

Building Bridges: Teaching about the Hmong in our Communities

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Hmong Population Around the World

- Asia

China – 4,500,000 (estimate)

Vietnam – 558,000

Laos – 316,000

Thailand – 124,000

Burma – 2,656

- Western Countries

United States – 200,000-250,000

France – 15,000

Australia – 1,860

Canada – 640

French Guyana – 1,800

Argentina – 250

New Zealand - 150

Germany - 70

In China, Hmong are classified in the broader “Miao” Group. The “Miao” group includes Hmong, Kho Xiong, Hmu and A Hmao.



Estimates from Dr. Nicholas Tapp and Dr. Gary Yia Lee,
<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~yeulee/Topical/12point%20statement.html>

Hmong in Southeast Asia



In Southeast Asia, Hmong live in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma. The map is from the Perry-Castaneda online map collection of the University of Texas http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/indochina_rel85.jpg

Origins of the Hmong People in China and Southeast Asia

- 2700 B.C.: It is believed by some scholars that the Hmong Occupied the Yellow River region of China at this time. King Chi You, a legendary King prominent in Chinese History is believed to have been Hmong by many
- Linguistic scholar Martha Ratliff in a 2004 article only found evidence of Hmong in Southern China using ancient linguistic records tied to the Hmong language and Chinese historical accounts
- Other scholars have posited that Hmong may have originated in Siberia and even the Middle East, there is very little existing support for these theories



A Chinese statue of King Chi You is in the Photo

Timeline of Recent Hmong History

- 1790-1860 A.D.: Many Hmong migrate out of China to Laos, Northern Vietnam, and Thailand
- 1963-1975: The Vietnam War and the U.S. Secret Army in Laos
- 1975: Hmong Refugees Move to Thailand
- 1976 to Present Time: Hmong refugees move to the U.S., France, Australia, French Guyana, and Canada
- December 2003: U.S. State Department agrees to accept applications for resettlement from 15,000 Laotian Hmong refugees living in Wat Thamkrabok, Thailand
- 2004-2006: More than 15,000 Hmong refugees from Wat Tham Krabok arrive in Minnesota, California, Wisconsin and other states

The photo shows a Black Hmong boy in Vietnam. Hmong began moving to Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries at the end of the 18th century. The photo is from the Tribal Textiles website:
http://www.tribaltextiles.info/Assets/images/Vietnam/Black_Hmong/9510I37T.JPG



Hmong Role in the CIA's Secret War in Laos 1963-1975

- “Mr. Pop” Edgar Buell, a retired Indiana farmer and humanitarian worker who was associated with the U.S. Information Office was a key figure who began working with Hmong in Laos in the late 1950s
- In 1961, Colonel Bill Lair, representing the CIA, met with Vang Pao, leader of the Hmong army in Laos to initiate a secret cooperative relationship between Hmong and U.S. operatives in Laos
- The CIA coordinated the effort against the Communists in Laos in partnership with the Hmong military leader General Vang Pao and the Royal Lao Government

The photo shows CIA officers training Hmong soldiers in late 1961. The photo is from a collection of the Chippewa Valley Museum in Eau Claire, WI
<http://www.cvmuseum.com/Hmong3.html>



Hmong Role in the CIA's Secret War in Laos 1963-1975

- Long Cheng – an airbase in Laos – was the focal point of the Hmong and U.S. effort to defeat the Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese in Laos
- The late William Colby, Director of the CIA during the Reagan administration, credited the Hmong with saving the lives of thousands of U.S. soldiers as they blocked the North Vietnamese from their efforts to extend the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Laos for several years
- The full extent of the Hmong role assisting the U.S. in the Vietnam War era was not officially acknowledged by the CIA and U.S. officials until the early 1980s



This 1998 photo shows the long-abandoned Long Cheng airstrip in Laos from the air. From Adventures in Laos Website:
<http://homepage.mac.com/peterlaos/Laos1998/Gallery15.html>

