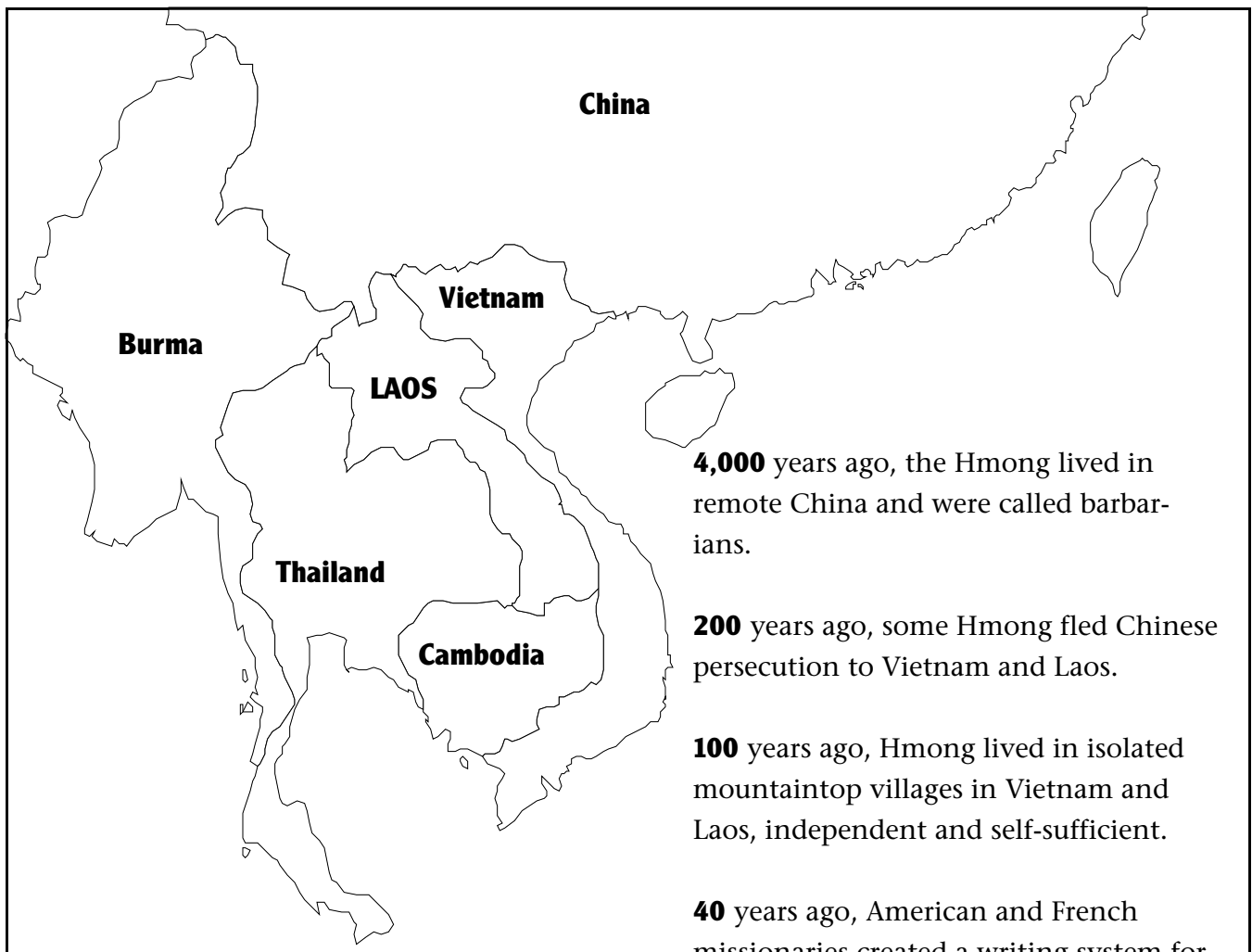


History



4,000 years ago, the Hmong lived in remote China and were called barbarians.

200 years ago, some Hmong fled Chinese persecution to Vietnam and Laos.

