

Music
of the

H m o n g

S i n g i n g
Voices

and
T a l k i n g
Reeds



M u s i c

o f t h e

Hmong

Singing

V o i c e s

The Hmong are a tribal group from southern China and northern Southeast Asia,

25,000 of whom have recently come to the

United States from Laos as refugees. They have long been noted for their rich heritage

of oral literature, which includes stories,

mythologies, ritual texts and extemporized sung poetry. The present work will concentrate

upon the extemporized sung poetry, or songs, which contain many insightful com-

ments upon the traditional beliefs and values of the Hmong. This people now faces a drastically new way of life in the West in which their culture is in a precarious state of balance between survival and extinction, and it is hoped that the present volume will aid in explaining and stimulating interest in those traditions.

a n d

Talking

R e e d s

by Amy Catlin

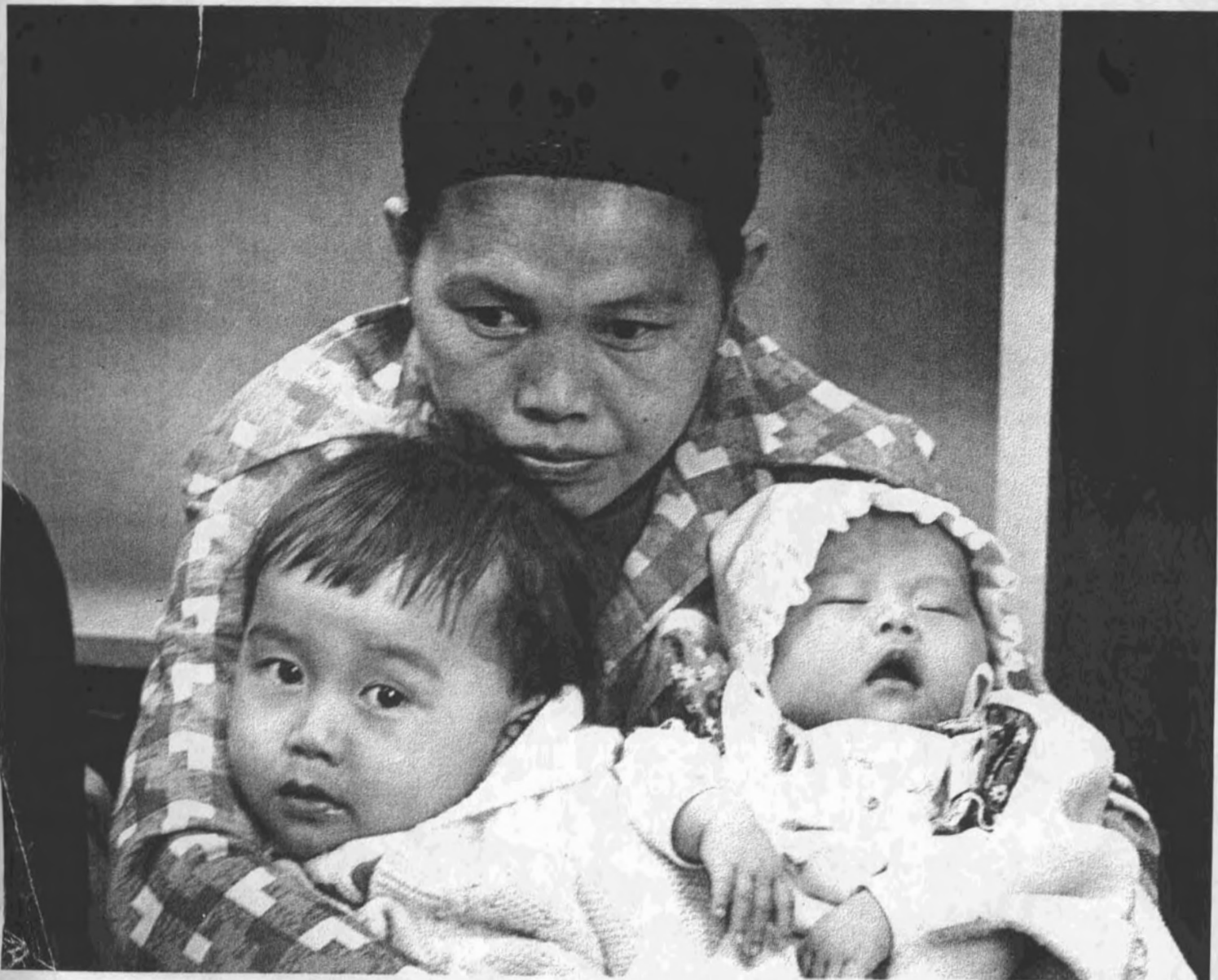
About half of the Hmong living in Laos were involved in the fight against the communist takeover of that country which finally succeeded in April, 1975. The Hmong helped the American military effort in Laos in that struggle, hoping that their own autonomy in the mountaintops where they were roving agriculturalists would be insured through the defeat of all unsympathetic lowland governance. Unfortunately, although they were extraordinary soldiers, navigators, pilots, gatherers of information and organizers of their own tribesmen, the war was lost. Along with it the Hmong lost their homes and villages as well, for any Hmong village found to have conspired with the United States military during the war was automatically subject to massacre by the Pathet Lao when they came to power in 1975. For this reason, thousands of Hmong men, families and whole villages fled to the safety of the Thai border across the Mekong River, where they were allowed to set up refugee camps and await repatriation in the West.

