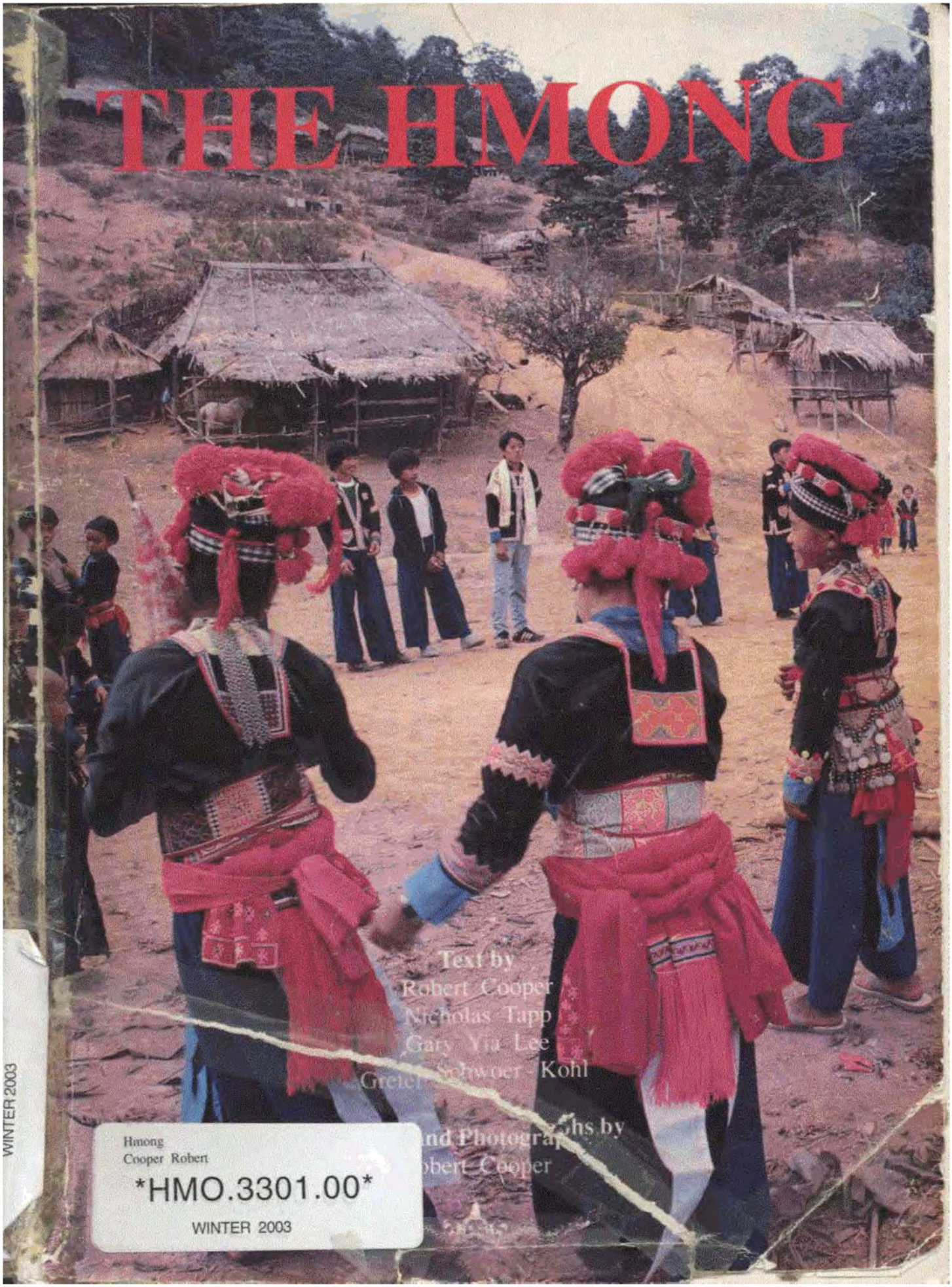
THE HMONG



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THE HMONG

All royalties from the sale of this book are directed to the Southeast Asian Mountain Peoples Foundation (SEAMP) in Chiang Mai for assistance to Hmong and other students of hilltribe origin.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Once upon a time, the Hmong had a very valuable Book which told them many important things that it was necessary to know in life and during the great journey between death and re-birth. That Book was eaten by cows and rats. Since that time, no text has been able to represent a culture as rich in variety as that of the Hmong.