Hmong Role in the CIA's Secret War in Laos 1963-1975



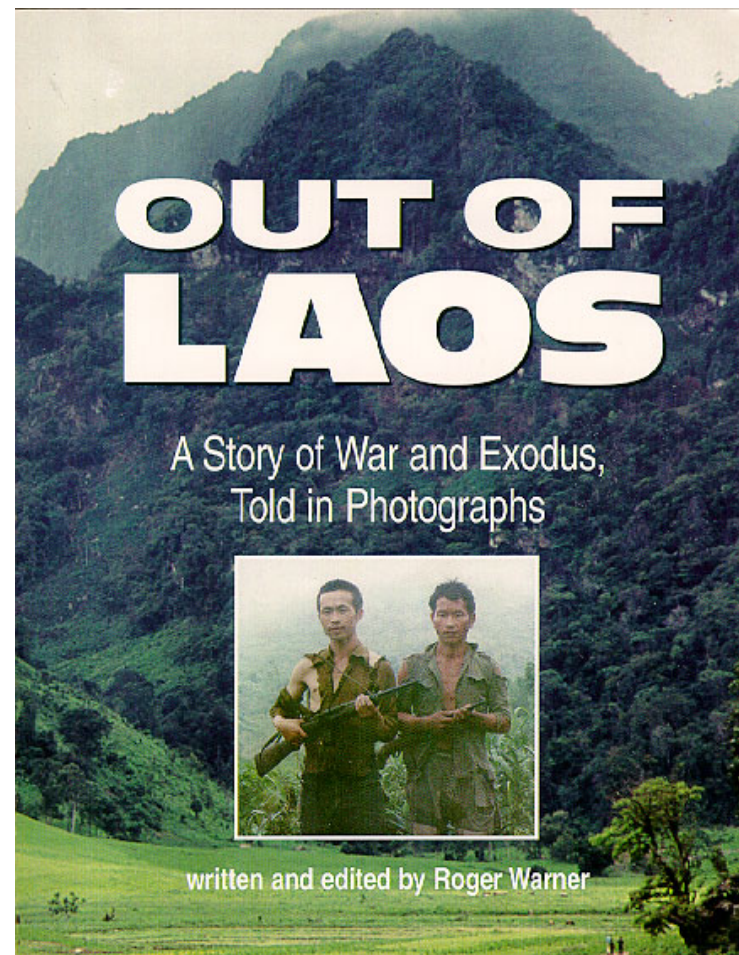
The map shows the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, and Vietnam. The Hmong played an important role in preventing the North Vietnamese Communists from extending the Ho Chi Minh Trail from Vietnam into Laos for several years.

The map is from the Nixon/Kissinger/Vietnam Website
<http://www.geocities.com/nixonkissingerpeacemaker/images/part2ch5pic2.jpg>

Hmong Role in the CIA's Secret War in Laos 1963-1975

- Estimates are that 30,000-40,000 Hmong died during the duration of the Vietnam War in Laos
- In June 1974, the last Air America plane and last U.S. military personnel left Laos. Over 40,000 North Vietnamese troops remained in Laos at this time to assist the Communist Pathet Lao
- In May 1975, the Hmong General Vang Pao was evacuated by air to Thailand, thousands of Hmong were left behind. Later In 1975 the Pathet Lao publicly announced their plans to “wipe out” the Hmong

The photo shows the cover of Roger Warner's 1996 book about the Hmong refugee exodus from Laos, Out of Laos



The Hmong Refugee Experience/Movement to the U.S. 1975-Early 1990s

- In 1975, thousands of Hmong began attempting to escape Laos by crossing the Mekong River into Thailand. Many Hmong died during the exodus process. Many Hmong babies died when their parents used opium to quiet them so Pathet Lao soldiers would not hear them as they tried to escape the country
- Several Hmong refugee camps were established in Thailand by the late 1970s. The largest and best known Hmong refugee camp in Thailand was known as Ban Vinai
- The first Hmong refugees began arriving in the United States from the Thailand camps in December 1975 and January 1976

The photo is of a Hmong family living in Ban Vinai camp in Thailand in 1991 a year before it closed. The photo is from the Southeast Asian Refugee Archive collection at California State University, Irvine

