

# Acknowledgements

## Field Guide to Hmong Culture produced by

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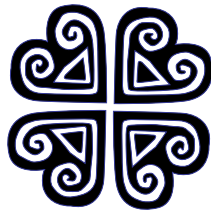
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History of the Hmong





## Chapter 1: History of the Hmong

### Ancient Times

The Hmong have been a migratory people for a long time. They have moved from place to place during thousands of years. It is unlikely that Asia was their original home, for, unlike the people of the Asian continent, the Hmong are spoken of in history as having blonde hair and blue eyes, and some Hmong are born with light hair and blue eyes even today. In addition, all Hmong have round eyes, rather than the almond-shaped eyes of their neighbors. Thus, it is felt by some that, once upon a time, the Hmong lived in Europe and slowly migrated to the east and south.

### China

Approximately 5000 years ago, the ancestors of the Hmong lived in northeastern China. Population growth, and the resulting scarcity of resources, increased. This led to war, and the Hmong began to migrate to Southeast Asia. While some Hmong chose to remain in China, thousands left at the end of the nineteenth century to settle in the highlands of the Southeast Asian countries, particularly Burma, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.



### Laos

Although motivated by the wish to avoid problems, this journey southward from China to Southeast Asia was difficult and long, and the Hmong experienced tremendous hardships, including starvation and death. Yet many Hmong made it safely to Southeast Asia, and finally settled in the green highlands of Burma, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, where they lived peacefully.



## History of the Hmong

In 1893, the French began to colonize Laos, and sent explorers to investigate the wilderness. These explorers came upon Hmong villages. As the French began to intrude farther and farther into the interior of Laos, the Hmong found that freedom was restricted by the new government, and the Hmong rebelled against the French.

In this struggle, a Hmong leader named Pa Chai Vue rose up to organize the Hmong, and it took the French almost four years to end the rebellion.

After World War II, the Hmong renewed their rebellion, and this time the French packed up and left the region.



### War in Vietnam

Now, communists in North Vietnam began to attack South Vietnam. Because Laos, the home country of the Hmong, was right next door, the Hmong became involved in this conflict.

America's conduct of the war in Vietnam in the early 1960s involved training local people to defend themselves from attacks by communists, and in Laos these communists were called the Pathet Lao.

The U.S. government employed its Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, to gather important information. The CIA began to make friends with Southeast Asians who might be helpful, and many of these friends were Hmong. The Hmong were also highly skilled at the rescue of American pilots shot down by North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers, as well as in the protection of American radar sites inside Laos.



## History of the Hmong

From 1960 to 1975, this struggle continued, and a Hmong leader named Vang Pao emerged. As the Vietnam War accelerated, Hmong villages were invaded, burned, and abandoned, while all males of fighting age—some as young as twelve or thirteen—were forced to join the fighting. In this way, thirty thousand Hmong men lost their lives.

Hmong women and children were affected, too, for these and the elderly were uprooted from their villages and resettled in “safety zones” in lowland cities; strange places to them in which they had never before lived. The change of climate and the loss of a familiar setting were a source of unhappiness, yet Hmong families were forced to move from one settlement site to another, always in conditions of fear and danger.

### New Journeys

In 1973, the last American soldiers returned home from the war in Southeast Asia, and, in 1975, the communists took over all of Vietnam and Laos. The Hmong who supported the Americans were now without supplies, support, or protection. Some of the Hmong, the lucky ones, had already been provided refuge in the United States, and had begun making new homes and new lives. Others were left behind to take care of themselves.

Many chose to flee although the journey was a frightening and dangerous one; through dense jungles filled with mosquitoes and other insect pests, poisonous





## History of the Hmong

snakes, and wild animals. Still, thousands of Hmong fled Laos in 1975 in an effort to become refugees in Thailand.

At last, those who had successfully arrived at the border of Laos with Thailand were confronted by the broad expanse of the Mekong River. This was yet another problem, for most Hmong did not know how to swim. Many Hmong arrived at the river where there were no boats, and so they built bamboo rafts, while others tied bamboo logs under their arms to help them float. Many drowned.

### Refugees

In the end, those who were able to finish the journey arrived in Thailand, where refugee camps awaited them. These Hmong arrivals were placed in seven towns: Nong Khai, Nam Phong, Ban Na Yao, Ban Vinai, Chieng Kham, Ban Napho, and Pha Nanikhong. These refugee camps were not at all comfortable. Yet, if the Hmong went back to Laos they might be arrested and put in prison, or killed. There was no choice but to stay: although these camps were crowded and there was no way to make money, there were no schools, and there was nothing very much to do. Yet, the Hmong slowly began to adapt. Schools were built and handicrafts became a source of income.





## History of the Hmong

Eventually the American government stepped in, and agreed to permit those living in the refugee camps of Thailand to make a new life in the United States.

### American Life

Thus, in 1976, thousands of Hmong began to emigrate to the U.S., as well as to France, Canada, Australia,

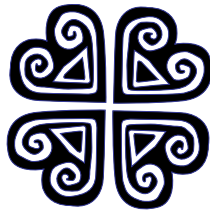


Argentina, French Guyana, and Germany. Today, the Hmong live all over the world; some in China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, others in the United States, Canada, French Guyana, Argentina, Australia, France, and Germany. Of the nations of the West, the United States has the largest Hmong population, estimated to be three hundred thousand. The three states which are home to the largest Hmong populations are California, with approximately seventy to ninety-five thousand; Minnesota, with about fifty to seventy thousand; and Wisconsin, which is now home to around fifty thousand Hmong. North Carolina has the fourth largest Hmong population, at approximately ten to twelve thousand, while Michigan ranks fifth with seven thousand. Other states are home to anywhere from one thousand to five thousand Hmong.

Most Hmong today speak more than one language and live a life embracing several cultures. Those who live in urban centers no longer wear their beautiful costumes or speak their Hmong language at work. Many do not even speak their language at home, as children are educated in the English language and American customs. The majority no longer make a living by farming.

### Questions for Study:

1. Can you name one Southeast Asian nation from which our Hmong neighbors came?
2. Have the Hmong always lived in the same place?
3. Is it true that the neighbors of the Hmong have always treated them with kindness?
4. Can you say which European people, as they formed Asian colonies, met the Hmong first?
5. Which American organization trained and equipped the Hmong to fight against communism?
6. What is the name of the Hmong leader who emerged during that time?
7. In which Asian nation did the Hmong refugees first find shelter?
8. Can you name one town in that nation in which refugees stayed?
9. Can you name three states with large Hmong populations?
10. Can you name three countries besides the United States in which the Hmong have settled?



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Clan & Lineage





## Chapter 2: Clan and Lineage

### What is a Clan?

A clan is a group of families all of whom share the same family name and all of whom are linked to a common set of ancestors. The concept of the clan comes to us from the days when life was neither as safe nor as comfortable as it is now. In years gone by, there were fewer policemen, fewer soldiers, and fewer doctors. This meant that a big family, or a clan, was very valuable, for all the clan members were always ready to help each other.

The Hmong people, too, were and are far away from any assistance in times of difficulty, and thus they, too, have always found it an advantage to live banded together in clans. Although the Hmong word “xeem” (pronounced “seng,”) is different from the word clan, both the idea and the reality are the same.



### Clan Origins

As far back as anyone can remember, there were twelve original clans. These clans were the Yang clan, the Vang clan, the Xiong, the Thao, the Vue, the Moua, the Lee, the Her, the Hang, the Lor, the Cha or Chang, and the Kue. In time, a few more names were added and now there are about twenty-one clans.

In the state of Minnesota, for example, there are eighteen clans. The clan members all consider themselves to be related in a way, in that they all maintain the same traditions and all believe in the same spirits.



## Clan & Lineage



### What is a Lineage?

While people who share the same clan name are members of one clan, those large clans are also divided into smaller groups. One of these groups is called a “lineage,” and one clan has many lineages. A lineage is a group of people with the same clan name who can trace their roots through historical records to a common ancestor who lived within several generations of the recent past. For example, there are many Cha clan members throughout the United States and the world, and one of the authors of this text is a member of this Cha clan. However, only certain members of the Cha

clan can be considered to belong to the same lineage as the author, because they can all show, with a list of names and a diagram of relatives, that they share the same great-great-grandparents.

### Differences Among the Clans

Over the great span of time, new forms of clan rituals and ceremonies have arisen, with the result that different Hmong clans or lineages currently practice slightly different versions of rituals than formerly, and may recite modified texts in those rituals.