The Editor is well aware that this text is not, and cannot be, fully representative of the detailed Hmong Way. It does not seek to recreate the magnificent menu lost to the cows and rats, but to provide a taste of Hmong life and a basic knowledge of the structure of Hmong society.

With Hmong villages perched on mountain tops from Southern China, through Viet Nam and Laos to Thailand, and divided and sub-divided into linguistic and cultural variants, any book talking - as this one does - of "the Hmong", must generalize. All generalization is dangerous and the Editor is well aware that different types of Hmong do things somewhat differently. A deliberate attempt has been made to prevent generalization falling into abstraction. Apart from the short section on history, everything described or explained in this book is the result of on--the--spot observation, interview, or participation in Hmong villages in Laos and Thailand by several people who contributed to this text. Of course, all observers and all participants have not quite agreed on every statement in this book, and the final responsibility remains with the Editor.

An editorial decision has been made to limit reference to cultural differences between sub-groups to those most clearly evident, enduring and what the Editor sees as functionally significant. The Editor has also decided that things must be presented as simply as possible (although when it comes to music codes, even the possible strays from the guideline of plain simplicity).

This book should provide a basic understanding of Hmong traditional village life for the increasing number of non-Hmong coming into contact with Hmong: for Thai, Lao and Chinese, as well as Westerners visiting Hmong villages. It should be particularly useful to people working with Hmong refugees in camps in Thailand, or reception and assistance agencies in countries of resettlement. To facilitate use as a "handbook", a detailed index has been appended.

The book is written in English, with a non-Hmong reader in mind. It is very much hoped, however, that young Hmong currently in school in the United States and other Western countries, many of whom have never seen a Hmong village and perhaps never will, together with their non-Hmong American friends, will find the book interesting and enjoyable. It is primarily for the Hmong reader that Hmong terms have been written in the Hmong script, which is now widely accepted. Whenever known to the Editor, Green and White Hmong dialect differences have been noted.

The Editor recognizes that for a great many Hmong, the wounds of the long civil war in Laos remain open and painful. This war has been men-

tioned only briefly in the short chapter on history. This book is not about war or politics; although these subjects cannot be completely ignored. If the reader finds anything politically partial in this text, the Editor has failed in his job. Similarly, any academic conjecture has been weeded out and, whilst the book should certainly be useful to students of anthropology, language and style have been kept as simple and clear as the Editor could make them. This is a book for the man in the street' or in the village, camp or school.

Good, bad, academic, proselytizational, sensational, controversial, right and wrong: much has already been written on the Hmong. With this book an attempt has been made at something of a fresh start. It is acknowledged that past writings have had a conscious or sub-conscious influence on this book, but in this text the reader will find no footnotes pointing out where views of different authors conflict with or support material presented here. For the reader wishing to further his studies of the Hmong, a small number of books are listed at the back of this text. Chief among these are the works of Geddes, Jacques Lemoine, Yang Dao, and Heimbach. The pronunciation guide to Hmong script found at the back of this book is an adaptation of that in Heimbach's dictionary. Heimbach is also the inspiration for the saying on the dedication page. The translation of a Hmong incantation given in chapter 14 was made by Jacques Lemoine. Jacques Lemoine and Yang Dao are the pioneers of Hmong studies:

Hauv mis koj xub noj
Hauv tsoos koj xub hnav.

This book has involved much exchange of ideas between four people over a lengthy period. It is now difficult, if not impossible, to attribute specific chapters to specific writers. Very generally, the first seven chapters (History through to Economy) and The Way of Death were written by Robert Cooper; the two chapters on music and crafts were drafted by Gretel Schwoerer-Kohl; chapters 10-13 on religion and shamanism were the work of Nick Tapp; the Editor has added a short postface on change. The entire text has been extensively reviewed by Gar Yia Lee and a great many changes and improvements have been made following his comments and advice.