<http://www.lib.uci.edu/libraries/collections/sea/seaexhibits/refugeecam.html>

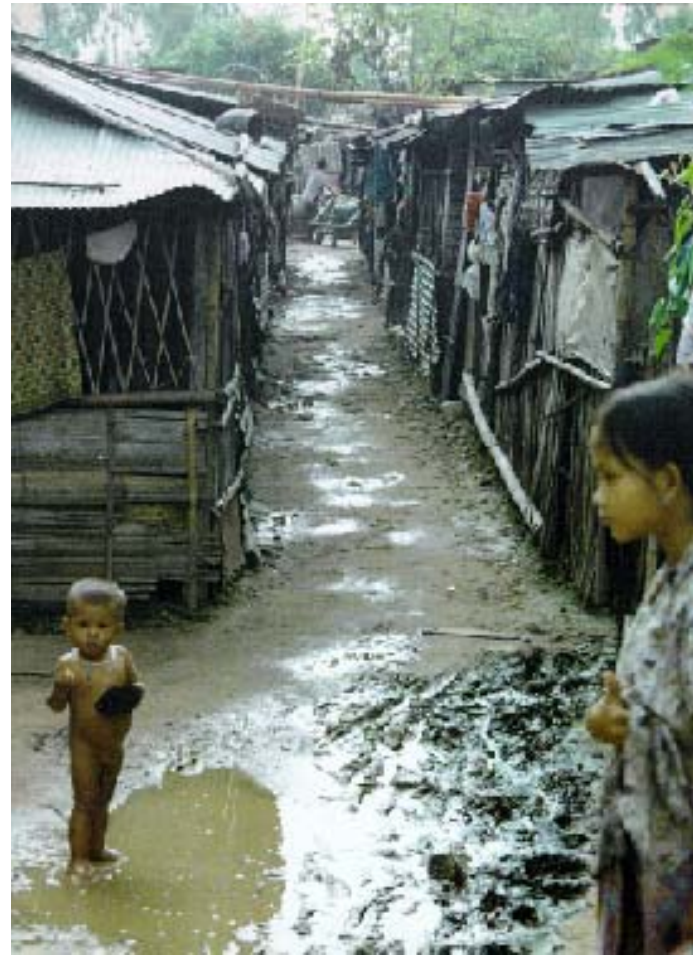


The Hmong Refugee Experience/Movement to the U.S. 1975-Early 1990s

- The number of Hmong refugees admitted into U.S. from the Thailand refugee camps exceeded 10,000 in 1979 and reached a peak of about 27,000 in 1980 before decreasing to under 5,000 in 1981 and even less per year through mid-1980s
- The number of Hmong refugees annually admitted to the U.S. began increasing again in 1987 and exceeded 10,000 in 1988. The number exceeded 5,000 each year between 1989 and 1994 with the exception of 1990
- The 1990 U.S. census found about 94,000 Hmong residing in the U.S.

Photo: Chiang Kham was another primarily Hmong refugee camp in Thailand. It closed in 1993, a year after Ban Vinai. The photo is from the Southeast Asian Refugee Archive at California State University, Irvine

<http://www.lib.uci.edu/libraries/collections/sea/seaexhibit/refugeecam.html>



Hmong Refugees in Wat Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple in Thailand 1992-2004

- As Ban Vinai and the other Hmong refugee camps in Thailand had closed by 1992, many of the Lao Hmong refugees left in Thailand who had not yet been able to come to the U.S. or other countries as refugees were given refuge by a Thai Buddhist monk in a temple an hour north of Bangkok called Wat Tham Krabok
- The 15,000 or so Lao Hmong refugees in Wat Tham Krabok had no official status in Thailand. For many years the Thai government wanted to repatriate (force) them to back to Laos where they feared for their safety
- Finally in December 2003 after years of lobbying by Hmong-American organizations, the U.S. State Department agreed to accept 15,000 Hmong refugees living in Wat Tham Krabok into the U.S. They started arriving in June 2004

By the end of 2006, more than 5,100 Hmong Refugees from Wat Tham Krabok were resettled in Minnesota.



The Photo shows Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand. It is from the Website of Hmong International Human Rights Watch:

www.hmongihrw.org/thamkrabok.html

Issues with Hmong-American Census Data

U.S. Hmong census enumerations are almost certainly significant undercounts

- The Language Barrier may have prevented some families from filling out the census form
- A person only counted as “Hmong” if they took the initiative to write in “Hmong” as their ethnicity on the census form
- Many families may be distrustful of providing information to the government about income etc. due to past experiences as a minority in Laos and Thailand

Hmong Population in the U.S. (2006 American Community Survey)

- 209,000 Hmong estimated in the 2006 American Community Survey
- Hmong National Development in Washington D.C. estimates the actual Hmong population is about 275,000 in the U.S.
- **Top 10 Hmong Populations by State**
 1. California – 71,244
 2. Minnesota – 49,200
 3. Wisconsin – 38,949
 4. Michigan – 8,686
 5. North Carolina – 8,451
 6. Colorado – 3,875
 7. Georgia – 3,407
 8. Washington – 3,050
 9. Oregon - 2,729
 10. Florida – 1,856

Hmong Population in the U.S.

2000 U.S. Census

- **Top 10 Hmong Metropolitan Areas in the U.S.**
 1. Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN – 40,707
 2. Fresno, CA – 22,456
 3. Sacramento-Yolo, CA – 16,261
 4. Milwaukee-Racine, WI – 8,078
 5. Merced, CA – 6,148
 6. Stockton-Lodi, CA – 5,653
 7. Appleton-Oshkosh-Neenah, WI – 4,741
 8. Wausau, WI – 4,453
 9. Hickory-Morganton-Lenoir, NC – 4,207
 10. Detroit-Ann Arbor-Flint, MI – 3,926

The photo shows a Hmong business on the East Side of Saint Paul, MN. With more than 25,000 Hmong residents, Saint Paul has the largest Hmong population of any city in the U.S.



Hmong in Minnesota

Minnesota Hmong Populations by Community (2000 U.S. Census)

1. St. Paul – 24,389
 2. Minneapolis – 9,595
 3. Brooklyn Center – 1,346
 4. Brooklyn Park – 1,226
 5. Maplewood – 685
 6. Woodbury – 264
 7. Vadnais Heights – 219
 8. Rochester – 211
 9. Winona – 199
 10. Oakdale – 189
- The 2006 American Community Survey estimated more than 49,000 Hmong in Minnesota, community estimates put the actual population in the state between 60-70,000.
 - In addition to Rochester, and Winona, there are also outstate Hmong populations in Tracy/Marshall/Walnut Grove in Southwestern MN and in Duluth and Taylor's Falls