Although these changes happened by accident, the majority of Hmong today assume that, since the rituals of their clans or lineages are different from each other, the clans must be unrelated. This creates feelings of division between clans and lineages, and so another consequence of these changes in tradition is that the Hmong began to emphasize the importance of clan differences and of differing versions of rituals and their texts, rather than clan similarities and close relationships. Therefore, the focus of many individuals and clans has shifted to an emphasis on those things that have changed through time. As a



## Clan & Lineage

result, clan identity has assumed a heightened importance in later years, with clans accenting their differences from other clans.

### Similarities Among the Clans

Still, clan membership is highly valued, and this is true both in modern America and in more traditional Laos. For example, in the state of Colorado, there are currently many Hmong clan organizations with extensive membership. All can be categorized into one of two types: informal groups, and those which are more formally associated. Most of the Hmong clan organizations are of the informal type, but there are several of the other kinds, as well.

In all cases, each clan elects a male representative for a term of one to three



years as a sort of Clan President. The duties of this clan representative include calling the other clan members to meetings to discuss clan problems; attending meetings with the representatives of

other clans; handling issues of concern to the entire Hmong community; and organizing the annual Hmong New Year Festival. These clan representatives also serve as members of the board of directors for The Hmong American Association of Colorado, Inc., which is one of the largest of the formal organizations.

The smaller organizations are exemplified by the nonprofit mutual assistance association or the church group, and all Hmong belong either to one of the more loosely-knit groups or one of the more formal associations, or both. In fact, approximately ten percent of the Hmong in Colorado belong to a nonprofit organization; thirty percent to a church group; sixty to seventy percent to a formal clan organization.



## Clan & Lineage

Affairs in the Hmong community will be handled through clan leaders and Hmong social structures. This is a great help in dealing with community difficulties, and even family and individual problems. Health care information is one of many areas in which this clan system makes it possible for news and information to reach many people quickly. By working through elected clan representatives, as well as the boards of directors and the officers of Hmong non-profit organizations, together with church leadership figures, health information can be distributed in a timely manner.

### Drawbacks

To the Hmong, the group is more important than the individual, and this is often helpful; but it is sometimes also inconvenient. For example, when major health care decisions must be made for parents, some young Hmong still have to consult with relatives and other family members before scheduling treatment. Of course, in many instances young people will ignore this rule and, if all goes well, no one will say anything. However, if things go wrong, everyone will join in blaming this young offender for making a bad choice.

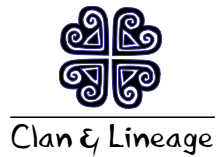
In this way, members of the younger generation of Hmong have to find ways to work with the older generation and the rest of the family, and from clan members generally. Therefore, if a Hmong is faced with a major decision, he will consult with everyone. Ancient Hmong folk wisdom says that, "An individual is but a drop of water in a bucket; if it crosses the rim and falls, it is tiny and will soon dry out." By custom, and even in these modern times, while there are Hmong who can comfortably make independent decisions, the clan continues to play a large role in Hmong life.





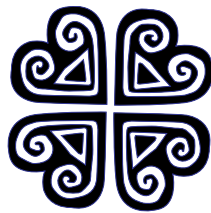
## Benefits

This emphasis has benefits, and few Hmong are willing to give up clan membership altogether. When a family member is sick, for example, everyone may expect that someone will always be available to care for that person. It is expected that not only family members, but others in the clan, as well as friends, will visit. If they do not, both the patient and his or her family members will feel offended, hurt, and saddened. Since it is customary in the West that hospital staffs usually allow two or three people to visit a patient at one time, a large group of visitors will be observed in the waiting room, ready to take their turn to visit the patient when the hospital staff allows them to do so. Should the patient be seriously ill, all of his or her important family members and relatives will gather in the waiting room, not only to visit as a matter of obligation, but, in addition, to prepare themselves for any major decisions they may be forced to make as a result of any and all necessities created by the doctor's recommendations.



### Questions for Study:

1. Can you define the word "clan?"
2. What is the difference between a "clan" and a "lineage?"
3. How many Hmong clans were there originally?
4. Can you name four Hmong clans?
5. Has the number of clans changed over time?
6. What is the Hmong language word for "clan?"
7. What is the good of being a clan member?
8. Who takes charge of a clan, and how long does he serve?
9. How many types of clan organizations are there?
10. Is it true that a Hmong who goes to the hospital for treatment will often be lonely?



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Daily Life in a Hmong Village





## Chapter 3: Daily Life in a Hmong Villiage

### Morning

Morning arrives at five a.m., or even earlier in a Hmong village. Without electricity, there will be no alarm clock, and thus nature's alarm clock, the rooster, wakes up the sleeping Hmong family with its loud, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" In a Hmong village, there will be chickens – both hens and roosters—ducks, pigs, horses, goats, cows, and even water buffalo. There will be dogs, cats, and sometimes uninvited guests such as mice, rats, and snakes.

As the rooster crows and wakes everyone for the new day, Mom and Dad, sisters and brothers, open their eyes, stretch, and rub the sleep from their faces. In Southeast Asia it never gets terribly cold at night, and certainly it never snows, so there is no need for lots of heavy bedding. With dinner's cook fire smoldering through the night, a blanket or two is more than enough; if the night is a cold one, the fire will be kept high, shedding heat to keep everyone warm.





## Daily Life in a Hmong Village

Everyone sleeps in their daily clothes since the Hmong clothes are not tight. As the family wakes, stretches, stands, and folds blankets to make room for household activities, all straighten their clothes for the new day. Everybody washes their face with warm water, which is poured from a kettle in the fireplace, and combs their hair, after which those who need to do so will wander off to the area designated as the bathroom. After all this, with a fresh log or two thrown on the fire, the group is ready for breakfast, which is now cooked by Mom and, perhaps, Big Sister, followed by the day's activities.



### The Hmong House

The Hmong house is a simple structure, consisting of a large central living room where the family gathers together, and where the fire burns for the creation of meals. This living room is surrounded by several smaller bedrooms, depending on the size of the family, where Mom and Dad, boys and girls, all sleep. These rooms are simply laid out and sparsely furnished, and their number does not depend so much on the wealth of the family as is the case in the West. This is because building materials – bamboo and other woods from the forest, together with big leaves for the roof – are freely available to everyone, and there is an abundance of time and labor with which to add



## Daily Life in a Hmong Village



rooms, if needed. Floors are hardened earth, beaten down by endless foot steps, and these, of course, cost nothing, while allowing the placement of a safe cook fire directly on the floor of the main room. There is no window in a traditional Hmong house. Roofs,

meanwhile, for the most part keep out even heavy rains and shield those inside from the hot rays of the sun, although there are occasional leaks if the roof is not well-made or if it is old. In such a case, repairs or a new roof is called for. As for doors, door frames are generally two in number, and can be closed and locked with bamboo door panels and clever, homemade, latches and clocks fashioned from wood. These, of course, are not much use in keeping out thieves and burglars; however, their inclusion is more to repel would-be invaders of the animal and reptile variety than those of the human variety. Crime in a Hmong village is so uncommon as to be almost unknown.

The Hmong house, then, is a simple structure, and this is appropriate, since much of life for the Hmong is lived in the fresh air outdoors. There is little need for elaborate decorations or for great comfort when little time is spent at home, and the Hmong house will typically have no decoration on the walls. Furniture is simple, and will be confined to small stools made of wood, often bamboo or woven from rattan; a bench or two; and perhaps a dining table. A ritual altar for the worship of the household spirits will be placed against one wall.

Kitchen wares will be limited to aluminum pots and pans, or ceramic pots; one of the Chinese-style utensils for frying known as a wok; a kettle; a rice steamer woven from rattan, young bamboo or curved from wood; and a few miscellaneous baskets. There may be a clay oven nearby, but this is used mostly during big feasts or to cook large quantities of vegetables for the feeding of pigs. Other features of the Hmong village used for the benefit of all will be such structures as a blacksmith shop, rice pounding and corn grinding equipments, and a water aqueduct or well.



## Daily Life in a Hmong Village

### Village

These houses are laid out in the village with much thought and care, so that each house will have enough space surrounding it for all the family's needs. This includes an area to store firewood, create a garden, and enough room for the family's chicken coop and pig pen. The location for a new house is selected according to a ritual calculated to obtain the advice and consent of spirits charged with the supervision of the ground on which the house is to be built.