Collection of information was assisted by a small grant from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and thanks go to Marjorie Russell and Nanthapa Cooper for typing out manuscript drafts. Line drawings were the uncoerced work of the Editor's wife Nanthapa. Robert Cooper took all of the photographs.

So many Hmong have participated, knowingly or unknowingly, in the provision of information contained in this book that it would require a second volume to name them all. Thus, thanks must be expressed collectively in the form of the simple dedication of this book to the Hmong.

Robert Cooper
Editor, Chiang Kham 1990

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

HISTORY

Sources of Information

The Hmong have no tradition of written history and the orally transmitted origin myths contain little to assist in the construction of a "History of the Hmong". Historical sources are therefore almost entirely non-Hmong and almost entirely suspect. Most reports and writings on the Hmong, until recent years, have been made by soldiers, administrators and missionaries. The writers were often intent on killing, taxing or converting the Hmong; activities which tend to make partial history.

The early Chinese sources are particularly suspect, consisting mainly of reports home by soldiers and administrators who were at pains to emphasise the violent nature of the "barbarians", who always receive the blame for initiating hostilities. It is impossible to know how many Hmong took part in any rebellion, how powerful or important were Hmong chiefs, and how far, if at all, Hmong society was ever organized for military objectives. It is sure that the Hmong rebelled against the Manchu dynasty in the latter half of the nineteenth century; but even this bloody episode must be placed in the historical perspective of the widespread suppression and peasant revolt that plagued the Manchu Government, which was committed to a policy of heavy taxation in order to pay off the indemnities that had arisen from the Opium War.

"History", a collection of written scraps of information and often prejudiced observations, can trace the Hmong back over four thousand years; but such history tells very little about the way the Hmong lived during that time: what crops they grew, what techniques of production they employed, what customs they followed and how their society was organised and changing. We can be certain only that a proportion of the Hmong people have migrated south from the provinces of southern China. Written history tells us something about Hmong relations with non-Hmong at certain times, but nothing about the long centuries of peace during which the Hmong may have lived in complete harmony with their neighbours.

War has undoubtedly had a great effect on the Hmong, particularly those born in Laos. However, the emphasis on war and violence in written history could give an impression of Hmong personality as rebellious and warrior-like; left at peace in their villages, Hmong are tolerant, reasonable and peaceful.