100 years ago, Hmong lived in isolated mountaintop villages in Vietnam and Laos, independent and self-sufficient.

40 years ago, American and French missionaries created a writing system for the Hmong language.

30 years ago, some Hmong defended their villages against Communist takeover and became tough guerilla fighters in the U.S.-backed “secret army.” Villages disrupted by the fighting could no longer grow their own rice, and came to depend on “rice from the sky.”

20 years ago, Laos fell to the Communists, and Hmong fled to Thailand as refugees. Many young Hmong were born and raised in the refugee camps, where families depended on “rice from the United Nations.” Refugees are people who cannot return home for fear of being killed. Nations of the world eventually provide a safe place for refugees to live.

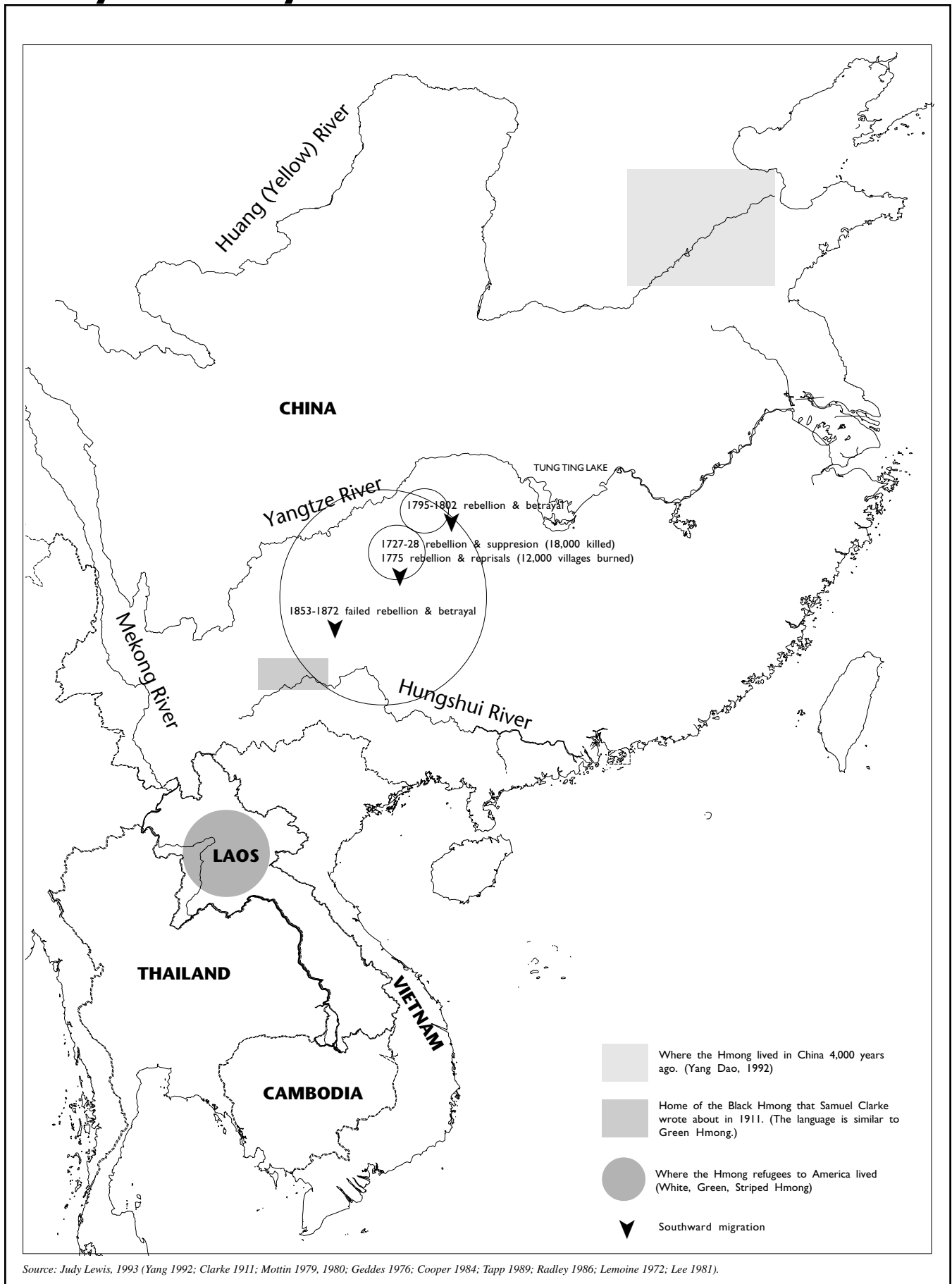
Today, 120,000 to 150,000 Hmong are in American cities, learning to live new lives. Other Hmong refugees live in France, Canada, Australia, and South America. Hmong who were never refugees live in Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, and China.