The entire village, meanwhile, is fashioned around an open space from which all vegetation has been removed. This allows everyone to walk freely from one house to another without passing through grass, which can conceal insects to bite the feet and ankles, and which may also conceal larger hazards (such as snakes); since the Hmong like to walk barefoot. Snakes can be very dangerous, and, in fact, once, as a young girl, when walking through

some high grass to travel to a corn field early one morning to tend the corn, one of the authors of this book, Professor Cha, was bitten on her bare foot by a poisonous snake. She was very, very sick for several days, and her entire leg became enormously swollen. With great good luck, however, she lived to become an American and a college teacher in Minnesota. Nevertheless, such snake bites are not uncommon in Southeast Asia, and caution is always advisable. Thus, it is thought wise to rid the Hmong village precincts of grass and shrubbery which may conceal such creatures as snakes and biting insects. While this can result in exposed earth becoming somewhat muddy during the rainy season, Hmong villages are generally constructed on the ridge lines that run between highland peaks, so that rain runs down hill quickly, leaving little mud behind.



## Daily Life in a Hmong Village

### Ready for the New Day

After breakfast, Hmong men and boys, women and girls, all attend to a variety of tasks. Throughout the day, those Hmong women with infant children may take breaks to feed their babies, and babysitters are usually the older brothers or sisters. Women, joined by the men of the village, take responsibility for the labor involved in raising crops. The adults will be joined by all the young girls and boys who have achieved sufficient size and strength to be of assistance. Those children, boys and girls, who have grown beyond the need for constant care, but who are not required for labor, will be free to play, with hide and seek, Hmong tops games, and jump rope being the most popular.



### Chores

During a typical Hmong work day, animals such as chicken, pigs, cows, horses, ducks, and goats must be fed. The larger animals, horses and cows, are fed by the men and boys; the remaining livestock are fed by the women and girls. Corn, rice, vegetables, and other plants will be used, and these are brought to the village animal pens where the creatures are kept, or are placed in common areas for the nourishment of those animals allowed to roam free. A variety of other chores are required, such as rice pounding, blacksmithing, or jewelry making.

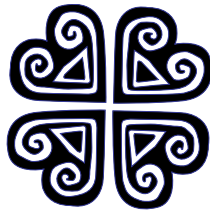


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Daily Life in a Hmong Village

Questions for Study:

1. What do the Hmong use for their alarm clock?
2. Can you name four types of animals raised in a Hmong village?
3. Why do Hmong homes have space around them?
4. How is the spot for a new house chosen?
5. What do the Hmong use to make a roof?
6. From where do the Hmong obtain drinking water?
7. Can you describe a Hmong house?
8. Is it true that the Hmong like to leave lots of trees and bushes in their village to accommodate wild visitors from the forest?
9. Can you name three furniture items in a Hmong house?
10. Whose chore was it to feed the animals?



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Food & Farming





## Chapter 4: Food and Farming

### Hmong Dining

Like everyone, the Hmong love to eat, and just because Hmong live in the highlands is close to nature and far from city markets, it does not mean that food is scarce or meals are small. On the contrary, a vigorous life of farming and hunting, combined with lots of fresh air and bright sunshine, means that appetites are keen and meals must be ample. The Hmong, therefore, see to it that there is plenty of food available at all times, unless bad luck in the form of famine due to drought or other adverse weather conditions lead to poor crops, and game animals in the forests cannot be found. In such cases, everyone will share and help each other, hoping the bad luck will pass as soon as possible. But bad luck can come to anyone of any nation and any climate, and such ill fortune is no more common to the Hmong than to anyone else. Thus, the Hmong may look forward to three good meals during the day, with between-meal snacks when desired.



### Hmong Cuisine

Such meals will consist of a variety of common Hmong foods known to everyone throughout the world: chicken, pork, rice, corn, homegrown vegetables, and the exotic meats of animals caught in the jungles surrounding the village, as well as chicken and duck eggs, and the eggs of wild birds from nests found in local trees. All



of these staples are prepared according to recipes perfected over many generations, and passed along from mother to daughter as part of a girl's traditional upbringing. The dishes which resulted will be spiced with herbs such as hot peppers, green onions, and cilantro grown in the family's garden, and salted with the product sold by traveling Chinese merchants who make a living visiting the village from time to time to peddle their wares.

All of this, of course, makes for a substantial and satisfying diet, supplemented by snacks of fresh fruit picked from the trees, and sweets—such as steam cakes—made with sugar cane which has been cut, ground up, and mashed to extract its sugar. These treats, as well as daily meals, are washed down with fresh spring water that has been conveniently carried to the center of the village from a nearby river via a cleverly constructed bamboo aqueduct, or with water drawn from a well.

## Farming

The Hmong system of farming begins with clearing the land, and this is accomplished by what is called the "slash and burn" method. First the high bushes and low trees, together with much of the undergrowth, will be cut down; then the resulting cuttings will be burned where they have fallen using a carefully controlled fire. This, of course, will also clear away all the uncut grasses and low bushes beneath. After the land has been cleared in this way, seeds, saved from previous crops, will be planted.

The planting of seeds is performed in different ways depending on which crop is being planted. In the case of rice, for example, individual holes must be punched into the earth with the end of a sharp stick, after which seeds are placed into the holes. As this process unfolds, the cooperative nature of Hmong village life is revealed, for the men will advance while pressing holes in the earth with the village ladies following behind with pouches or bags of seeds. The ladies drop the rice seeds into the holes the men have created, and in unison, they move along up the field.

In the case of other crops, seeds may be scattered over the bare earth and then covered with a layer of soil using a hoe. As the crops grow up in the



abundant Southeast Asian sunlight, weeds must be pulled and wild animals, who may come to eat the young plantings, chased away. Once the crops are mature, they can be harvested for the table or for storage. Harvesting crops is done by both village men and village women and it is a laborious process which involves picking the crops by hand or harvesting with a sickle. However the result is having a variety of fresh and delicious edibles: green vegetables such as peas and beans, rice, corn, pumpkins, squash, hot peppers, melons, and cucumbers. Most of these will find their way to the Hmong table either immediately after being harvested or after some processing and storage; some will be sold or traded in nearby villages.



### Rice Processing

When rice is harvested, each grain of rice is surrounded by a tough outer shell or husk. This husk must be removed from each and every grain of rice before it can be cooked and eaten, and this is true whether we are living in a Hmong village or in the West. Fortunately, this doesn't have to be done grain by grain. In the west, of course, this function is performed by elaborate automatic machinery. In a Hmong village, we might suppose, the method is more simple, but is, nonetheless, quite ingenious. The unhusked rice is placed, one batch



Food & Farming

at a time, into a large wooden bucket with thick, strong walls. Then a large wooden hammer, held in place by a pin through its handle, is raised by a pulley operated by a floor pedal. Once the hammer has been raised slightly, the foot of the operator is withdrawn, which in turn releases the hammer. Thus the hammer falls and hits the rice in the bucket, which shatters the husks and allows them to fall off the inner, edible grains of rice. Later, after the rice and husks, still all mixed together, are removed from the bucket, this mixture is placed on a large, lightweight tray fashioned from bamboo or rattan. With a slight breeze blowing, this mixture is thrown a few inches into the air and then caught again.

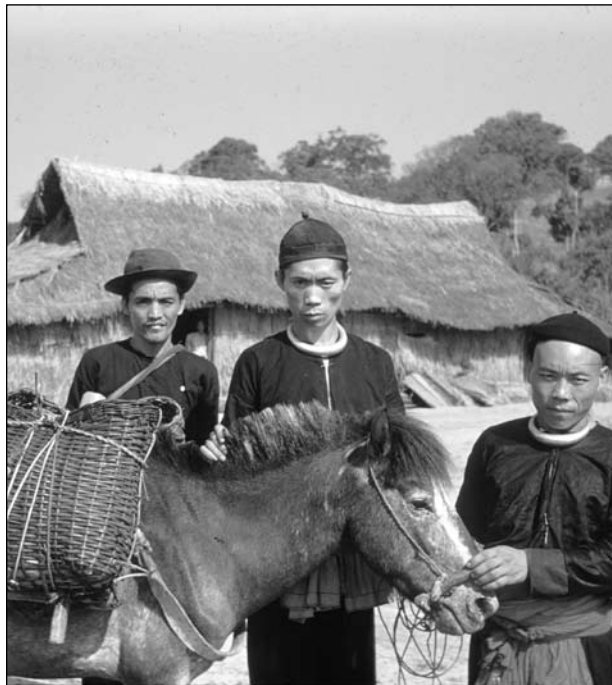
Before it is caught, however, the breeze will blow away the broken rice husks—which are extremely light. Left behind will be the clean, fresh rice ready for cooking into a great many delicious dishes.





## Hunting

There is another way in which to obtain food; hunting in the forest. A Hmong village is surrounded by jungle, and this jungle is filled with creatures who may furnish tasty tidbits at meals. Hmong men, and young boys who are old enough to accompany them, spend much of their time hunting, and, when



water is near, fishing. In addition, wild birds provide eggs that are just as delicious as those of chickens.