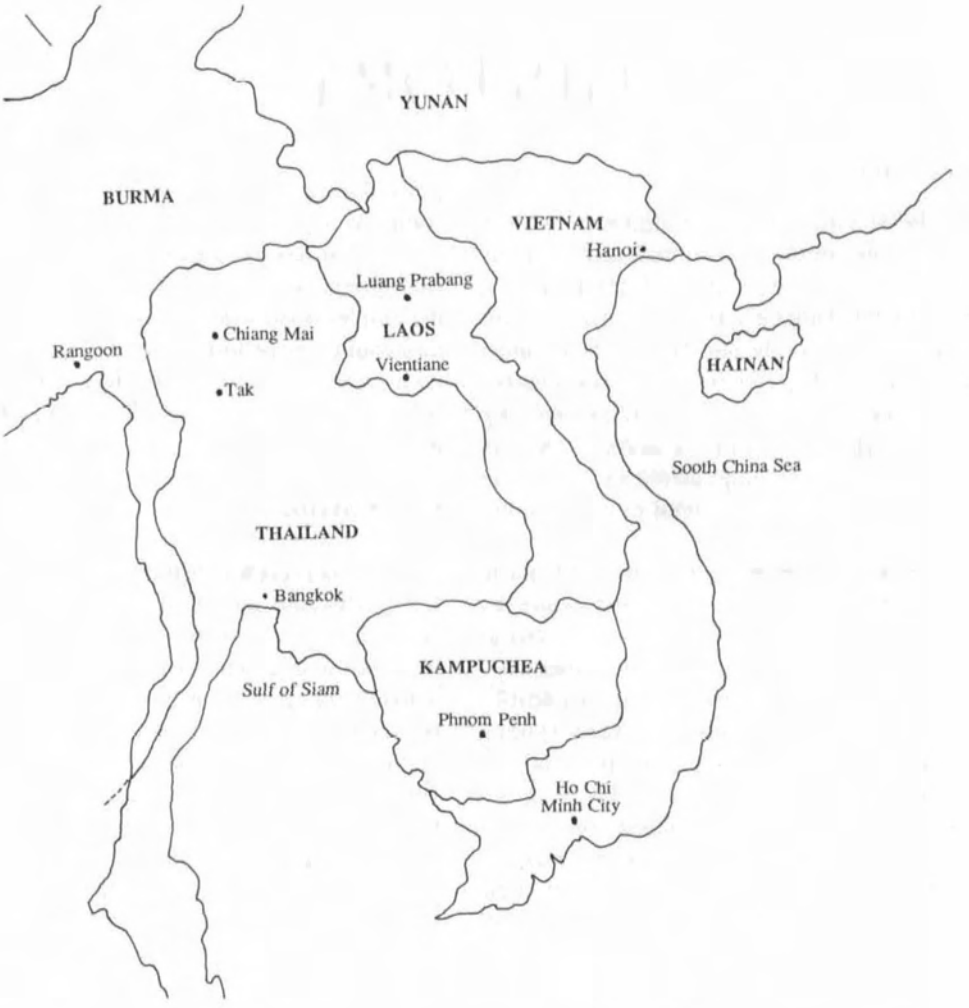
Origin Myths

It is certain that the Hmong now living in Laos, Thailand and Viet Nam and the various countries of resettlement are descendants of emigres from the mountainous southern provinces of China. Where they came from before catching the attention of Chinese written history is unknown. One oral origin myth describes a land of snow and ice, where days and nights each lasted six months. This has led to conjecture (no more than that) that the original home of the Hmong was somewhere in Mongolia, Tibet or even Lapland.

Early China

Chinese annals make reference to people who could be Hmong as early as 2679 BC. A reasonably reliable mention of the Hmong occurs in the ShuChing, a Chinese classic of history which states that the "Miao" were banished from the central Yangtze plains by Yii the Great (2205-2918 BC) to north-western Kansu. There are many early Chinese references to rebellions by "the Man barbarians". Since the terms "Man" and "Miao" were used fairly indiscriminately to refer to many of the other southern tribes, it remains to be verified which references apply specifically to the Hmong. The Chinese objective in suppressing the tribes at this time was probably to extend their empire and to raise taxes.

There are mentions of "Miao" in the South in the third and tenth centuries. There is then little



mention of the Hmong, or "Miao", until 1682. At this time, a Chinese general (Ma Dao) reported that he had been ambushed in southern China by Hmong who took all of his muskets, sparing his life in exchange for instruction on their use and manufacture.

Out of China

From the mid-nineteenth century, Hmong-Chinese relations deteriorated into a continuous series of suppressions and rebellions. It has been suggested that harsh suppression began the movement of a section of the Hmong population south to cross China's southern frontiers into Viet Nam and Laos and, eventually, Thailand.

Perhaps the bloodiest wars between Hmong and Chinese were fought between 1855 and 1881. It is reported that the Hmong were also fighting the Annamese and Tai in Tonkin during the 1860s. In Laos, the Hmong rebelled against the French colonists in 1918. The rebellion ended in 1921 when the French appointed Hmong chiefs (in place of Thai or Lao) to rule over Hmong areas as delegates of French authority.

The movement of Hmong into Northern Thailand is considered to have started around 1885. By 1929, there were Hmong around Tak. Tak is a township located at the southern tip of the mountain range which stretches north into the

southern provinces of China, where the majority of Hmong still live. Thus, it would seem that the Hmong had spread across the entire mountain range, from China, across Northern Viet Nam and Laos, to within three hundred kilometres of Bangkok, in just fifty years.