H m o n g

in the

Why?

West



The term "tribal" is applied to the Hmong, but it should not be misconstrued as an indication of "primitiveness."

The word simply means that Hmong society is organized according to clans,

all of whom theoretically at least recognize one individual as the leader of the entire tribe.

There are about twenty Hmong clans, whose names are listed here.

These spellings only roughly approximate the actual pronunciation in Hmong. For instance, the names *Fang*, *Hang*, *Khang*, *Chang*, *Vang*, and *Yang* are actually pronounced without the final "ng" sound.

Members of one clan must always marry outside their clan. A woman changes her clan to her husband's clan when she marries, and her children are born as members of their father's clan. In the United States, the clan names are used by the Hmong as surnames, whereas in Laos whenever an official name was needed the clan name preceded the given name. Thus, Hmong men who became famous in Laos are still known with the clan name first, such as: *Yang Dao*

The first Hmong to receive the Ph.D. degree in the subject of anthropology from the University of Paris.

He now lives in France.

Sometimes a Hmong man is given an additional honorific name by his wife's parents.

This third name is placed before the other two, and becomes part of the name by which he is addressed from that time forward. Thus, many older Hmong men have three names:

the honorific name,
the name given at birth,
and the clan name.

For instance, the leader of the Hmong in Providence, *Xia Xeu Kue*, belongs to the *Kue* clan; his name from childhood was *Xeu*, but at some point, after fathering at least one child, his parents-in-law bestowed the name "Xia" on him. From that time, he was called "Xia Xeu" by his friends and family.

			<i>Vang</i>
	<i>Xe</i>		
	<i>Thao</i>		<i>Vue, Vu</i>
<i>Fang</i>	<i>Chang</i>	<i>Moua</i>	<i>Cheng</i>
<i>Hang</i>	<i>Tchou, Chou</i>	<i>Phang</i>	<i>Xiong</i>
<i>Heu, Her</i>	<i>Txu</i>		<i>Yang</i>
<i>Kong</i>	<i>Khang</i>		
<i>Ku, Kue</i>	<i>Lo, Lor, Lau</i>		
	<i>Ly, Le, Li, Lee</i>		