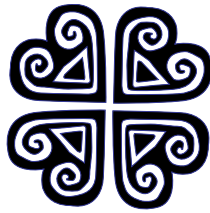
A Hmong hunter knows the woods around his village; there is no need for a map. Taking enough supplies for a one-day excursion, and perhaps accompanied by a few friends, his son or sons, or some of the other boys from the village who have reached their tenth birthday or thereabouts, he will shoulder his rifle, usually

homemade by the village blacksmith, and a crossbow and arrows. Or, if he is going fishing, he will take a net and hike along narrow trails. The hunting party will search for anything that might provide meat for the table, and, if they are lucky, there will be meat at the end of the day to share between themselves and with the other members of the village.



### Questions for Study:

1. What kind of food do the Hmong eat at meals?
2. Where do the Hmong get their spices?
3. What snacks do the Hmong enjoy?
4. How do the Hmong plant rice?
5. What sorts of eggs do the Hmong eat?
6. Do the Hmong eat fish?
7. Who plants the rice?
8. Where does the drinking water come from?
9. Can the rice be eaten as soon as it is harvested?
10. When a Hmong hunter has a lucky day, does he keep everything for himself?



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Hmong Art





## Chapter 5: Hmong Art

### Practicality and Aesthetics

Beautiful things are a delight to everyone the world over, and the Hmong are no exception; they create beauty with metal, wood, and cloth to adorn themselves and their surroundings. Hmong create a backpack basket from bamboo; take great care in making the rice pounding device; fashion with a sense of traditional style the stone grinder (which assists in the preparation of animal food); and place great emphasis on beautiful embroidery for colorful skirts and costume accessories. Also created with care and much artistic skill are Hmong jewelry, musical instruments to entertain the living and fulfill



ceremonial functions, and such household and farming tools as the short knife, the sickle, the hoe, and the long knife.

### Jewelry

Earrings, bracelets, rings, and silver necklaces are just some of the Hmong jewelry creations. These are commonly made of silver. In earlier times only the members of wealthy families could afford to wear an elaborate silver necklace. More recently, this practice has grown common and most necklaces are of a relatively elaborate style. Many modern necklaces, as well, include decorative colors, so that, when one compares a Hmong

silver necklace from the pre-Vietnam War era to a similar item from the post-Vietnam War era, dramatic changes are apparent. Such variations from earlier examples include evolution in the size, the decorative style, the technique of execution, the addition of color, and the weight. The more wealthy a Hmong person is, the larger and more heavy the necklace would be. The larger and more decorative necklaces will most often be worn by women, while men tend to choose a simpler and more modest design. For both men and women, however, the necklace both creates and enhances a festive mood, for a silver necklace is commonly worn by both sexes on special occasions such as the Hmong New Year and wedding celebrations.



In fact, jewelry is not only decorative, it plays a role in social tradition. Jewelry is often a sign of wealth. It may also be utilized for healing, and bracelets, necklaces, and anklets will be worn for reasons of both spiritual and physical well-being. In fact, many elderly Hmong believe that wearing a copper bracelet can help to alleviate a headache and improve circulation of the blood. As prescribed after certain rituals performed by a shaman, a necklace made of red and black, or simply red, string – or copper – will be recommended to protect from evil spirits someone who has fallen ill.

These jewelry traditions are changing, and, in America, Hmong jewelry has evolved dramatically with the prevalence of enhanced technology and the availability of silver. While the silver necklace remains traditional in look, such items as the ring and the bracelet have been modified to meet more modern tastes, and so numerous are customers for these items that there are at least three Hmong jewelry companies in America that specialize in serving the Hmong community.

### The Blacksmith's Art

The blacksmith, customarily a man, has, for millennia, been creating items both functional and beautiful, and these are uniquely designed in different shapes and sizes. They include a long, curling knife used for cutting bushes; the sickle used for harvesting rice or for harvesting thatch as a roofing material; a variety of shovel or spade; the hoe; and the short knife.

In America, while many elderly Hmong males dream of having their own black smith shop and tools in order to fashion from scratch their own tools, it is difficult to establish such a facility due to its specialized nature and the related cost. In fact, the only functioning Hmong blacksmith center currently in existence in the United States is in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Aside from items created there, most Hmong tools and household items of traditional designs are imported from Laos, Thailand, or China.





### Basketry

The Hmong's artistic ability is also found in the woven implements Hmong families use daily. The backpack basket; the winnowing basket; the woven dust pan; the water bucket; the rice steamer; and the strainer, are usually made from bamboo or rattan, and are fashioned by both men and women. These are woven in a skillful manner from natural materials, so that they perform well, last long, and are pleasant to the eye.

### Needlework – Paj Ntaub

Perhaps in no other area is the depth and breadth of Hmong aesthetics more apparent than in the area of needlework. In fact, Hmong needlework is among the most deft in the world, and, other than the embroidery of clothing, is utilized in the creation of the paj ntaub, (pronounced pan ndau) meaning "flower cloth." The traditions which govern the creation of the paj ntaub incorporate many rules of form and design, and an essay on the subject would run to many pages. Broadly speaking, however, there are two sorts of paj ntaub: the paj ntaub of traditional designs and patterns, and the more modern story cloth.



With respect to the more traditional paj ntaub, one may see up to five complex variations at work in its construction: 1.) the paj ntaub of cross stitch needlework; 2.) the paj ntaub of reverse appliqué; 3.) the paj ntaub of the elders; 4.) the embroidery paj ntaub; and, 5.) batik.



While the creation of such wonderfully ornamental needlework as these is complex, the uses are widespread in Hmong life. They are found in traditional men and women's costume and in ceremonial clothes worn at weddings and elsewhere. In fact, embroidery, cross stitch, and reverse appliqué paj ntaub will be observed in both men's and women's traditional costume, while elderly paj ntaub can be found in ceremonial settings. Even baby carriers, and children's hats and clothes are decorated with such needlework.



A combination of the many different paj ntaub patterns, techniques and designs are used in the creation of Hmong traditional costume. We may see in many items of Hmong daily wear, such as shirt sleeves, the sash, the apron, the



blouse, the hat, and the skirts of the Green Hmong, the paj ntaub of reverse appliqué; the paj ntaub of cross stitch needlework; and batik.

Among all of these garments, it is considered that the skirt of the Green Hmong demands the greatest artistic skill for its creation, traditionally made of hemp cloth. The creation of the cloth for such a skirt will typically take one year, while the patterning will demand five months. This process begins with strips of bark

taken from the hemp plant, which are then alternately boiled and pounded with rocks several times until the resulting fibers are soft. These fibers are then spun by hand into a yarn which is, in turn, a highly durable fabric which is extremely pleasant to the touch.

Upon this cloth, women use a wax pen to carefully draw their preferred designs, then dye the fabric by the process we know as batik. The cloth, usually ten to fourteen feet in length, is dipped into a dye bath, then removed and allowed to dry in the sun. Finally, paj ntaub of reverse appliqué of geometric design is then stitched into the skirt to give it the colorful red, blue and yellow colors.

## Needlework – The Story Cloth

A more recent, and therefore less traditional, item of paj ntaub needlework is the story cloth. A story cloth is a cloth upon which images have been embroidered which collectively relate a tale. This form of needle work did not exist in Laos prior to the Vietnam War. This new form of paj ntaub was invented because there was little else to do in the refugee camps of Thailand, and there was no book written about Hmong experience and life in Laos so young Hmong and foreigners could learn about Hmong life and history. In order to provide a source of income and to share their life stories, Hmong men drew patterns on cloth which express stories of recent history, after which women embroidered these stories into the fabric. This activity had a practical application, for, upon completion, these story cloths were sent to family members residing in America, Australia, Canada, and France, and there sold to raise money for the artists. With the funds thus raised, refugees were able to buy food for their families, as well as more cloth and thread to begin the process anew.





### Questions for Study:

1. Do the Hmong use baskets?
2. What does a blacksmith make?
3. Are the Hmong American men of the older generation tired of blacksmithing?
4. From which metal is Hmong jewelry made?
5. Does Hmong jewelry come in many colors?
6. Have the patterns and colors of Hmong jewelry changed very much?
7. How many types of traditional paj ntaub are there?
8. From which cloth is a Green Hmong skirt made?
9. What is a story cloth?
10. Is a story cloth worth any money?



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Wedding & New Year Celebrations





## Chapter 6: Wedding & New Year Celebrations

### A Link Between Two Days

For many young Hmong, the New Year celebration is a time to choose a mate, and so this holiday is closely tied to another occasion for celebration; the wedding. In Laos, young Hmong men and women often marry a month or two after the New Year. This is an adaptation to life in the highlands, where the young live far from each other and travel is not easy, and where the farming lifestyle does not allow much time away from the fields during which to meet new people.

