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**Südostasien sehen / South-East Asia Visually**

***Images of Hans Manndorff's Anthropological Research  
on the 'Hill Tribes' of Northern Thailand (1961-1965)***

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***Manndorff's anthropological research in Northern Thailand (1961-1965)***

In the years 1961 and 1962, the Austrian anthropologist who later became director of the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna, Hans Manndorff, was working on behalf of the United Nations on a research and development project in the highlands of Northern Thailand. The project, titled 'The socio-economic survey of selected hill tribes in Northern Thailand', was the first government-supported study of the so-called hill tribes of Thailand. Officially conducted by the Public Welfare Department of the Ministry of Interior, several other organizations, such as the Asia Foundation that provided financial support, assisted in the project. The field survey took place from

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October 1961 to May 1962 and covered five ethnic groups: the Akha, Hmong, Mien, Lisu and Lahu. 18 sample villages were studied rather intensively and 20 to 30 villages more briefly. The aim of the project was to collect scientific data and information on these five ethnic groups in order to provide suggestions and recommendations for the operating institutions and agencies (Manndorff, 1967).



Start of the expedition: As soon as the road ends, the research team is hiking up the hills with the help of small horses. Manndorff (middle) in company of a Lahu man (back), a representative of the Public Welfare Department (left) and a member of the Border Patrol Police (BPP). Chiang Mai, 1961.

From 1963 to 1965 Manndorff continued his field trip to Northern Thailand, Laos and Burma (now Myanmar). He was sponsored by the Asia Foundation to advise the Thai Government in establishing a Tribal Research Institute (Buadaeng, 2006; Manndorff, 1965).

At the end of his field trip in 1964/1965, Manndorff was able to conduct a long-planned movie project, documenting immaterial and material culture, techniques



and ritual elements of various selected ethnic minority groups. With the support of the IWF (*Institut für den wissenschaftlichen Film*/Institute for Scientific Film) in Göttingen, Germany, he and his film team shot 54 reels of 16 mm documentary films<sup>3</sup> (Manndorff, 1972).



Establishing contact: This voice recorder did not only serve as an instrument to record songs and oral recitations, it also became a crucial medium for getting access and gaining rapport to the ethnic community. The research team plays a tape recorded at another village. The villagers listen highly interested and astonished to the recorded voices and greetings from the other village which is a seven hours' walk away. Hmong village, Tak Province, 1961.

During this research (1961-1965) Manndorff build up an archive of approximately 800 ethnographic slides documenting economic, social and ritual activities of the five selected ethnic minority groups. The ethnographical photographs deal in general with the same topics and cultural settings as the 54 ethnographical IWF documentary films. The photos also show scenes in far more remote villages and hill

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<sup>3</sup> The documentary films were digitalized by the IWF and can be obtained through its website (<http://www.iwf.de>).





Political issues: Manndorff emphasizes that he had no interest to get involved in any political affairs. In the geo-political struggles in the context of the east-west conflict, however, where Thailand feared political and military influences and disturbances from neighbouring countries, every action seemed to have a political connotation. The research team, therefore, sometimes was accompanied by a member of the Border Patrol Police. Black Lahu village, Tak province, 1962.

ranges since the heavy and complicated film equipment necessary for making IWF-movies could hardly be brought into the very distant interior of the ethnic minority areas. Furthermore, the slide collection includes about 40 photographs that display the anthropologist Hans Manndorff himself.

### ***Digitalization of the photographic archive***

Until recently, the photo collection taken in northern Thailand was rarely used, both by Manndorff and others. However, the photo archives are still useful for younger scholars and students who study ethnic minority groups in Northern Thailand. Also, villagers who are descendants of those people in the photos should get opportunity to





Puch-Haflinger (type of Austrian off-road car). The car became an object of interest in the visited villages. Hmong village, Tak Province, 1964.

have them for family collections. The slides, though, were not properly protected and could thus be gradually damaged. In a collaboration project between the Social Research Institute (SRI) of Chiang Mai University and the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre



Cameraman Hermann Schlenker of the IWF. Hmong village, Tak Province, 1964.





Hans Manndorff (left), dressed in Hmong clothing, and two villagers. Hmong village, Tak Province, 1964.



Hans Manndorff today at the age of 83 years. Vienna, 2009.

(SAC) in Bangkok, Thailand, as well as the Department of Geography and Regional Research (DGRR) of the University of Vienna, Austria, the slide archives were taken to Thailand and scanned by the Thai partner institutions. After the process of digitalization, Manndorff





Seeding cotton: Cotton is put into the machine between two rollers which revolve in opposite directions. The cotton fibres are transported through these rollers and are thus separated from the seeds which had remained on them. Akha village, Chiang Rai Province 1965



collaborated with Prasit Leepreecha (SRI), Alexander Trupp (DGRR) and the SAC in order to identify precisely the slides and to complete captions<sup>4</sup>. This photo essay offers some insights into ethnographic fieldwork of half a century ago<sup>5</sup>.



Hmong children take a keen interest in cameraman Schlenker's work. Hmong village, Tak Province, 1964.

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4 Manndorff's digitalized photographic archive is soon planned to be online at SAC's website: [www.sac.or.th](http://www.sac.or.th)

5 The documentation and contextualization of Manndorff's photo collection was conducted by Alexander Trupp with financial support from "Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien, MA 7 - Kultur, Wissenschafts- und Forschungsförderung", funding period: 05.10.2009-06.11.2009.

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