Today and tomorrow, Hmong will contribute to the strength of their new homelands, and will continue to build networks with the Hmong who live in other countries.

Hmong in America: Refugees From a Secret War

Southeast Asia Community Resource Center (Folsom Cordova Unified School District), Department of Anthropology, CSU Sacramento, Chippewa Valley Museum, and National Endowment for the Humanities.

Early History



Source: Judy Lewis, 1993 (Yang 1992; Clarke 1911; Mottin 1979, 1980; Geddes 1976; Cooper 1984; Tapp 1989; Radley 1986; Lemoine 1972; Lee 1981).

Identity: Hmong & Clans

Hmong v. Non-Hmong

The first level of identity is to be **Hmong**, as distinct from other non-Hmong peoples. The word *hmoob* ('Hmong'), according to Geddes (1976:55) represents the concept of "clan." However, other peoples of the world refer to themselves by a word that translates as "the people," distinguishing themselves from all others, who are not like them: *Inuit* (called "Eskimo" by most non-Inuit), *Ankwehonwe* ("Mohawk"), *Ashinabe* ("Algonkian"), *Diné* ("Navajo"), *Deutsch* ("German"). It is likely that the word *hmoob* functioned in a similar way, to indicate, for example, that this *Vang* is *Hmong*, not Chinese or some other group. The oft-quoted meaning "free man" was a misstatement of something said by Yang Dao to *National Geographic* photographer and writer W. E. Garrett (1974:78): "We have always called ourselves Hmong, which means 'free men'." At about the same time, Yang Dao wrote in his doctoral dissertation, originally in French, "The word 'Hmong' means man or human being. It is the name by which the people have always called themselves" (Yang Dao 1993:xvi).

Clans

When asked to describe their society, Hmong first tell about their **clans**. Hmong cannot marry a person with the same clan name. Those to whom marriage is forbidden are *kvv tij* ('old brother, young brother'); all others are *neej tsa*. After greeting a stranger and inquiring about his or her clan, the next question concerns the identity of the ancestor three or four generations distant, and the details of the spirit worship and taboos, particularly the details of the funerary rituals. Individuals who have the same rituals are considered to be lineage kin.

Lineage and other groups

The most meaningful group to an individual male is the **lineage**, or those males

who are descended from a common ancestor. In actual practice, within the lineage (*caj ceg*) is a group of related males who prove to be compatible and willing to work cooperatively; these relationships are closer and stronger than the general *caj ceg* relationships. This subset of the lineage form a *pab pawg* or *txheej ze*. This group of people help one another and benefit from the reputation that the group builds. Most members are actual kin, but non-kin can also become part of the group.

Marriage connections

Women become part of their husbands' families when they marry. The ideal partners for marriage come from *neej tsa* (relatives of a man's mother or grandmother), so that a woman's mother-in-law might also be her aunt or great-aunt. In the old days, a woman taught her daughter just the basics of cooking, household chores, and needlework or batik skills. A girl's mother-in-law expected to complete her training, so that her skills fit well with the family and sublineage.

Knowing who is who

Hmong have been interested in indentifying kin for over 4,000 years, but they have had a writing system for only the past 40 years. How did people identify relatives?