The picture shows Hmong Jao Fa Grocery on White Bear Avenue on Saint Paul's East Side



Hmong in Minnesota: A Diverse Community

- The Hmong community in Minnesota and the U.S. more generally is diverse with many subgroups, some of which overlap. It is important to understand that persons from these subgroups may hold very different views about important social issues in the community

Important Subgroups in the Minnesota Hmong Community may be identified as follows:

- Followers of the traditional Hmong Religion (a majority about 70% of the population), Hmong ceremonial ritualists and Shamans
- Hmong Christians (they belong to many denominations)
- Speakers of the Green and White Hmong dialects
- The 18 Hmong Clans and their Leaders
- Hmong Veterans who served during the War in Laos from 1963-75
- Hmong Professionals (Educators, Lawyers, Doctors, Non-Profit Organization Leaders) as well as Hmong Business Owners
- Activist Interest Groups on Issues such as Supporting the Human Rights of Hmong in Southeast Asia, Social Justice Issues in the U.S., and Women's Equity Issues
- Hmong Working Class Families (by far the majority of the population)
- Hmong refugees newly arriving from Wat Thamkrabok in Thailand

- It is crucial to understand that there is no one "leader" who speaks for the Hmong community or even completely understands the variety of views in the community. Decisionmakers should attempt to get input from a variety of sources in the Hmong community before making decisions or forming judgments. Younger, more "Americanized" leaders in particular, may not fully understand the feelings of large segments of the community pertaining to certain issues

Hmong Demographics in the U.S. 2006 American Community Survey

- Median Age of the Hmong Population in the U.S.: 19.1 Years compared to 36.4 years among the entire population of the United States
- % of the Hmong Population in the U.S. under 18 Years Old: 47% compared to 24.6% of the entire U.S. Population
- Average Hmong Household Size per occupied Housing Unit: 5.36 persons compared to 2.61 persons among the entire U.S. Population

The photo is from the 2002 Hmong New Year in Green Bay, WI. It was published by the Hmong Times Newspaper, September 15, 2002.



U.S. Hmong Educational Status (2006 American Community Survey)

Educational Attainment (Adults 25 and Older)

- 39.7% of Hmong-American Adults have less than a high school diploma compared to 15.9% of the entire U.S. population
- 60.3% of all adult Hmong-Americans have earned a high school diploma or higher compared to 84.1% of the entire U.S. population
- 12.6% of adult Hmong-Americans have earned a Bachelor's Degree or higher compared to 27.0% of the entire U.S. population
- The percentage of Hmong with a high school diploma and a Bachelor's Degree have more than doubled since 1990 showing considerable educational progress among Hmong people in America
- The 2006 American Community Survey indicates that Hmong men's educational attainment still exceeds that of Hmong women, though the gap has narrowed considerably since 1990. Anecdotal evidence suggests women have eliminated the gap and perhaps even pulled ahead in terms of enrollment and completion of higher education.

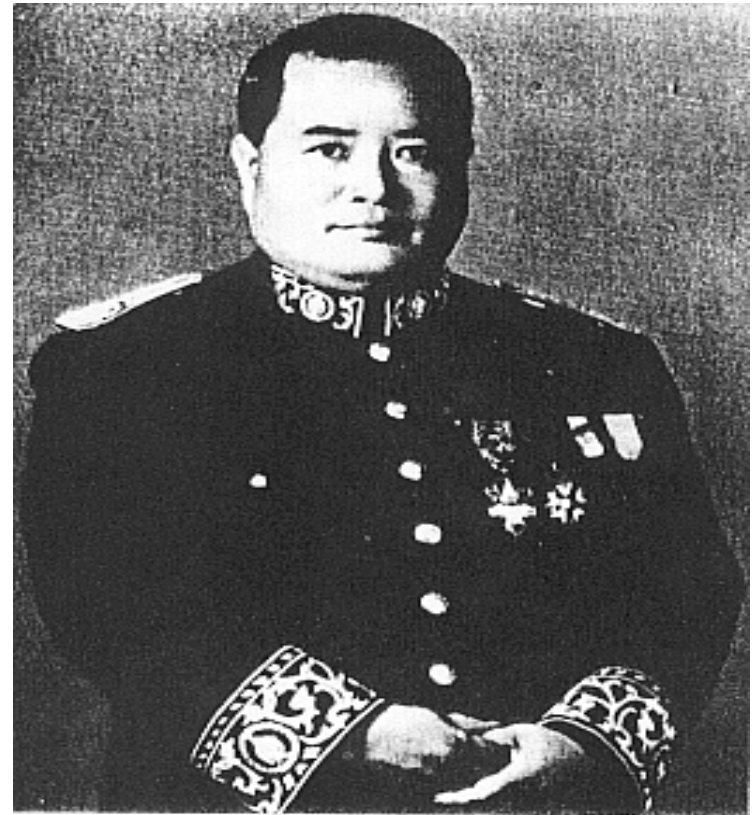
U.S. Hmong Socioeconomic Status (2006 American Community Survey)

- U.S. Hmong Median Family Income in 2006 was \$42,875 compared to \$58,526 among the entire U.S. population
- 26.4% of U.S. Hmong Families lived below the Poverty Level in 2006 compared to 9.8% of all U.S. Families
- The percentage of U.S. Hmong Families living below the Poverty Level fell from nearly 70% to less than 30% between 1989 and 2006
- In terms of job distribution, by far the largest percentage of U.S. Hmong adults were concentrated in Manufacturing Jobs – 33.1% - in 2006, this compares to the 11.6% of the entire U.S. adult population who worked in Manufacturing Jobs
- The U.S. Hmong Homeownership rate in 2006 was 54.1% up from 13% in 1990.