### Meaning of the New Year

The holiday which marks the end of the old year and the beginning of the new is a time for parents to rest and enjoy the fruits of their labor, while the young amuse themselves with and express their talents through a variety of games and similar activities. Music is played on the qeej, a bamboo flute; and there is singing and play with tops and balls. There is even a sort of bullfighting! Most importantly, the Hmong New Year is a time to begin anew with a carefree spirit. Tasty food is abundant, and guests are invited from far away to dine with friends and family members not seen for a long time. Relief from the ordinary cares of life is the order of the day.





### Preparations and Prohibitions

On the night before the festival, a soul calling is performed. Afterward, the father of each family will invite the spirits of ancestors to visit and enjoy dinner. Then, on the day of the celebration, a long rope is fashioned from thatch; one end is tied high on a center pole, and the other end fastened to the ground. Holding a chicken in his hands, an elder man waves it over the heads of those who pass under the rope in order to bless them with good health in the coming year.



### New Year's Resolutions

The Hmong observe a few simple "New Year's Resolutions" during the festival and for a short period afterward. For good luck in the coming year, it is considered essential to eat only meat and rice for three days. Those who eat vegetables, it is said, may find themselves unable to obtain sufficient meat throughout the year; this, of course, implies there will be difficulties in raising



## Wedding & New Year Celebrations



livestock. It is also considered unlucky to eat rice soup during this same three days. Those who do so may encounter difficulties with the coming year's rice crop.

### Wedding Traditions

Since the selection of a partner made at the New Year celebration leads so often to marriage, the wedding celebration is considered in the same context. For the bride and groom, a wedding is a transition to adult

responsibilities. Once married, social interaction is limited to more adult forms than before, especially for women. Since it is Hmong tradition that a new bride moves in with the groom's family, this family gains a valuable, new family member, and the newlywed couple is expected to fulfill the roles of a well-behaved son and daughter-in-law.

In this way, dramatic changes are felt by the bride and the family she has left. While the bride's old family has lost a helper in work and a companion in leisure, the bride must make a sometimes difficult transition as she joins a new family and seeks to form her own. She





## Wedding & New Year Celebrations



must assume her new family's spiritual traditions, which will differ in some respects from those she has known, and she must wear the new family's traditional costume and speak the new family's dialect, which is sometimes different from her own. Most importantly, she must bear children. As for the groom and his parents, they now have a new addition to the family and are responsible for teaching her their expectations and way of life.

As compensation for all the bride must endure in assuming her new duties, and to ensure their earnest intention to treat the bride well, as well as to recognize the effort expended by the bride's parents in raising a daughter, the groom's family makes an offering to them of money and/or gifts. The bride's family, meanwhile, give as lavishly to the newlyweds as they are able, bestowing cash, household items, clothes, and jewelry in order to support the young couple in building their life together. As is customary during the Hmong New Year Celebration, certain restrictions are observed on the day of the wedding; for example, hot peppers are not allowed at table lest the marriage be troubled by arguments caused by hot tempers!





## Wedding Procedures

After two young Hmong decide to marry, the groom and his parents bear the primary responsibility for the planning of the wedding. A team representing the groom's family interest must be organized for the ritual journey to the bride's home to greet the bride's parents, negotiate gifts, and bring the bride back to his home. Often this "journey" is a short one, and symbolic only. Occasionally it is long, for the bride may live in another village several hours' walk from that of the groom. In any case, a picnic lunch will be prepared and enjoyed along the way – whether the journey requires fifteen minutes, six hours or a whole day.

Another traditional observance is the ritual "packing of three chickens." These cooked delicacies are utilized in the course of the wedding ceremony; one as a spiritual offering and two for consumption. Rice and salt will be packed, and blankets included for the



convenience of guests. Traditional costumes are worn to and from the home of the bride's parents, and the bride's brother will be asked to play the qeej flute as a send off for the wedding party as they return to the groom's home. Such customs as these originated in early times, when the homes of bride and groom were often not only separated by long distances, but when travel in the highlands of Southeast Asia was even more difficult and uncertain than presently.



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## Wedding & New Year Celebrations

Although guests at the festivities may number in the dozens or more, thirteen people make up the wedding party itself. These are: 1. the bride; 2. the groom; 3. the best man; 4. the bridesmaid; 5&6. the bride's marriage negotiators; 7&8. the groom's marriage negotiators; 9. the groom's delegated parent; 10. the bride's delegated parent; 11. the groom's brother; 12. the bride's brother; 13. one elder. Interactions between these principals will be extremely romantic, and even poetic, in nature, for all such interchanges are, by tradition, musical. In fact, at a Hmong wedding everything is done in song. There is a song to ask the bride's parents to open the door as the wedding procession arrives; there is a song to be performed while setting up a table at which the marriage negotiators will sit; there are songs to invite parents, songs to introduce the marriage negotiators to one another, songs for literally everything!

### Completing the Formalities

It will come as no surprise, therefore, that a Hmong wedding is a prolonged affair, and takes a great deal of time to finish. After the bride leaves her parents' home, there are still four more steps to be completed before the wedding is final. These are:

1. the introduction of the bride to the spirits of the groom's ancestors
2. the notification of the bride's parents of the bride's whereabouts
3. the soul calling on the third morning
4. the post-wedding.

The first of these is when the bride and groom arrive at the groom's house for the first time. The groom calls his father or an elder man to the door and asks him to perform a welcoming ritual to transfer the bride's allegiance from the spirits of her parents' ancestors to the spirits of the groom's ancestors.



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## Wedding & New Year Celebrations

The second step is to deliver a message from the groom family to the bride's parents; if the wedding was secretly initiated and the bride leaves her parents' home to the groom family without anyone seeing. This message notifies the bride's parents that they should look for their daughter no more, since she is now eternally to be found with the groom's family.

The third step occurs on the third day after the bride's arrival at her new home. On this day, a soul calling is conducted to welcome the new arrival.

Finally, the groom's family will perform a specific ritual of thanksgiving to express gratitude to all the wedding negotiators or assistants. This is the post-wedding, and, with this, the marriage is complete and the girl becomes a wife. As a symbol of her new status, she will remove forever the black and white striped cloth – called a siv ceeb – from her turban. This striped cloth has been symbolically tied to an umbrella that has accompanied the wedding ritual from day one. This is a symbol of the union of man and wife, for, when the wedding ritual is over, the civ ceeb is untied from the umbrella, and the new bride opens it over her husband to signify that the two young lovers now shelter eternally under one roof. Forever afterward, as Western women wear a wedding ring, the traditional Hmong woman will signal her married status by wearing her turban without the black and white stripe.

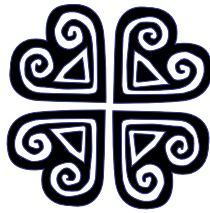


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Wedding & New Year Celebrations

Questions for Study:

1. What is the link between the Hmong New Year celebration and a Hmong wedding?
2. What are some of the activities in which Hmong engage during the New Year celebration?
3. Is the New Year celebration a time of fasting?
4. Do the Hmong make New Year's resolutions?
5. After a marriage, can young Hmong continue to behave as children?
6. Where does the newlywed couple live?
7. With respect to a Hmong wedding, who gives gifts to whom?
8. Who plans a Hmong wedding?
9. Does the bride-to-be always live near the groom?
10. Is it true that, by tradition, music is forbidden at a Hmong wedding?



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Spirit & Ceremony





## Chapter 7: Spirit and Ceremony

### Spirit or Soul

The spirit is often referred to as the soul, and, while it is usual in the West to believe that each of us has one soul, the Hmong believe that each of us has either three or five souls (according to different opinions). Some Hmong believe that one soul occupies the head area, one the region of the torso, and one the leg area. Other Hmong believe that a person has five souls; each of them named after an object in nature: reindeer, running bull, chicken, growing bamboo, and shadow.

In any case, according to Hmong tradition these souls, acting in harmony, produce a happy, healthy life. However, when even one of these souls begins to exhibit a lack of harmony with the others, trouble follows and life may become unpleasant and unhappy. Indeed, illness may be the result, and even, in extreme cases, death. Thus, we can see that the harmony of a Hmong's souls is very important, and when this harmony is lost it must be restored quickly.

### Calling the Soul

In fact, the Hmong believe that one or more souls may sometimes not only fall out of harmony with the others, it may even decide to leave the body altogether and go elsewhere. This "soul loss," or poob plig, as it is called in the Hmong language, is a serious situation and requires measures to call the straying soul back. These measures are collectively known as "soul calling," or hu plig. The missing soul may have wandered away to someplace nearby, or it may have wandered far – even to the spirit world, a place similar to our world, but inhabited by spirits and other disembodied beings. In such a case, calling back the soul may be a problem.