Men compare the details of household rituals and the family oral history. If ritual details match, then they must have had the same ancestor at some time in the past, because the rituals are learned by watching and listening to elders.

Women may have produced needlework designs that were specific to the lineage. All evidence is lost to time, but since needlework (particularly the collar) is learned from the female relatives, it is likely that different families had slightly different designs. As the lineages connected with more and more new lineages through marriage, the women borrowed new ideas from one another, and the distinctions blurred.

Hmong clans in the United States.

White Hmong		Green Hmong	
English spelling	Hmong (RPA)	English spelling	Hmong (RPA)
Fa	Faj	Fang	Faaj
Ha	Ham	Hang	Haam
Her	Hawj	Her	Hawj
Kha	Khab	Khang	Khaab
Kong	Koo	Kong	Koo
Kue	Kwm	Kue	Kwm
Lo, Lor	Lauj	Lo, Lor	Lauj
Lee, Ly	Lis	Lee, Ly	Lis
Moua	Muas	Moua	Muas
Pha	Phab	Phang	Phaab
Thao, Thor	Thoj	Thao, Thor	Thoj
Cha	Tsab	Chang	Tsaab
Cheng	Tsheej	Cheng	Tsheej
Chue	Tswb	Chue	Tswb
Va	Vaj	Vang	Vaaj
Vue	Vwj	Vue	Vwj
Xiong	Xyooj	Xiong	Xyooj
Ya	Yaj	Yang	Yaaj

To the Hmong way of thinking, an individual is identified by membership in different kinds of groups—clan, lineage, sublineage, dialect group, region, and so on.

Individual names are not used to identify people unless they are famous (have a “loud name”). A person who in America is called Neng Lee would be referred to as (for example):

Hmong Lee, son of Cher Pao

A generalized *paj ntaub* pattern can be used to demonstrate relationship of social groups.

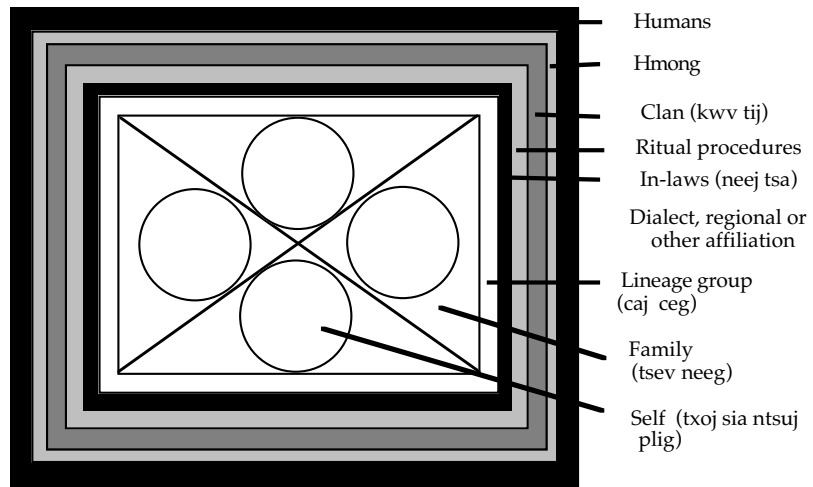


Diagram: Judy Lewis, 1993; influenced by Geddes, 1972.

Identity

Clan identity is important to marriage, but other kinds of group membership are important to relationships and mutual help. Hmong identify themselves by dialect group, lineage or sublineage, region, religion, education, and political views.

Clothing and dialect differences mark the three main groups of Hmong in the United States: **White Hmong** (*hmoob dawb*), **Green Hmong** (*moob ntsuab* or *moob leeg*), and **Striped Hmong** (*hmoob txaij*).

White Hmong from Xieng Khouang province, wearing a new-style “rooster” hat.



White Hmong from Luang Prabang.



Striped Hmong from Sam Neua province.



Green Hmong from Xieng Khouang province.