Insurrection

Since World War II, the Hmong have been caught up in the wars of Indo-China; wars fought in the interests of powers and ideas of which the Hmong knew little and stood to gain less. It has been suggested that Hmong guided Ho Chi Minh's cannon through the mountains to sites overlooking Dien Bien Phu in 1954; if this (unverified suggestion) is true, the Hmong could have been instrumental in the defeat of the French.

During the civil war in Laos, which dragged on intermittently from 1949 to 1975, the Hmong were divided and, like the Lao, fought on both sides. At first, there seems to have been more of an inclination to rally to the Pathet Lao (communist forces) under the Hmong leader Lo Faydang. Later, many thousands of young Hmong joined the anti-communist Hmong general Vang Pao, and moved with their families to the mountain base of Long Cheng, which rapidly became the largest conglomeration of Hmong ever known to have existed.

To escape the fighting, thousands more Hmong left the mountains to live in special areas or in lowland camps near Vang Vieng and Vientiane. It is not known how many Hmong escaped from the war by crossing into the comparative peace of Thailand. However, Thailand did not remain a refuge for long.

Intelligence units of the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP) submitted reports to the Thai Military Government which claimed that between 1962-66 Hmong villagers were being recruited from Thailand, trained in Viet Nam and Laos, and returned to undertake anti-government activity. In response to this and other possiblities of rebellion, the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC) was established under the command of General Praphat (deposed in 1973) to co-ordinate military, police and civilian anti-communist forces in Thailand.

In 1967, a "war" broke out in four provinces between Hmong villagers and the Thai armed forces supported by remnants of the Kuomintang Army (allowed to settle in the North of Thailand). Hostilities continued sporadically for several years. Only a minority of Thailand's Hmong were involved. However, thousands of Hmong, and some other tribal minorities, were relocated in lowland camps where the CSOC embarked on a programme of "accelerated integration" into Thai culture. Today, these "camps" remain evident as large villages. The Hmong villagers have been given farmland and seem content to stay where they are.

The involvement of the Hmong in communist insurrection and suppression led to the establishment of a new structural element in Hmong society: the township. It also meant three decades of "front line" fighting which decimated the young Hmong male population, upsetting to an unknown degree the sex and age structure among the Hmong of Laos.

Rice and Maize

The Hmong, or at least the great majority of Hmong, like most farmers in Asia, relied for their subsistence on swidden cultivation: trees and foliage were cut down and burnt; seeds were scattered or planted in the ashes, nourished by monsoon rains and produced one crop each year. We can assume that, at least until the introduction of maize to China in the sixteenth century, the staple diet for Hmong as for the Southern Chinese was likely to have been rice, barley and buckwheat.

The introduction of maize was facilitated by the fact that it complements swidden rice cultivation. No new techniques of production were required and the periods of intensive labour input in maize cultivation differ from those of rice: maize matures in the rainy season, rice in the dry season. Thus, maize permitted the same number of people to grow more food and the existence of two staples and two harvests provided a level of security against famine.

From various historical references, it seems that at different times and places maize has formed the alimentary base of the Hmong diet. However, for the majority of the Hmong in the majority of locations, the staple diet has long been rice, with

maize playing only a supportive role.

The Opium Factor

The cultivation of opium and its use as a medicine and as a stimulant is likely to have been practiced on a small scale by the Hmong, as by others, for a very long time. The Chinese were also well aware of opium's properties. One Chinese surgeon (220-264 AD) is recorded as administering opium to his patients before surgery. By 1516, Chinese merchants were importing opium into China that they had bought from Arab merchants in Malacca. One of the first edicts of the Manchu dynasty in 1644 prohibited tobacco smoking in China but ignored opium (use at that time seems to have been mostly confined to the court and mandarinate). As British trade in opium increased in the eighteenth century and the habit of opium consumption spread through all classes of Chinese society, the Manchu Government responded by introducing a complete ban on consumption, cultivation and importation of opium in 1800. British military might enabled importers to ignore this law with impunity.