H m o n g

Clans

Vang Pao

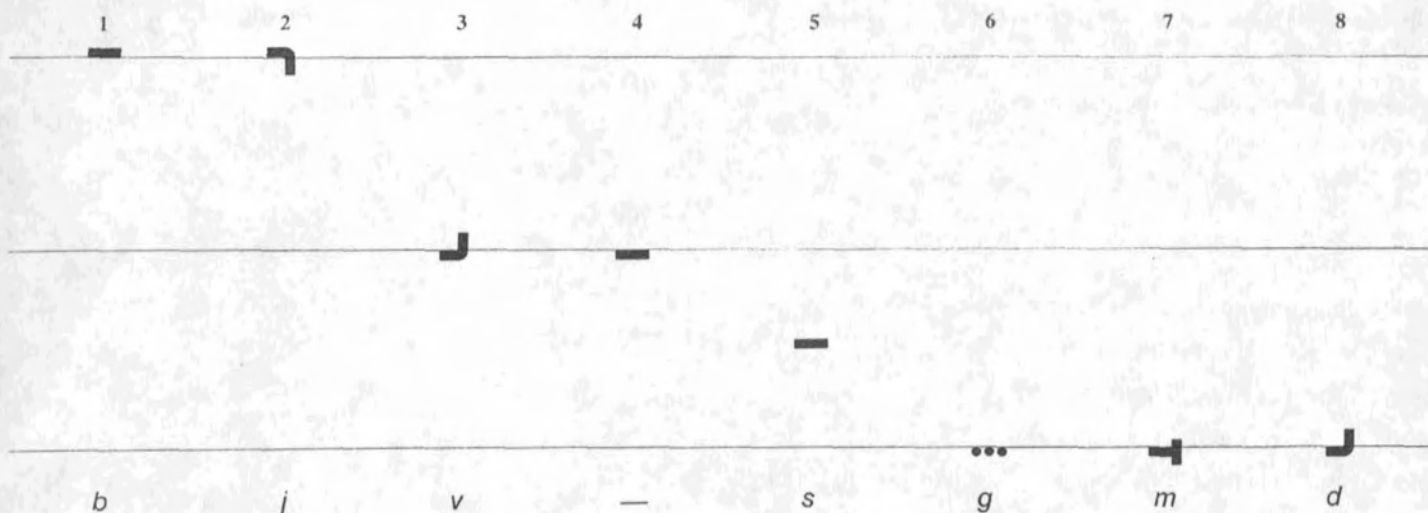
The general in charge of Hmong troops in the war against the Pathet Lao, now living in the United States.

Hmong is a monosyllabic tonal language containing eight different vocal tones.

This means that virtually any syllable can be pronounced with each of the different melodic contours, and the meaning of the word will change completely according to the tone which is used.

The

The tones can be shown on a graph as follows:



Seven of the eight tones are labelled with a letter in the graph: *b*, *j*, *v*, *s*, *g*, *m*, and *d*.

The unlabelled tone is the mid-level tone, pronounced at "middle" pitch and as a straight tone, that is, neither rising nor falling in pitch.

Four of the tones are level (*b*, —, *s*, *m*)
two are descending (*j*, *g*) and
two ascending (*v*, *d*).

Two of the tones have additional properties: the lowest level tone (*m*) must be pronounced with an abrupt glottal stop at the end of each syllable,

and

the low short descending tone (*g*) is always pronounced in a breathy, almost whispered manner.

H m o n g

These letters, *b*, *j*, *v*, —, *s*, *g*, *m*, and *d*, are written in the RPA system

at the end of each word in order to show the vocal tone to be used;

since all Hmong words end in vowels, these tone markers cannot be mistaken for consonants.

Language

The RPA (Roman Popular Alphabet) was devised in the 1950's by linguists from France

and America working in Laos; prior to that time, Hmong was an unwritten language.

Songs

of the

H m o n g

Hmong people never sing in groups, because their songs are always improvised at least to some extent. Thus, there are no songs which are sung exactly the same way by the same person twice. To sing is a highly creative act, in which the ingenuity of the singer is displayed for his or her audience.

The method of transferring the vocal tones to musical tones does not follow the exact contours of the words as they are spoken, but there is a fairly consistent system nevertheless. Since Hmong melodies have only four notes, whose pitches can be chosen by the singer, some speech tones must be sung to the same pitches. This means that the listener must be very alert, and from the context he must guess what the correct spoken tone for each word should be.



The chart below shows how the spoken tones are transferred to the four notes of the melody.

1 (highest note) *b* (highest tone) *1 v* (rising tone)
 2 — (mid-level tone) *2*
 3 *g,s,m*
 4 (lowest note) *j* (falling tone)

There are about twenty different genres of songs, each dealing with a different sort of experience.

The list below gives the White Hmong name for each genre.

kwv txhiaj plees
love songs
(the most frequently sung genre)

kwv txhij ua nyab
songs lamenting the impending status of a
young girl to be married, when she
becomes a daughter-in-law

kwv txhiaj cia nyab
songs sung by the young husband asking
that she not leave him

kwv txhiaj tuag
eulogies for the dead, recounting their life
history

kwv txhij ncaim
songs of separation from the beloved, a
close relative or friend

kwv txhiaj ntsuag
songs telling the sadness of orphans and
widows





As an illustration of the influence of tone on the meaning of a word, consider the syllable “*pa*.”