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Silverwork

Silver is a visible sign that a family has produced enough to feed itself and had enough left over to sell. Silver bars were used as currency. Hmong silversmiths crafted silver bars into necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and costume decorations. They scratched intricate designs into medallions, and the patterns resemble the batik and stitchery done by women. French coins were popular additions to costume, and replica coins are made today for jingly coin belts and bags. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, necklaces were made from aluminum or titanium (from the downed aircraft), but today necklaces are pure silver.

Luang Prabang style necklace of silver. The rings are hollow, worn in the front, and the chains dangle down the back.



Engraved medallion that hangs in back for Luang Prabang style neckrings and in front for Xieng Khouang style necklaces.

Engraved end pieces of a neckring.



Three engraved bracelets.



Coin belts and bags. (Thai White Hmong, Khek Noy).



Necklace chains dangle down the back. (Thai Hmong, Khek Noy region).



Xieng Khouang style necklace in aluminum. The neck ring portion is solid. Chains are linked and elaborated and hang in front.

Tools & Weapons

rab hlau (hoe)

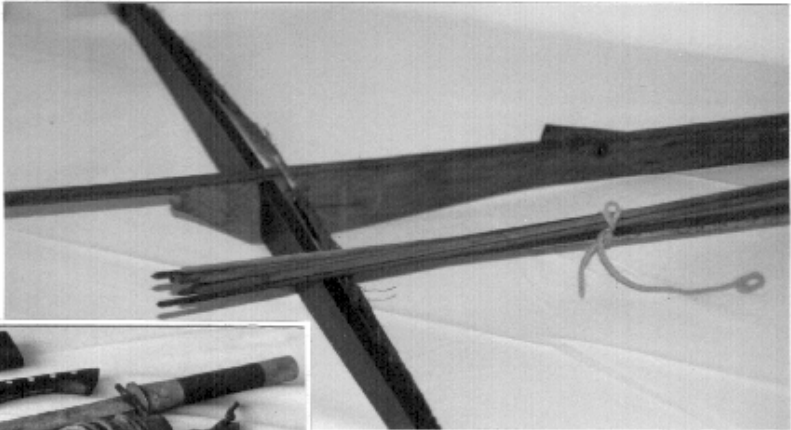


rab taus (axe)

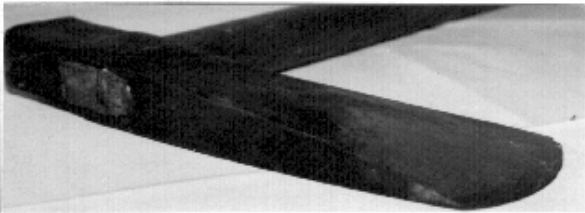
rab rauj (hammer)

rab txuas (brush knife)

rab hneev (crossbow)



cov riam (knives)



rab taus (axe)

Oral expression

While composing and singing *kwv txhiaj* (**sung poetry**), the girls catch balls in their right hands, and throw them back underhanded to the boys facing them. As the two throw and catch the ball, they exchange verses of the song, created extemporaneously as they sing. The ways in which the girl answers the boy's verses tell him whether or not she is interested in him, and vice-versa. The mental agility is also evident, as the verses are complicated and interrelated, with pairs of rhymes that contain semantic pairs, often laced with innuendo.

The instrumental equivalent to sung poetry is music produced with the *qeej* ("**windpipe**"), the *raj* ("**flute**"), the *ncas* ("**jew's harp**"), and even the *nplooj* ("**leaf**"). Amy Catlin (1981:171) calls this kind of song "surrogate speech" in that the notes blown on the instrument are in reality the tones and even the vowels of speech; only the consonants are lost. The musical instruments usually play verses that follow the same structure as sung poetry.

Hmong say that the musical instruments served a practical purpose: When young men went visiting girls at night (*mus yos hluas nkauj*), creeping into dark villages, the instruments helped identify them as friendly visitors, not thieves or enemies.



Tossing the ball (*ɔov ɔov*) and exchanging verses of sung poetry. (Thai Hmong)



jew's harp (*rab ncas*)



Blowing the windpipe (*tshuab qeej*).



Flute (*lub raj*).



Performing sung poetry (*hais kwv txhiaj*).