This soul calling, although it sounds very difficult, is, in fact, a fairly common ceremony with which all Hmong become familiar at an early age. Although required when an individual falls ill, soul calling may also be performed to prevent illness and promote good health; a soul calling is performed three days



after the birth of every new Hmong baby. In addition, at the time of the Hmong New Year celebration, a soul calling ceremony is performed for the entire family. A soul calling ceremony will be held for a newlywed couple on the third day after their union, and may even be performed for a family member



who is about to undertake a long journey or who has just arrived home from such a journey. When a Hmong is ill, however, or has fallen, or merely become frightened, a soul calling ceremony is most often performed. For that matter, in any instance in which it is felt the individual may have lost one or more of his souls (sometimes even without knowing it!) a soul calling ceremony will be performed. This ceremony may be performed by any individual who is not shy and knows the method; however, it is usually performed by an elderly person, by a Hmong shaman, or by another variety of medical professional or healer.

### Back From Where?

Yet, wherever the wandering spirit has gone, it is never very far away in the usual way we understand the word far. Although we could walk for many days, or even months, and never arrive there, the Hmong believe that the spirit world is nearby for that rare individual, the Hmong shaman, who can see it. This shaman lives with us in this world, which is called by the Hmong the yaj ceeb, while still being able, in certain circumstances, to see into the



## Spirit & Ceremony

spirit world, or yeeb ceeb. As the result of our own experience and our classes in school, we all know a great deal about this world in which we live, the yaj ceeb. But what about the spirit world, or yeeb ceeb; what do we know about that?

Most of what we know about the yeeb ceeb comes to us from the insights, experiences, and visions of the Hmong shamans down through the centuries. The Hmong believe that the spirit world is the home of those who once lived here on earth, but who, after growing very old – or, in some cases, after a severe illness or accident, or due to war – departed to live in a world made only of pure energy, or light, or spirit. These departed ones are referred to as spirits, or, in the Hmong language, as dab, and in their world they live in the company both of other spirits who arrived in the same manner and of spirits who never lived on earth, and who are much greater and more powerful than they. Sometimes referred to as Great Spirits, or gods, these others have been given the task of watching over the welfare of those who, like ourselves, live on earth.

### The Shaman (Tus Ua Neeb)

A shaman is a spiritual healer. While it is most common for a man to become such a shaman, both men and women may do so. Certainly, the shaman is one of the most important members of Hmong society, and there are several different categories of shaman. All of these, however, fall into two main types.





## Spirit & Ceremony

The first of these, the traditional Hmong shaman (neeb muag dawb), is selected by circumstance, fate, or destiny. In fact, no one may become this sort of shaman simply by choosing to do so. On the contrary, it is the residents of the spirit world who will make the selection. For the most part, this is accomplished by rendering him ill and refusing to allow him to get well until he agrees to become a shaman. In this way, he realizes it is his destiny to become a shaman, and he will have no choice except to begin his apprenticeship and training. If he does not, his illness will continue on and on. When a shaman so selected and so coerced performs healing ceremonies, he will always go into trance; a kind of mixture of sleep and wakefulness.



The second, and more recent, type of shaman (neeb muag dub) assumes this career merely by desiring to do so. Such a shaman, after his training is complete and he has begun his work, will not necessarily enter a trance state in order to perform his duties. Although it would seem that, in some sense, a shaman who has been selected by the spirits for his qualifications of temperament and character might be superior to the other variety, either of these two types of shaman can be expected to be capable of diagnosing and treating illness.



The Hmong shaman, thus, in his role of healer, is responsible for two things: first, he must join the patient in the fight for life and health; and, second, he must restore the wholeness of the patient's self by bringing back the patient's wandering soul or souls. The shaman thus takes responsibility for his clan's physical and spiritual well-being as he serves as a bridge between this material world and the spiritual world.

### More Work for the Shaman (Tus Ua Neeb)

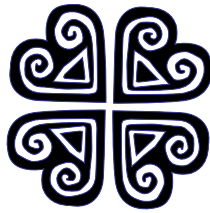
It is clear, then, that the clan's shaman is a very important person. But there is still more he can do. The shaman may also perform many valuable functions both at weddings and at funerals. By custom, if a shaman engages in these ritual activities, he must have additional qualifications beyond those required for the performance of other rites. All of these qualifications – singing, playing certain musical interludes, performing specialized tasks at the funeral, and so on – have to be learned from an expert.





### Questions for Study:

1. Are "spirit" and "soul" different or the same?
2. How many souls does a Hmong have?
3. Where are the Hmong souls located?
4. Can you name three Hmong souls?
5. What is a Hmong spiritual healer called?
6. How is he (or she) chosen, and by whom?
7. Is it true that the Hmong always like to have one or two of their souls out wandering around?
8. If a Hmong soul wanders away, what will happen and what can be done about it?
9. How have the Hmong learned most of what they know about the spirit world?
10. What are the two main duties of a shaman?



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Folkloric Traditions





## Chapter 8: Folkloric Traditions

### The Role of the Storyteller

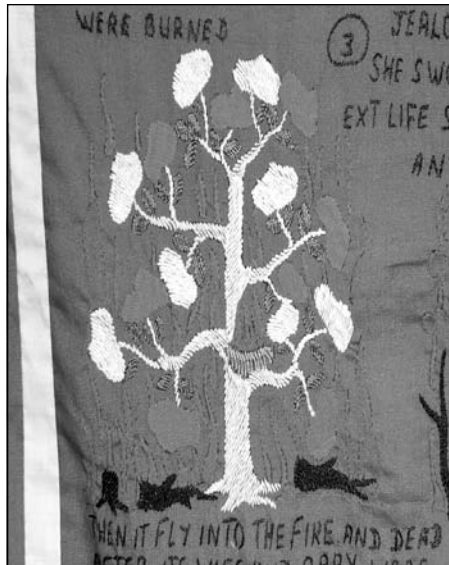
The day is done, and dinner is finished. Grandfather, mother, father, brothers and sisters sit together, tired from work but warm and contented. All around is the deep jungle, above which the moon glows brightly, like a face in the heavens, while the stars shimmer in the hundreds.

The cook fire has burned down to a bed of glowing coals which cast an eerie light in a circle around the room. Dark shadows in odd and mysterious shapes dance along the walls as thin threads of smoke rise up around the ceiling, but not before they fill the room with a fragrant mistiness. Outside, somewhere not far away, a hoot owl calls, "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!" The hum of insects can be heard, and four or five large moths flicker and fly around the room, adding their shadows to the tapestry of light and darkness on the walls.

Then grandfather speaks, "A long, long time ago, there lived a Dragon King..."

Now is the time for stories, and the topics of these stories – topics which define the range of Hmong folkloric traditions – are such hidden realities as the creation of the world, the nature of the region of the spirits, the lives and activities of creatures such as dragons, and so on. The scope of these topics is very large, so a small selection follows.

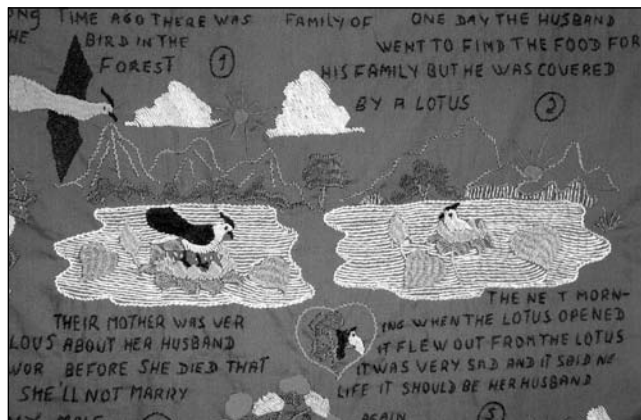




### Folklore – The Creation

The spirit first created at the beginning of the world is called Saub. Among folklore tells of a great flood that covered the world in the beginning of our time, after which Saub created the original twelve clans. Yet Saub is not the greatest of the spirits; he is merely a lieutenant to another one who created him, who is even greater than he. This being is named Huab Tais Ntuj, and he is said to be the creator and ruler of the world. He is the king of heaven and governs everything in the universe.

Aside from these two, there are many lesser gods and spirits living in the spirit world. There are spirits of the household; there are spirits of medicine; there are nature spirits; there are spirits whose job it is to help the Hmong shaman with his many tasks; and there are a great many others. The spirits of medicine are worshipped by healers, and, when called upon, banish negative influences which may be causing illness. Nature spirits inhabit wild and uncultivated places such as forests and jungles, and are widely respected by the Hmong and treated with courtesy, even deference. As but one mark of this deference, the Hmong will always refrain from throwing rocks while in jungle or forest, lest they disturb a forest spirit.