Written simply “*pa*,” without any tone marker at the end of the word, it is pronounced in a mid-level tone, and it means “air, breath, or gas.”

However, if the same syllable is pronounced in the high straight tone, indicated by the tone marker “*b*” at the end of the word, “*pab*,” it means “to help, assist.”

The following list shows the syllable in seven of the eight possible positions, with the corresponding meaning for each:

pab

1. to help, assist
2. a classifier indicating a group or flock

paj

flower, flowery

pav

to bind, tie into a package, tie around

pa

air, breath, gas

pam

1. a blanket
2. to prepare, provide for
3. funeral rites (the original tone for “*pag*” above, which only occurs in certain contexts)
4. a classifier for bodily wastes.

pas

1. a staff, rod
2. a lake
(depending on the classifier used)

pag

1. part of a two-word unit indicating a type of melon which tastes like a cucumber
2. funeral rites

This syllable has been chosen because it appears in the Hmong term for their famous embroidery, usually written in English as

“*paj ntaub*,”
“*pan dau*”

or

“*pa ndau*.”

As the list above shows, the word “*paj*”

means, “flower, flower.”

The second word and is pronounced in a high, straight tone, we would use the same intonation to say “beep, beep.” We would use the “*j*” high falling tone to say emphatically, “Why?”

means “cloth.”

Now try transferring those intonations to “*pa ndau*” and you will be pronouncing the term with the correct melodic contours.

As the list shows, a mistake in tone for the first word could have you saying many totally unrelated things: “help(ful) cloth,”

“bind(ing) cloth,”

“breath(y) cloth,”

“staff cloth,”

“lake cloth” (whatever that might be!),

“blanket cloth,”

or “funeral cloth.”

If the second word, *ntaub* (*ndau*) is pronounced with the incorrect tone, the possible mistakes increase geometrically!

Incidentally, the word Hmong is written in RPA as *hmoob*. The double “*o*” means a nasalization of the vowel “*aw*.” The letter “*h*” is pronounced by closing the lips and exhaling through the nose. The high straight tone is used, as shown by the tone marker “*b*.”

Thus, the word “*Hmong*” nearly rhymes with “song”;

it does *not* rhyme with “sung.”

The following is a composite translation of
two songs sung by

Song Vu Chang, age 75,

and *Chia Chue Kue*, age 65.

to the students in the Providence public schools in February and March, 1981.

They show how the
singer directly addresses his audience by
composing poetry to suit the occasion.

Young girls and boys
You are so cute!
It shows that your parents really knew how to give you birth.
But I am not so attractive as you.
It must mean that my parents knew less about giving birth, I suppose.
I hope you still enjoy my visit here, in spite of all that!
Boys and girls, when you became about 6 years old it was time to begin school
In this country, you must go to school for many years in order to have a good job.
You must learn to read and write and many other things about life in America.
You must listen to your teachers and do as they say.
Be kind to each other so that everyone can be happy.
The older children must try to help the younger ones to learn.
Then you will be prepared to be an adult and take care of your own family.
You may have an office job, or you may even become a doctor or lawyer, or even the president of the United States!
It is better not to fall in love until after you have finished your schooling.
After you graduate, you may have a party with food and liquor.
Don't forget to invite your principal and your teachers!
Without them, you could not have learned so much.

Sometimes the remarkably rich folklore and mythology of the Hmong is a subject for a song,
as the following example sung by *Chia Chue Kue*

How Man Lost His Fur

Long ago, humans had their own fur,
And the spirits of earth and heaven were not invisible.
At that time, men and women used to kill their own brothers, the animals.
This made the spirits very angry.
The spirits decided to put ointment in the eyes of the humans,
Which made them blind to the spirits forever.
Then the spirits stole the fur of the humans.
Ever since, the spirits have remained invisible to humans.
And humans must work very hard to clothe themselves.

The Hmong make and play several musical instruments, many of which use the principle of the *free reed*.

A free reed is a vibrating tongue which does not need to beat against a solid surface

(as a clarinet reed does)

or another vibrating reed

(as an oboe reed does).

The same type of reed is found in the harmonica, accordion, and harmonium, and all of these instruments

evolved after a free reed organ was brought to St. Petersburg from Southern China or

Laos in the 18th century.