Cosmology



Xwm kab, or household altar to the ancestors and household spirits.

A household ritual, calling the spirits (*hu plig*) to come home. This ritual is performed whenever spirits are wandering or when there is a need to ensure good health, wealth, happiness to the members of the family.

Every group of people has a system of beliefs about the world, the cosmos, that help make sense of things that happen. Hmong beliefs are based on the behavior of spirits that inhabit people, houses, trees, rivers, crops, and even silver. Every household has a household altar that is renewed each new year, with the household head using rituals and chants learned from the father and other lineage kin.

Herbalists know how to use plants to relieve symptoms of ill-being, and every household has someone who knows how to use herbs for relieving symptoms.

The shaman is the one who can enter the world of the evil spirits and change what they do. There are only a few shamens, and they are used when household rituals fail to bring about a remedy, or when misfortune strikes a household.

A relatively small percentage of Hmong have converted to Christianity. There is friction between Christian and traditional Hmong, particularly when Christianity requires the abandonment of all traditional practices, even those that help identify lineage kin.



Shaman's tools



Split cow horn
(used to communicate with the spirits).

Shaman's altar
(*lub thaj neeb*)



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Paj ntaub, “flower cloth”



Of the ethnic markers, the Hmong *paj ntaub* (‘flower’ ‘cloth’) is the most immediately recognizable, and enduring over space and time.

Generally speaking, the cut-and-reverse appliqué and embroidery is the specialty of the White Hmong, and the batik, cross-stitch, and layered appliqué is the specialty of the Green Hmong. Both groups have a decorated collar piece; those with cut-and-reverse appliqué and embroidery, worn face up, are White Hmong, and those with layered appliqué or cross-stitch worn face down, are Green Hmong. All except the

White Hmong (who sometimes wear black pants) wear front-tied pleated skirts, the opening covered by an apron, and overtied with colorful or decorated sashes. Green Hmong skirts are based on indigo-dyed batik, while White Hmong skirts are white. All wear some kind of silver neck ring, some with the chains hanging down in front, some with the chains



hanging down in back. The headdress and hairstyle show extreme variety, as do the details of embroidery and appliqué. Skirts, sashes, and collars are elaborately decorated with patterns that, like fingerprints, are unique but composed of familiar elements.



The pieces in evidence today in the United States—**decorative squares**, dresses, aprons, pillow covers, bedspreads, checkbook covers, and scenic panels—are innovations for the marketplace based on elements learned from sewing the traditional pieces, both White and Green Hmong. The propor-

tions of the commercial decorative squares are carried over from the *noob ncoos*, or funeral squares.

The **story cloths**, for which there is no Hmong name other than *paj ntaub*, represent a distinct change from the decorative squares. There is no piece of traditional textile that contains embroidered figures showing actions in settings, although the Lao, Cambodian, and Thai wall embellishments contain figures in secular or spiritual activities. Bessac (1988:27) speculates that Miao from China have taught Laotian Hmong women a representational stitchery that is common in the Guizhou, Yunnan, and Sichuan provinces of China. Peterson, who researched the creation of story cloths in Ban Vinai refugee camp says (1988:8), “most concur that sponsors organizing sales noticed and encouraged a newly developed vernacular form that struck them as more marketable ... ”

Making a living



Hillside of Hmong fields in northeastern Thailand. The trees and brush are chopped down and left to dry. They are then set afire, and the ash fertilizes the soil. After a few seasons, the fields are abandoned and the elephant grass soon takes over. In Thailand, the Hmong are no longer allowed to “slash and burn” new fields, but are offered roads, water, and a school in exchange for a promise not to clear new lands or to grow the opium poppy as a cash



crop. Villagers are learning to grow cabbage, garlic, mangoes, coffee, and other market crops for sale, but nothing yet approaches the poppy for its exchange value and

ease of transportation.



A family without a water buffalo is destitute, and cannot meet its obligations in times of the death of elders or crises in health and well-being.