## Folklore – The Dragon and the Princess

One of the most appealing creatures in Hmong folkloric traditions is the dragon. He is a kindhearted fellow, and the Hmong sing a song about him at every wedding. This tradition began as follows: A long, long time ago, four Hmong boys went hunting. Each had his own special talent. One was a fortune-teller, could see the future; one was a skilled archer; the third was a powerful swimmer; and the fourth a magic healer.

As they were walking, the fortune teller said, "In a little while, a bird will fly overhead. Shortly after, the group noted a bird soaring aloft, and, without thinking, the archer retrieved his bow and shot the bird down, which landed in a river. Seeing this, the swimmer pulled himself through the river to get the fallen creature, but much to his surprise, he found that when he had arrived beside it,



the bird had been transformed into a beautiful woman. With powerful strokes, the swimmer brought this beauty to shore, but she was no longer breathing. The healer, counseling the others to stand back, then used his skills to bring her back to life. When she awakened, all four began to chat with her, and, charmed, she chose the swimmer to be her husband.

On their wedding day, the woman revealed to her fiancé that she was secretly the princess daughter of the Dragon King, and had assumed the shape first of a bird and then of a woman in order to meet the handsome young man. She



## Folkloric Traditions

then said, "My father is a kindhearted old man, and will no doubt agree to our marriage. Nevertheless, to show the serious nature of your intentions, please sing a song to him when we arrive at his palace."

Thus, when the young man arrived at the palace of the Dragon King, he sang a romantic song to the girl's father, asking him to open the door to his dragon palace so the youth might ask for the hand of the princess in marriage. Hearing this, the gentle dragon was pleased and gave his permission for the couple to wed. Since that time, the Hmong refer to all songs sung during the wedding ritual as the "dragon songs" or Zaj Tshoob.

### Folklore – The Dragon and the Umbrella

The Hmong association with the kindhearted Dragon King has been a close one ever since, and the Dragon King has been of great help on at least one other occasion. One day, a Hmong girl, who had been courted by a handsome young man, decided the time was right to marry and start her own family. Her parents, however, loved her very much and did not want her to leave home to live with the groom, as is the Hmong custom. Undeterred, the girl made up her mind she would elope, and, concerned about interference from her parents, called out and asked for assistance from her guardian spirits, who agreed to make her parents sleepy that night so she could slip away with her beloved.

The next morning, the parents arose and looked around for their daughter, but she was gone. Furious, and seeing the girl had eloped,





## Folkloric Traditions



they bitterly upbraided the girl's guardian spirits and claimed to all who would listen that, without their knowledge or permission, the girl was not truly married. This left the way open for a major dispute: was the girl really married?

The case was argued among the highest authorities in the world, but no one was able to establish his opinion as definitive, and, since human beings could not resolve it, the matter was taken to the palace of the Dragon King. The Dragon King, who lived underwater, was then asked by the visitors to come and resolve the case. Applying himself, the Dragon King reviewed the details of the case, and, as he pondered, he clutched an umbrella that one of the people involved had brought with him and left hanging on the palace coat rack.

At length, and holding this item as he spoke, he intoned, "I have examined the evidence, and I have thought on this matter, and I find that the young couple are married! Moreover, henceforth I will use this umbrella as a symbol for those Hmong who wish to marry. From this day forward, when the marriage negotiator carries an umbrella with him as he walks along the path, all the people who see him should understand that he is engaged in arranging a wedding for someone."

This is how the old Dragon came to resolve the Hmong dispute, and forever afterward the Hmong marriage negotiator has carried an umbrella while arranging the union of a young man and a young woman.



Questions for Study:

1. At what time are stories told?
2. Do the Hmong enjoy stories?
3. Who created the twelve clans?
4. Is he the chief among the spirits?
5. Did the Dragon King have any children?
6. Who were the four young men who went walking?
7. What did they see in the air?
8. Which of the four got married?
9. What did the Dragon King find hanging on his coat rack?
10. Was the girl who ran away to elope really married or not?



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The Hmong Language





## Chapter 9: The Hmong Language

### Making and Using Language

We make language using our chests, lungs, mouths, lips, tongues, and vocal cords. With these tools we make sounds and shape them into a form that will be recognized by others, and we do this to communicate feelings, ideas, needs, and a variety of information. This is accomplished by the use of words, and by putting these words into the correct order according to rules which are known to and accepted by the people around us in our society. These rules govern both the meanings of words, called definitions, and the order in which those words can be used to convey meaning, called grammar.

### The Origins of Hmong

We have already seen, in our chapter on Hmong history, that when the French began to create colonies in the southeastern part of Asia, French explorers spread out throughout the region in search of whatever of value they could find. One of them, Father F.M. Savina, a Catholic priest, was not seeking gold, silver, gems and jewels, or other such precious things; he was looking for people who might wish to become Catholic. He settled in with the Hmong in their highland villages, and there he studied the Hmong language in great detail, learning it well. Finally,





## The Hmong Language

in 1920, he published a book about the Hmong in which he declared that, after much thought, he considered that the Hmong language was related to other languages from places far away, such as Mongolia, the southeastern part of Europe, and even Turkey. Thus, the Hmong language may have originated far from Laos and China. We cannot know where it originated precisely, but two things are certain: the Hmong have traveled far in their long history and their language is quite unusual.

### Tones in Hmong

One characteristic of the Hmong language which may be somewhat difficult for us to understand is that Hmong is a “tonal” language. This means the definition of a word will change depending on the tone with which it is spoken. Let’s consider some examples. As Americans we use tones ourselves in our everyday speech.



When we inquire, “Excuse me, can you tell me what time it is?” our voices rise a little at the end. We can say, then, that this is an example of a rising tone. When we find that the dog has torn apart our favorite pillow, we may groan, “Oh, no...” Often our tone of voice as we groan these words will fall slightly, so that we might say this is an example of a falling tone. Another tone will be used when we say, “For my vacation, Mom and Dad are taking me to Hawai’i.” Between the two final letters of Hawai’i – that is, between one letter “i” and the other letter “i,” we leave a slight break or pause, so we might call this a broken tone. If we say, in a matter of fact voice, “This is my school book,” our voices do not change at all, and so we might call this a flat tone. And so on.



## The Hmong Language



In the Hmong language, a word spoken in one tone will have an entirely different meaning from the same word spoken in a different tone. We who have been born and raised in the United States may feel this is a bit unusual, but it is also true of the Chinese language and the languages

of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. In fact, there are seven tones in the Hmong language, and some people even say eight, since two of the tones are so similar that people disagree whether they are different or not! Some of these Hmong tones are referred to with such terms as “high tone,” “high falling tone,” “low tone,” “low falling tone,” and even “breathy mid-low tone.” At all events, the final letter of the printed form of a Hmong word will indicate to us which tone it is in which that word is to be spoken.

### Syllables in Hmong

Hmong words are usually quite short; most are not more than one syllable. Thus, many words in Hmong sound the same to someone not used to listening for the difference. Foreign students of English often have the same trouble, and cannot tell when to use the words “to,” “too,” and “two.” So, we can appreciate that, in the Hmong language, one word such as “cee” can have several meanings depending on whether it is spoken with a high tone, a low tone, or some other tone. Indeed, in our chapter on ceremony, we have already seen that this word, when spoken with a specific tone indicated by the final letter “b,” means “world” – as in yaj ceeb, our material world; or yeeb ceeb, the world of the spirits.



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### Words in Hmong

Some Hmong words we might like to know are:

Hello - Nyob zoo

How are you? - Koj nyob li cas (A literal translation of this phrase would be, "How do you stay,")?

I'm fine - Kuv nyob zoo (Literally, "I stay well").

My name is Joe - Kuv lub npe hu ua Joe

You are my friend - Koj yog kuv tus phooj ywg

Good-bye - Sib ntsib dua (This means, "See you next time").

- Mus zoo ("Go well").

### Hmong Language and Tradition

Although the Hmong language may seem complicated, no doubt a similar discussion of English will seem quite the same to foreign students of our language. We should not conclude from this that the Hmong language is difficult for young Hmong children to learn. In fact, as we may readily suppose, all young Hmong children learn to speak Hmong, as we may observe in the wide variety of Hmong stories, jokes, and riddles enjoyed by children and adults alike, taken together with the large number of proverbs calculated to educate and inform.