Hmong Hall of Fame

Touby Lyfoung

- Touby Lyfoung was an important Hmong political leader in Laos. He was born in 1917 in Nong Het, Laos
- In 1945 during World War 2, Touby Lyfoung helped organize the anti-Japanese resistance in Laos
- In 1958, Mr Lyfoung won the legislative elections in his province and was elected as Vice-President of the Laotian National Assembly. He was the first member of the Hmong minority to rise to such a prominent position in Laos
- From 1960 until 1974, Touby Lyfoung served as head of several ministries in the Royal Lao Government
- After the takeover of Laos by the Communist Pathet Lao in 1975, he was arrested and sent to a labor camp along the Vietnamese border where he died in 1979



Hmong Hall of Fame

General Vang Pao

- General Vang Pao was born in Laos
- Vang Pao joined the anti-Japanese resistance led by Touby Lyfoung at a very young age in 1945
- Vang Pao fought as a corporal, sergeant and then an officer under the French Union Army flag against the Communist Viet Minh until 1954 when the Geneva Conference granted independence to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos
- Vang Pao was named a Brigade General in the Royal Lao Army in 1964
- With CIA assistance, General Vang Pao led a fierce resistance to the North Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese Communists from 1961-1973
- General Vang Pao left Laos in 1975
- General Vang Pao is the founder of Lao Family Community, a Hmong social service organization with offices in several states

The photo shows General Vang Pao in Laos in the 1960s. Photo by Paul White.



Hmong Hall of Fame

Dr. Yang Dao

- Dr. Yang Dao is a scholar and educator. Dr. Yang Dao received his Ph.D. in social science from the Sorbonne University in Paris, France in 1972. He was the first Hmong to earn a PhD
- Dr. Yang Dao served in the Ministry of Planning of the Royal Lao Government from 1972-1974 and the Political Consultative Council, a National Coalition of the Kingdom of Laos from 1974-1975
- In 1983 Dr. Yang moved to the United States where he has continued his writing, editing several Hmong-related academic journals and publishing the book Hmong at the Turning Point in 1993
- Dr. Yang Dao has worked for the Saint Paul Public Schools and served on the boards of several major Minnesota institutions



Hmong Hall of Fame

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Senator Mee Moua

- Mee Moua was the first Hmong to be elected to a state legislative office in the United States in January 2002
- As a State Senator in Minnesota, Mee Moua represents the East Side of Saint Paul, a district with a large Hmong residential population
- Mee Moua was born in war-torn Laos in 1969. She and her family left Laos because her father was a medic who had assisted the US Soldiers during the Vietnam conflict. Ms. Moua and her family resettled in the United States in 1978
- Mee Moua is also employed as an Attorney



Hmong Hall of Fame

Representative Cy Thao

- Cy Thao was elected as a State Representative in Minnesota's District 65A in the November 5, 2002 election and re-elected in the November 2, 2004 election
- Cy Thao represents the Frogtown neighborhood of Saint Paul in the Minnesota State House
- Cy Thao was the second Hmong to win election to a state legislature in the U.S.
- Cy Thao is also a professional visual artist



Hmong Clans

The 18 Hmong Clans

1. Chang/Cha (Tsaab)
2. Chue (Tswb)
3. Cheng (Tsheej)
4. Fang (Faj)
5. Her (Hawj)
6. Hang (Taag/Haam)
7. Khang (Khaab)
8. Kong (Koo)
9. Lee/Ly (Lis)
10. Kue (Kwm)
11. Lor (Lauj)
12. Moua (Muas/Zag)
13. Pha (Phab)
14. Thao (Thoj)
15. Vang (Vaaj/Vaj)
16. Vue (Vwj)
17. Xiong (Xyooj)
18. Yang (Yaaj)

Hmong Clans

Functions of Hmong Clans

- Clans are Hmong Family Groups, the Clan Name is the Family Name
- Clans provide the basic form of social and political organization in Hmong society
- At birth, a Hmong person takes his or her father's clan name and remains a member for life with the exception of Hmong women who marry and take on new identities in their husbands' clans
- Hmong clans provide their members with social support. Members of a clan are expected to provide mutual assistance to one another. In the U.S. there continue to be Lee, Moua, Vue etc. clan associations for this purpose
- Hmong clans provide their members with legal and mediation assistance. Any dispute between two Hmong or different clans (such as a divorce) will typically be settled by leaders of the two clans
- Traditionally, clans also provide economic assistance to their members