Roads are the key to a better life. Travel by motorcycle or truck allows villagers to take

goods to the city to sell, and allows merchants to travel to the villages to buy and sell. Roads also allow for access to

health care and education. Even when there are roads, as there are to this tourist village of Doi Pui in Thailand, girls seldom go to school beyond three years at the village school. To go further, families would have to send a girl to a town or city to live with strangers and to pay for tuition, books, uniforms, and living expenses.



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War & escape



In our area the war started in 1960. The Vietnamese came from Vietnam to bother us. Our leaders requested weapons, carbines, from Touby Lyfoung. (Nao Cha Xiong, Wisconsin)

The war automatically affected you and your life. You felt disturbed by the war and you felt

compelled to get involved with it. Even if no one offered you a gun, you felt you needed to protect your village by looking for weapons. The enemies would burn your village to ash. They didn't avoid shooting civilians. I guess no one forced me to be recruited, but myself. The benefit was your rights, your property, your village, and your family. (Pang Cha Pha, Wisconsin).

I was a soldier from 1960 to 1964, a radio operator from 1965 to 1970, and a commando beginning in 1970. I fought the last battle in Salaphukhun in 1975 which led to the exile of General Vang Pao. We fought with the Chao Fa (resistance fighters) until 1979. (Nao Chao Xiong, Wisconsin)

Our General Vang Pao will come back. That's what every one of us thought. But it was only five days after he left Long Cheng, his headquarters, which was a three-day walk from my village. Half the village had escaped and there was no choice for my family. We packed what was important and left behind what we could not carry. With tears in his eyes, my father-in-law slowly touched his favorite water buffalo's body, and untied it from the big pole of rotten wood. We hid in the jungle for almost two years. (Chamy Thor Lee, California)

We saw a big huge river in front of us, it was the Mekong River. We had no choice but to build a raft from banana trees. We worked for hours, when the raft was finished, we stood waist-deep in the swampy water trying to pull the raft into the mainstream of the river. Bee took a seat on the raft, while one of his brothers and two other men held on and scissor-kicked behind it to keep it straight in the current. As we got to the Thai shore, there were two Thais waiting for us. I thought they would help. When we got closer to them, they pointed their guns at us. We raised our hands and knelt down to ask for peace. They seemed very angry at us. One pointed his gun while the other searched each one of us from head to toe. He took my four-ounce gold chain and our two bars of silver hidden inside my sister-in-law's belt. They sent us to a prison camp at Nong Khai. (Chamy Thor Lee, California)

Creation Myth, 1900

Zie demanded his sister in marriage,
His sister spoke,
Spoke how?
 Thus by rote I sing,
 Still don't understand.

Then his sister spoke,
You want to marry your sister;
Lift up a millstone each opposite,
Let go to roll to the valley;
(If) they roll and make one,
You marry your sister.
If the stones rest apart in the valley,
(We) both go and rest in our own place.
So his sister spoke,
Spoke words thus,
 Why don't you understand?

Let the stones go into the valley;
Did the stones make one (or)
Did the stones rest apart?
 I who sing don't know.

The stones rested apart.
Zie contrived wickedly,
Put stones in the valley,
Called his sister to come
To see the stones become one.
A-Zie then spoke,
Now we two will marry,
Spoke words thus,
 Why don't you understand?

His sister again spoke,
Spoke words nicely,
How did she speak?
 Thus by rote I sing,
 Still don't understand.

His sister again spoke,
Take knives each on a separate hill,
Throw the knives into the valley;
(If they) enter into one sheath,

We two will marry.
(If) the knives rest apart,
We will rest apart.
So his sister spoke,
Spoke words thus,
 Why don't you understand?

A-Zie then hit on a plan,
Made up his mind what to do,
He would have his sister for wife.
 Thus by rote I sing,
 Still don't understand.

A-Zie then hit on a plan,
He made his heart wicked,
Made two pairs of knives,
He placed knives in the valley,
(They) rested apart.
Threw and went into the grass,
(He) called his sister to come
To see the two knives in a pair.
Now we two will marry,
He would have his sister for wife,
 We don't you understand?