We have already seen one example in our chapter on clan and lineage: a wise proverb which states, "An individual is but a drop of water in a bucket – if it crosses





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the rim and falls, it is tiny and will soon dry out." Another is, "We see the pigeon, but we don't see its nest." This means that while the bird may appear beautiful to the eye, it may secretly have made an ugly mess of things at home. In English we say much the same thing with the words, "Beauty is only skin



deep." Related to this is the riddle, "What is a bowl that cannot hold water?" The answer: A bird's nest. Another is, "Who is the old man with a pot on his head who walks up and down the river?" Give up? The answer is: a crab.

The Hmong language is a rich, full, and very effective means by which to express and preserve the hopes, history, and values of a people with

a cultural heritage developed over thousands of years. While it is certainly, in many ways, very different from English, and may therefore seem complex to English speakers, it is certainly not complex to the Hmong. The Hmong, rather, enjoy the use of their language in expressing themselves in daily life, just as, with great delight, they enjoy a variety of jokes, proverbs, riddles, and stories.

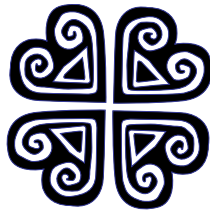


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The Hmong Language

Questions for Study:

1. For what do we use language?
2. How does a human being make language?
3. What do we call the meanings of words?
4. What do we call the rules for using those words?
5. Who was the man from France who first studied the Hmong language?
6. Can you name two languages sometimes said to be related to Hmong?
7. The Hmong language is a “tonal” language; what does this mean?
8. How many tones are there in the Hmong language?
9. Can you name two other “tonal” languages?
10. Who is the old man with a pot on his head?



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Games & Recreation





## Chapter 10: Games and Recreation

### Games We All Know

The Hmong work hard, and when time is available they like to enjoy themselves. In our chapters on Hmong language and folkloric traditions, we have seen that evening is the time for stories, jokes, and riddles; but evening is not the only time for fun. For adults, there are holidays, such as the New Year celebration, who take advantage of this happy occasion to feast and make music. For children (especially those too young to work long hours) playtime is available, as well as games like jump rope, tag, hide and seek, and the spinning of tops. In the highlands, toys are

hand-made from available materials; and with much time available, loving attention can be paid to the construction of toy bows and arrows, and tops of many sizes. These tops are spun as tops used to be spun in the United States, and in some places still are, by means of a hard toss at the end of a string. Hmong boys, as do boys the world over, also stage make-



believe hunts and make-believe battles with fierce animals of the jungle or with even more fierce creatures of myth that may lurk in the darkness of night. Surrounded by enormous forests, these Hmong boys have a wonderful natural playground at their disposal; a playground which stretches out ten, twenty, fifty miles in all directions. Hmong girls, meanwhile, in helping their mothers



with household chores and babysitting duties, are well-versed in the tasks required in caring for home and family, and this enables them to play house in an extraordinarily realistic and skillful manner as they dream of life ahead.

### Catch a Special Friend

The New Year celebration, perhaps more than any other time, is an occasion for games, and we may expect to witness participation from almost everyone. Teenagers in particular, will join in playing a special and unique game of catch which often leads to the acquisition of a special friend; a special friend who may, in time, become a mate. To play this game, the young men and women of the village, as well as visitors and guests of a similar age from outlying regions, form two lines, with boys standing side by side facing a line of girls who also stand side by side. There is no limit to how many can play, and, as the lines face each other about ten feet apart, participants toss a home-made ball (about the same size as a softball) back and forth. If anyone drops the ball, he or she must give a token, such as a bangle or a piece of cloth, to the one who threw it. If the one who drops the ball has no token, he or she must sing a song.

It all sounds very simple, but the girls often manage to drop the ball when it is tossed by the boys they like. Likewise, somehow the boys often seem to be clumsy when the ball is thrown by the girls they admire. In this way, many tokens and songs are exchanged between the boys and the girls who have eyes for each other, and frequently love blossoms, to be followed eventually by marriage.





## Highland Games

In an environment of nearly year-round sunshine, lush vegetation, and an abundance of wild creatures, much activity centers on the forest. Some take walks in the woods and others wade in streams that provide a cooling alternative to the heat of the day. Many activities which might otherwise be considered chores can be made into play by imaginative children. One such way is a Hmong children's game called Hitting the Tepee.

We have seen that the Hmong dinner is cooked over an open fire placed on the floor of the home's main room. Naturally, with all the families in the village cooking in such a way, much firewood is required, and the gathering of firewood is often assigned to the village boys. It is in the performance of this chore that the game of Hitting the Tepee can be of great value – for the winner.

The game is played by several participants, each of whom forages in the surrounding woods to gather as much firewood as possible. After this, the group assembles at a prearranged location, which is usually fairly flat and open. Side by side the boys construct



small, model tepees with a set number of sticks from the supply of firewood each has gathered. When all tepees are finished, each boy selects two additional pieces of wood as his throwing sticks, stands before his tepee, and throws the two sticks he has selected for the purpose. He may throw them far or he may throw them near; he may even drop them at his feet. However, the boy who has thrown the farthest goes first during the next phase of play.



Now the boys walk to their throwing sticks and take turns throwing them back again – this time aiming at the tepees in an attempt to knock them down. These tepees may all fall on the first round, or it may take many rounds to knock them down; however, when a tepee falls, the boy who knocked it down gets to keep the firewood from which it was constructed and add it to the pile he has gathered to bring home. Once they have finished one round, the players may, if they choose, select more sticks from their piles, fashion new tepees, and begin again; laughing, joking, and enjoying a long afternoon.

### Music – A Hmong Variety

For the adults, eating and storytelling are supplemented by music and song. Several instruments create this music, all of them home-made and capable of producing the complex, lovely, often hauntingly beautiful sounds of the highlands of Laos. Several of these are wind instruments, which means that air blown into them (like the flute) produces sound, while fingerings produce melody. These wind instruments are the reed flute, the leaf flute, and the bamboo flute. There is a violin made with a single string and played with a bow, and there is a mouth harp, smaller than a single hand, but which is held to the mouth with two hands and plucked. Indeed, the Hmong are even adept at taking a leaf from a tree or bush, and, by blowing across it in a specific and highly skilled manner, producing moving highland melodies. In addition, there is a drum which is





used on many occasions, chiefly ceremonial; and a variety of bells, as well as a pair of small cymbals, employed by the Hmong shaman – in the conduct of his ceremonies.

Probably the most versatile and widely used Hmong musical instrument, however, is a fourth wind instrument which consists of several reeds of different lengths bound together. This forms the qeej, the use of which we have discussed in our chapter on wedding and New Year celebrations. In the hands of a skilled and sensitive musician, this instrument is capable of generating music which is both moving and expressive of great emotional depth. For this reason, it is employed in the conduct of most Hmong ceremonies, although it is by no means restricted to these. In fact, inasmuch as it can be used not only to express solemn feelings, but also happiness, exuberance, romance, and even humor, it is frequently heard when any emotion is to be represented in musical form.

## Song

Of course, the Hmong voice can also express the full range of feelings and emotions, and songs are largely featured in Hmong tradition. We have already seen in our chapters on folkloric traditions that a song about the Dragon King is sung at all Hmong weddings. At that happy time, there are also many other songs for which all to join in and sing.

There are songs for other moods and other situations, not all of them ceremonial. There are songs sung during the performance of chores to make the time pass quickly; there are songs sung while walking to the fields or woods to plant or harvest or hunt; there are songs sung during leisure time. As is the case the world over, there are love songs, too; both happy love songs – to be sung when love is returned – and sad love songs – to be sung when it is not. Indeed, there are very few aspects of Hmong life which are not given a musical representation, for song celebrates happiness when the heart is light and lightens the spirit when the heart is heavy.



Questions for Study:

1. Which games played by Hmong children are also played in the United States?
2. Do Hmong girls know how to play house?
3. How does a Hmong boy spin his top?
4. When is it a good idea to drop the ball in a game of catch?
5. If you drop the ball, what must you do then?
6. Who gets to keep the firewood in a game of Hitting the Teepee?
7. What is a "wind instrument?"
8. Can you name two Hmong wind instruments?
9. What is the most popular Hmong musical instrument?
10. About who or what is a song always sung at a Hmong wedding?

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Mai Zong Vue obtained a Bachelor of Arts from Lakeland College in Business Administration in 1990 and a Masters in Social Work from University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1997. She is a renowned activist who has a deep and continuing commitment to improve the lives of refugees in America, especially women and children. Mai Zong has been with the Wisconsin State Refugee Office since 1992 and is currently serving as the board President for Hmong National Development, Inc. Mai Zong's activism work has brought her to visit the Hmong in Laos, Thailand and China and earned her over half a dozen outstanding achievement awards in Wisconsin. Her first publishing was "Voices From The Heart" published by Wisconsin Academy Magazine.