H m o n g

Each instrument plays the same music as is sung.

Instruments

An instrumentalist nearly always has in mind a particular *"kwv txhiaj"*
(extemporized sung poem)

as he plays, and if the listeners are knowledgeable in the art,

they can understand the words as he plays
their tones on the instrument.



kwv txhiaj kawn ntawn
songs to lament the departure of a young
man who must leave his village to study in
a school

kwv txhaij yeeb
songs about smoking opium

kwv tshiaj cawv
songs about drinking alcohol

lus taum
moralising songs

zaj tshoob
wedding songs

zaj pam tuag
songs for the funeral ritual

kwv txhiaj nriav kwv tij
songs about searching for one's lost parents

kwv txhiaj tsiab
songs of the New Year Festival

kwv txhiaj tsiv teb tsaws chaw
songs about emigrating from one's village
or homeland

kwv txhiaj rog
songs of war

hab huam
humorous songs

In every verse, there may be any number of lines, of any length.

When a singer extemporizes a song, he
must follow certain poetic rules.

The rhyme scheme is set up like a puzzle,
which the listeners appreciate, trying to
guess how the singer will solve the problem

he creates.

First, perhaps after several lines of formulaic verse, a line is sung whose last word must be rhymed in
a subsequent line. It is not known until this
second rhyming word appears, however,

which line is going to be rhymed.

Usually, but not always, the rhyme not only contains
the same vowel as the word it rhymes with,
but it also uses the same vocal tone.

Here are two lines from a song which show a typical rhyme:

Niam yais! Txiv leej tub cas lub pas dej tsis teev los tsis ntsiab.

Oh! Young man, why is the water standing in the pond not *clear*?

Cas plees nkauj nraum no yim deev los yim siab.

Why is it so for this romantic young woman?

The more the flow of love and courting, the more the flow of pain from my *heart*.

In order to complete the verse,

another pair of lines must be composed which replace
the original two rhyming words with
another pair of words, which also rhyme
with each other,

but not with the original rhyming pair.

The second pair of lines from the same song show the process:

Niam yais! Txiv leej tub cas lub pas dej tsis teev los nro.

Oh! Young man, why is the water standing in the pond *murky*?

Cas pleej nkauj nraum no yim deev los yim nco yuas txiv leej tub.

Why is it so for this romantic young woman?

The more the flow of love and courting, the more I *long for you*, young man.

As can be seen by the position in the last line of the rhyming word *nco*,
rhyming words need not necessarily come at the absolute end of a line.

Sometimes
they are even near the middle of the line.

The singer may intersperse many other unrhymed lines among the four essential ones while he or she is thinking of a way to solve the puzzle.

Thus,

suspense is built up among the listeners as they anticipate the

“beautiful-sounding words”

which rhyme with each other, and complete the meaning of the verse.

Songs are sung for informal gatherings of two or more people, during the ballgame for courting at New Year's as well as at the funeral ritual in order to entertain the deceased or to instruct him in the path to heaven. Young women are considered to be most desirable as wives if they can sing well, and when a well-known female singer becomes engaged, many young men for miles around may feel sad. After marriage, however, a woman is no longer supposed to sing. Men may continue to do so, and they are entirely responsible for the music performed at the three-day funeral ceremonies. Children do not sing until they begin their courtship so there are no children's songs, although parents do sing lullabies.



Again, vocal tones are not exactly matched by the musical tones.

but the same system of transference applies as in the vocal music.

Thus

it is a system of communicating similar to some "talking drums,"
and can even be thought of as "talking reeds".

Instruments are especially useful for people

who might be too shy to sing the words they want to say,
since most often the subject is love and courtship.

Thus, they function as a mask for the words the musician is thinking.

The most typical instrument for courting,

and also the simplest in construction, is the jaw harp (or Jew's harp) called *nja* (*ncas*).

Made of a flat sheaf of copper in which a
fine incision outlines the tongue which has
been cut from its center, the *nja* is held by
one hand between the lips. The other hand
strums the end, horizontally, causing the
reed to vibrate, while the player lightly
inhales and exhales through his or her lips.

By altering the shape of the mouth cavity,

different partials of the vibrating copper reed are amplified, creating notes which
again convey the tones of the words to be
transmitted.

