leads to more meaningful interaction. He calls those real human connections the highlights of his career.

He says, "We cannot take for granted the importance of talking to people to establish a deeper understanding."

Jonsson, who is faculty in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, will begin a visiting fellow position with Cornell University's Southeast Asia Program this fall.

Using memoirs, film, ethnographies, newspaper reports and fiction from 1950 on, he will study the complex diversity of supposedly antagonistic groups of people in Thailand during the last century.

As news emerges from Thailand regarding discord between Buddhists and Muslims in the south, and political fighting in the streets of Bangkok, Jonsson holds out hope for what insights anthropology can offer.

"Maybe I am exposing myself as an optimistic researcher, but I am committed to finding credible alternatives to separatism and conflict," he notes. "I can either assume the antagonistic rhetoric as a fact or go against the grain to study recurring signs of peaceful and creative co-existence. Perhaps that is the recipe for 'slow' anthropology more

generally."

Provided by Arizona State University

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