Hmong Religion

- About 70% of Hmong in the U.S. continue to practice the traditional Animist Hmong Religion and Shamanism
- About 1/3 of the Hmong population in the U.S. are Christians. Hmong Christians belong to many denominations, but the largest number are members of the Christian Missionary Alliance Church

The photo shows a 12-year old Hmong-American Shaman. The photo is from The Split Horn film documentary website:

www.pbs.org/splithorn/shamanism.html



Traditional Hmong Religion

- Hmong who continue to practice Animism and Shamanism believe that a spiritual world continues to coexist with the physical world
- The Hmong believe in many spirit types including ancestral spirits, house spirits and spirits in the natural world
- Many ritual ceremonies are performed by the Hmong for the purpose of fulfilling the will of the ancestors and natural spirits
- The Hmong use Shamans as a way to maintain communication between the physical and the spiritual world
- Hmong people use Shamans to perform rituals and sacrifice animals with the goal of pacifying the various spirits and curing illnesses
- Hmong believe in reincarnation

Photo: The Split Horn is a 2001 documentary about a Hmong Shaman living in Appleton, WI with his family. From the Split Horn Website

www.pbs.org/splithorn/shamanism.html



Traditional Hmong Beliefs about Health and Medicine

Hmong Beliefs about the Causes of Illnesses

Non-Christian Hmong believe that illness is caused a wide variety of factors. Hmong beliefs about the causes of illness fall into 3 basic categories:

- **Natural or Non-Spiritual Causes of Illness** – The Hmong, like most other cultures, understand that many illnesses are caused naturally, either by the environment around them or by the natural processes of life and aging
- **Spiritual or Religious Causes of Illness** – *Ancestor, nature, and evil spirits* are all thought to be able to cause illness to people in certain cases. Unlike evil spirits, ancestor and nature spirits are perceived as being non-harmful in general and to only cause illness in people when they are offended
- **Other Causes of Illness** This category includes a broad range of other types of perceived causes of illnesses. One example from this category involves *Curses*. It is a common traditional Hmong belief that persons who have been wronged by another person have the power to curse the wrongdoer and bring about illness

Non-Christian Hmong use Shamans to diagnose and treat the causes of illness

Traditional Hmong Beliefs about Health and Medicine

Loss of Souls as a Cause of Illness

Hmong believe that an important *spiritual* cause of illness results from an individual losing some of the twelve (12) souls that are thought to dwell in the human body. For a person to be in good health, all twelve souls must be intact in the body

Souls may be lost in a variety of ways including:

- Sudden fright (for example a dog barking scares a young child)
- Fear or too much grief
- Capture by an evil spirit
- A soul trying to transfer to another being because they are unhappy

According to the Hmong belief system: many aches and pains, depression and even more serious symptoms of mental illness are caused by a person having lost souls

Source: Bruce Bliatout (1990). "Hmong Beliefs about Health and Illness." Hmong Forum, 1:41-45.

Traditional Hmong Beliefs about Health and Medicine

Western Medical Practices that May Conflict with the Traditional Hmong Belief System

- Surgery – Many Hmong believe that surgery may interfere with reincarnation after they die and/or surgery may open access to the body for evil spirits to enter
- Drawing Blood – Many Hmong feel that blood maintains balance in the body and that withdrawing blood will weaken the body
- Autopsies – Traditional Hmong believe that an autopsy on a deceased person may hinder reincarnation. For this reason, many Hmong believe they will have betrayed a family member if they allow an autopsy to be performed. More broadly, Hmong also believe it is disrespectful to allow the body of their relative to be dissected

Source: Dia Cha (2000). Hmong American Concepts of Health, Healing and Illness and their Experience with Conventional Medicine. PhD Dissertation, University of Colorado, Boulder.

Hmong Cultural Practices associated with Pregnancy

- Hmong believe a person is connected to the placenta (birth shirt in Hmong beliefs) for life
- Following birth, Hmong traditionally bury the placenta
- Traditionally, the placenta of a boy is buried beneath the main post of the house since it is considered the connecting link to the ancestral spirits, and a son is responsible for the spiritual obligations of the lineage. The placenta of a girl is traditionally buried under the parent's bed
- Hmong believe that at the time of death, the deceased collects the birth shirt (placenta) at the birthplace, and with the proper performance of rituals the soul can find its way back to the land of darkness and eventual rebirth back on Earth.
- On the third day after birth, a soul-calling and naming ceremony is held, Hmong do not believe the child is truly a person with a full complement of souls until this ceremony is held