The *nja* is often played in the night by a young suitor outside the house of his beloved.

She may reply with her own *nja*
or another instrument,

and the dialogue can continue for hours. It is difficult for us to
imagine the quiet which would allow a dialogue
of these barely audible instruments

across such a distance.

If a much smaller (i.e. one inch) and thinner piece of copper has a similar reed cut into it,

the reed can be attached to the side of a bamboo flute. By covering the entire
reed with the mouth and either inhaling

or exhaling with gentle pressure on the
reed, a

free reed pipe is formed

Sometimes this
instrument is called a vibrating flute, but
since there is a reed involved, it is not prop-
erly a flute. We have no parallel instrument
in the West, but they are common in Southeast Asian hill regions.

The Hmong call theirs *raj nplaim* (pronounced roughly as "cha mblay" rhyming with "my")
meaning "a tube with a reed".

It may have three or four holes for fingering

the different pitches of the melody. Again, the poem
is thought and then played through the instrument,

which again functions as a "talking reed."

Other Hmong instruments include a recorder, *raj pum liv*, sometimes made in small sizes for children,

buffalo horn trumpets, and

the bowed fiddle *xim xos* (pronounced “see saw”).

A single leaf from a certain tree,
curled inside the mouth and set in vibration by the breath,
can also serve as a vehicle for poetry when other instruments are not at hand,

such as on a path

when one sees a pretty girl and needs to
attract her attention with courting music.

The Hmong mouth organ *qeej* or
geng (pronounced “cane”, more or less)

is the most important instrument

for the three-day funeral ritual,

and is also played for the festival at New Year.

Basically, it is a multiple free-reed pipe,
whose tubes are inserted into a wooden wind chest where the reeds are protected.

Six pipes play six different notes: the lowest and highest function as drones, and the middle four
function as the four notes to which all texts can be sung.

These pipes are often curved
before being inserted into the windchest,
forming a beautiful arch which gracefully

twists and turns as the player dances.

Sometimes acrobatic feats such as somersaults are performed by the musician/ dancer.

In the funeral ritual, lengthy texts
are blown on the pipes, while specially pre-
scribed steps are danced symbolizing the
various stages of the journey which the soul
must take to reach heaven. Spinning, usu-
ally done in multiples of three, may be
designed to confuse any evil spirits who
might be following the soul to the spirit
world. Large circular floor patterns denote
the various stages as they are traversed in
the soul’s horseback ride to join the souls
of the ancestors. It takes several years for a
player to learn all the texts which he must
play virtually continuously during the
three-day rites, interspersed with entertain-
ing pieces to amuse the dead person’s soul.

Some of the texts explain why the person
died, why he was born, what the purpose of
life is, and a complete explanation of the
Hmong cosmology is given in the course of
the ritual. A large drum accompanies the
geng during the rituals only,

as well as a gong,

but never during festivals.

There is a legend relating the origin of the *geng*.

Illness and death came to a young woman,

Nkauj Liag

At that time,

men did not know how to organize funerals.

There was a saying among them then which went like this:

The wife of *Shau* who lives in the immense sky

Knows a lot of science.

The old *Shau*, who lives on the moon,

He also knows a lot.

Let us see the wife of *Shau*

And we too will know a great deal.

The people went to *Shau's* wife, who taught them, saying:

"You know illness and death now, but not how to make funerals. This is what you must do: Cut the 'false mahogany' to make a windchest, hammer copper to make reeds, and cut bamboo to make pipes. Thus, you will make a *geng*. Then, find a cowskin and stretch it over a wooden body to make a drum. With their sounds, you will accompany the soul of young *Nkauj Liag* to the realm of the spirits."

The people returned and did so, and to this day, people become ill and die,

but they

know how to organize funerals.



The Hmong have recently begun composing modern songs with rock band accompaniment, performed by young Hmong men in their own language but with melodies totally different than their traditional sung poetry. These songs are performed at the New Year Festival and weddings for social dancing. They tell of the new problems which Hmong people face in the West: separation from other Hmong, a different society to which they must make immense adjustments, the possibility of losing their cultural identity in the process, and the importance of helping one another. But the majority of the songs are still love songs, now amplified for hundreds of people to hear at once, being sung in a modern urban setting they could have hardly imagined back in the mountains of Laos.

Modern
Songs
of the

H m o n g