Would have his sister for wife,
The two returned home.
Who did they ask (about it)?
Commanded what?
So the two got married.
 Thus by rote I sing,
 Still don't understand.

So the two returned home,
And asked their Mother,
Their Mother then said,
Heaven has no people,
Earth has no people,
You two must marry.
Kill buffaloes, kill cows, receive guests,
Hang meat on the branches of the "Zan" tree,
Call your brother cousin,
Hang meat on the branches of the "Ma sang" tree,
Call your Mother mother-in-law,
So their Mother spoke,
Spoke words thus,
And the two got married.
 Why don't you understand?

So the two got married,
Afterwards they had a child,
Had a child, what sort?
 Thus by rote I sing,
 Still don't understand.

Afterwards they had a child,
Had a child like a hammer,
 Why don't you understand?

Had a child like a hammer,
Zie saw, did Zie love it?
 Thus by rote I sing,
 Still don't understand.

Zie saw and did not love it,
Zie saw and Zie got angry,
 Why don't you understand?

A-Zie was full of anger,
Took the child and did what?
 Thus by rote I sing,
 Still don't understand.

A-Zie was full of anger,
Zie drew out a great knife,
Took the child and chopped it up,
 Why don't you understand?

Zie took the child and chopped it up,
Where did he throw (the pieces)?
Flesh went and got a name,
What did they become and what were they called?
 Thus by rote I sing,
 Still don't understand.

He sowed them on the hill,
In the morning they became people,
Thus they got a name,
What they became so they were called.
 Why don't you understand?

[The song undoubtedly continues with the naming of the clans.]

Creation Myth, 1980s

This story was recorded by Johnson (1985:113-120) and it typifies a modern version of the creation tale. It was told eighty-some years after the tale Clarke recorded, in a different country, by a woman of a different family and dialect group....all without benefit of a written version to keep the story intact.

... So the brother said that he wanted to marry his sister and have her for his wife. But the sister was not willing, and refused him. However, she said, "If you really want to marry me, we must do this: you and I will each bring a stone and we will climb up on that mountain. When we get there, we will roll your stone down one slope of the mountain, and roll mine down the other side. The next morning, if both stones have gone back up the mountain, and we find them laying together on the mountaintop, then I will agree to be marry you."

After she said this, the brother and sister each took a stone and carried it far up to the top of the mountain. The sister rolled her stone down one slope of the mountain; the brother rolled his stone down the other mountain side.

But since the brother wanted to marry his sister, he got up during the night and carried his own stone and his sister's stone back up the mountain and put them together on the summit.

The next morning, when they went to look, they wanted to take someone along to be a witness, but unfortunately, there was no one to take. So the two of them, brother and sister, went back again alone, up to the top of the mountain. Lo and behold! They saw that the two stones which they had rolled down the two opposite slopes had come to rest together, in the same place, on the mountaintop.

When the sister saw this, she said, "We are really brother and sister, but these stones have come back and are lying together. Therefore we can be married, if you wish it to be so." So the brother and sister married each other and lived together as husband and wife. Later, they gave birth to a child.

This child was like a round smooth stone. It had neither arms nor legs. So the woman said, "What kind of a child is this, round and smooth like a stone! We will cut it to pieces and throw it away!"

So the two of them cut the round egg-like creature into little pieces. Then they threw the pieces in all directions. Two pieces fell on the goat house (*nkuaj tshis*), and these became the clan Lee. Two pieces fell in the pig pen (*nkuaj npuas*), and these became the clan Moua. Two pieces that landed in the garden (*vaj*) became the clans Vang (*Vaj*) and Yang (*Yaj*). In this way they founded all the Hmong clans.

Proverbs

Below are proverbs from American culture. •Write in a Hmong proverb that expresses a similar value or idea as these:

Reap what you sow.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

The early bird catches the worm.

Experience is the best teacher.

Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

Look before you leap.

No man is an island.

Nothing is certain but death and taxes.

Out of the frying pan, into the fire.

Take the bitter with the sweet.

Two heads are better than one.