Hmong Cultural Practices associated with Pregnancy

- Traditionally, Hmong believe the new mother should stay at home to rest with the newborn child for thirty (30) days following a birth
- Hmong believe the new mother should follow a special post-partum diet in the 30 day post-birth period. This diet includes “hot” as opposed to “cold” foods.
- Hot foods in the post-partum diet include fresh hot rice, and chicken boiled with fresh green herbs. The husband and/or mother-in-law will often cook these foods for the new mother
- The new mother and child are not encouraged to visit other households and in Southeast Asia, Hmong may place a taboo sign outside of the home to warn others of the status of the mother and the newborn

Hmong Funerals and the Hmong Funeral Ceremony

- Hmong believe that proper burial and worship of ancestors directly influence the health, safety and prosperity of the family
- Access to a traditional Hmong funeral ceremony is perceived as a religious freedom issue by non-Christian Hmong families.
- The Hmong funeral ceremony in Minnesota usually involves a full 3 day process, it is often longer in Southeast Asia. Family members usually will stay awake for most if not all of the 3 days to take part in ceremonies and give proper respect to the deceased
- Currently, there are only 2 Hmong funeral homes in the Twin Cities, creating long waits for many local Hmong families when loved ones die

Sources: Hmong Cultural Center staff and Bruce Bliatout (1993). "Hmong Death Customs: Traditional and Acculturated." In *Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death, and Grief: Diversity in Universality*, edited by D.K. Irish, K.F. Lundquist, and V.J. Nelsen, 79-100. Washington, D.C.: Taylor and Francis.

Hmong Funerals and the Hmong Funeral Ceremony

- The traditional (non-Christian) Hmong funeral ceremony involves an extensive set of rituals and ceremonial songs which are played on both the Qeej instrument and are orally recited
- The sounds of the Qeej (reed pipe) instrument are thought by Hmong to be essential in allowing the spirit of the deceased to find its way to the afterlife
- Besides the *Qeej player* and the accompanying drummer, another important participant in the Hmong funeral ceremony is the *Guide to the Spirit World* who orally recites several songs, and who lists the things that the family must provide the deceased's (12) souls for making a successful trip and explains how the souls are to make the trip
- In traditional Hmong funerals, animals are usually sacrificed and offered to the deceased for spiritual consumption as well as to take to the spirit world

Sources: Hmong Cultural Center staff and Bruce Bliatout (1993). "Hmong Death Customs: Traditional and Acculturated." In *Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death, and Grief: Diversity in Universality*, edited by D.K. Irish, K.F. Lundquist, and V.J. Nelsen, 79-100. Washington, D.C.: Taylor and Francis.

Hmong Marriages and the Hmong Marriage Ceremony

- Hmong may not marry a member of their own clan, no matter how distantly related. Marriage partners are chosen from among the other 17 clans.
- Hmong perceive a marriage as a relationship not only between two households but also between two clans
- Divorce is a taboo in traditional Hmong culture but is becoming more common among younger Hmong in the United States
- Hmong *Mej Koob* (May Kong) are marriage negotiators who work to resolve past problems between the families involved while also setting the *Dowry*. One *Mej Koob* represents the bride's family and the other represents the interests of the groom's family
- Hmong *Mej Koob* also perform marriage songs and rituals which have importance in traditional Hmong religion. For this reason, the continued and unrestricted use of *Mej Koobs* is seen as a religious freedom issue by many non-Christian Hmong in the U.S. Efforts to license or impose restrictions on the practice of *Mej Koobs* are seen as an offensive imposition on religious freedom by many non-Christian Hmong
- The *Dowry* paid by the husband's family to the wife's family varies, the 18 Clan Council in Minnesota has attempted to set a standardized *Dowry* of \$5,000

Hmong Marriages and the Hmong Marriage Ceremony

- Following marriage, it is usually expected that the wife will move in with her husband and her in-laws
- Many Hmong in the United States continue to be married only in the Hmong culture and they do not have U.S. marriage licenses. This sometimes causes problems in attaining health and other social program benefits. It also causes difficulties in cases of divorce and child support situations
- Traditionally in Southeast Asia, most Hmong marry as teenagers for family-based economic reasons. While some Hmong families may encourage their daughters to marry as teenagers, recent research in Minnesota has shown that many Hmong-American teenagers may actually be adopting early marriage patterns in an effort to gain independence from their families and not necessarily as a result of adherence to “traditional Hmong culture.”
- In Southeast Asia, a small minority of wealthy farmers as well as military and community leaders practiced polygamy. A small group of older Hmong men in the U.S. continues to practice polygamy, and are involved in more than one marriage in the Hmong culture (these are not usually official American marriages). Polygamy is very unusual among Hmong-Americans who are under 40 years old

The Hmong Language

- The Hmong language branches into two dialects: **White Hmong** and **Green (or Blue) Hmong**. The colors in these names represent the colors used in the traditional women's costumes of the different groups
- The differences between the White and Green Hmong dialects are probably not much greater than those which distinguish British and American English
- About equal numbers of the American Hmong population speak White and Green Hmong
- The majority of books published in the Hmong language are in White Hmong
- Over the past few years, some Green Hmong scholars in the U.S. have led a movement to get Green Hmong persons recognition as a separate group from White Hmong by using the Green spelling “Mong” instead of “Hmong”

The Hmong Language

- In the Modern Era, a Hmong writing system wasn't developed until the 1950s
- The Romanized Hmong writing system was developed by missionaries from the Christian Missionary Alliance Church who were working with Hmong Communities in Southeast Asia
- The Hmong language differs from English in that most words only have one syllable
- Even though a Romanized system is used, the sound system that goes along with the Hmong alphabet is very different from English

The Hmong Language

- There are 8 tones in the Hmong language. The tones completely change the meaning of words that may sound very much alike to non-Hmong
- The Hmong language uses tonal markers, which are the last letter at the end of each word. The markers are not pronounced but indicate the tone
- The Hmong language uses the following tonal markers which are underlined in this example of the hypothetical combination between Da + the tone.

1. Dam (low tone)
2. Das (low tone)
3. Dad (low tone)
4. Dag (breathy tone)
5. Da (no tone)
6. Daj (high long tone)
7. Day (high medium tone)
8. Dab (high short tone)

- In Hmong, **Nyob Zoo** = Hello. Pronounced Nah Zhong
- In Hmong, **Sib Ntsib Dua** = Goodbye. Pronounced She Gee Duo

Hmong Schoolchildren and School/Parent Relationships

- Many Hmong Children in Kindergarten to first or second grade find learning English difficult. Most Hmong families do not teach reading and writing in the Hmong language though the Hmong language is primarily if not exclusively spoken at home
- According to some studies, a large proportion of Hmong students are visual learners. Effective instructional strategies should include visual, and hands-on activities
- Hmong children and youth must deal with conflicting messages from their family and peer culture with the old culture still being practiced at home on a daily basis by their parents while they also have continued exposure to and pressure from the peer youth culture at home
- Most Hmong parents place a high value on their children's education but they may lack the resources or personal background to personally teach their children important academic skills. Communication must be established between parents and the schools so that each party can understand and respect the other's potential role in a partnership
- Many Hmong parents continue to practice corporal punishment in the home and strongly believe in disciplining their children in cases of misbehavior

Cultural Etiquette for Interacting with Traditional Hmong

Greetings and Communication

- The handshake may be a new concept to the traditional Hmong person, this is especially the case among women. Traditional Hmong usually do not shake hands with women. Many Hmong women feel embarrassed shaking the hands of a male. Traditionally, handshakes do not occur. Persons greet one another verbally. Holding hands too tightly during a handshake will embarrass Hmong women
- Most traditional Hmong families do not enjoy hearing direct comments about their children, especially infants and babies. A comment such as "your child is cute" is not looked upon favorably. Many Hmong believe that if a bad spirit hears such comments, it might come and take the child's soul away
- When talking to a Hmong person, he or she may not look directly at you or give eye contact. The person you are speaking to may look down or away from you. Traditionally looking directly into the face of a Hmong person or making direct eye contact is considered to be rude and inappropriate

Cultural Etiquette for Interacting with Traditional Hmong

Communication

- Hmong people tend to be humble. They usually do not want to show or express their true emotions in front of others. Often, they will say: "maybe" or "I will try" instead of giving a definite positive or negative reply. Sometimes they might say "okay" or "yes" which actually means "no", when they feel pressured
- Most traditional Hmong elders, especially men, do not want strangers to touch their heads, or those of their children, due to their religious beliefs and personal values
- Most traditional Hmong men take on an adult name after they have married and had their first child. The adult name is added to the first name. Most Hmong men prefer to be called by their adult name

Cultural Etiquette for Interacting with Traditional Hmong

Gender and Family Roles

- When conversing with a Hmong family, one should always ask for the head of the household which is usually the father
- It may be considered quite embarrassing and rude when outsiders assumingly label the members of a Hmong family as man or wife. If one does not know the family or the relationships between family members, one should ask
- Traditionally, it is considered inappropriate for the opposite genders to sit too close to one another when conversing. To avoid misinterpretations, a male should keep a distance between himself and a female when in conversation or in any type of encounter

Cultural Etiquette for Interacting with Traditional Hmong

Cultural Customs

- There are many unusual physical marks which might be found on the body of a Hmong person. These are commonly the result of a home treatment with tiger balm and other remedies for traditional healing and health problems such as colds and headaches. These marks may involve bruises or redness from cupping, spooning, or coining on the neck, shoulder, back, chest, forearms, and forehead
- Hmong who practice the traditional Hmong religion also may wear unusual accessories such as red necklaces made from silver and brass, white cloths around their wrists, and red or white strings on their wrists, necks, or ankles. These accessories may be worn for health and religious purposes

Useful Resource Websites

- Hmong Cultural and Resource Center
www.hmongcenter.org
- Hmong Studies Journal
www.hmongstudies.org
- Learn about Hmong
www.learnaboutthmong.com
- WWW Hmong Homepage
www.hmongnet.org

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