The immense profits from the opium trade financed British expansion in the Far East and posed an impossible balance of payments problem to the Chinese Government. By 1838, 2,400 tons of opium were exported annually from British India, almost all of it to China. (The magnitude of this figure may be judged by comparison with the 1974 annual consumption of heroin in the United States which was the equivalent of 150 tons of opium and the estimate for total opium cultivation in the Golden Triangle areas of Thailand, Laos and Burma which reached an all-time high of one thousand tons in 1978.) After losing the Opium War, the Manchu Government was required to raise 21 million pounds to pay off the indemnity owed to Britain under the Treaty of Nanking. Reversing its former policies, China now began to grow and sell its own opium.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, China was self-sufficient in opium production and it is likely, or possible, that the Hmong, who occupied some of the most suitable land for opium cultivation in China, expanded this section of their agricultural activities and were able to add a cash crop to their economy. (The opium harvest conveniently falls at a different time of year to maize and rice harvests.)

Although we cannot know what percentage of opium sold in China came from the mountains of the southern provinces, it is logical to assume that the potential wealth of the mountains increased the attraction of these hitherto marginal areas to the Chinese Government in its search for revenue. Opium is easily portable, readily convertible to cash, and grows best at high altitudes in a monsoon climate. This made opium an ideal cash crop to grow in the isolated mountains but also an ideal crop for taxation and an attraction to banditry. Thus the profits from opium, which have caused and financed several Indo-Chinese opium wars in the twentieth century, could have played a causal role in the bloody suppression of part of the Hmong population in China during the 1860s.

When a proportion of the Hmong in China left for Viet Nam, Laos and Thailand, they took with them the means and habit of opium cultivation. They moved into areas where opium markets were being created. It can reasonably be assumed that the Hmong migrants, sitting on excellent opium lands, with a market at hand and possessing all the skills necessary for opium cultivation, moved rapidly into large-scale cash crop opium production.

Refugee Movements

The Hmong led the movement of refugees out of the three Indo-Chinese countries. Within a few months of the change in governments that took place in 1975, over 44,000 Hmong had fled to Thailand. This compares with the 10,000 ethnic Lao who left during the same period. Although the exodus of Hmong declined after the initial flood, more than 120,000 had left Laos by 1990.

The protracted diaspora of the Hmong has left at least three million in China, an estimated 200,000 or so in Viet Nam, possibly 200,000 in Laos, some 100,000 in Thailand (with a further 50,000 currently in the camps), and around 80,000 resettled overseas, mostly in the United States but with small communities in Argentina, Australia, Canada, France and French Guiana.

CHAPTER 2

HOUSE AND HOUSEHOLD

One House People

The most important social and economic unit in Hmong society is the *tsev*: the house or household. Members of a single household can refer to themselves as *ib tsev neeg*, literally "one house people", or as *ib yim tuab neeg* (one family people); whatever the term employed, the feeling of family bond is very strong. This bond originates in the *tsev neeg*, but can extend to several closely-related households sometimes separated by great distances.

A Hmong is likely to move several times in life: he takes with him the essence of the *tsev neeg* in the form of the ancestral altar and in the (symbolic) form of ash from the abandoned hearth. The *tsev* is home rather than house: a place to be born, to grow, to marry, to have children, to die, and to watch over as an ancestor.

Composition

With very few exceptions, the smallest unit to occupy a *tsev* is a nuclear family: a man, his wife or wives, and his unmarried children. More usual is to find three generations under one roof. Family size is also frequently enlarged by the addition of kin who cannot alone form a viable *tsev*, e.g. widowed aunts, uncles, divorced sisters. A widow can also marry her dead husband's younger brother (levirate) and move with her children into her new husband's household.

The marriage of a daughter means she leaves the *tsev* (although family bonds are not abruptly broken) and the marriage of a son means a new addition to the *tsev*. Families can also contain adopted children. Such children are aware of their origins but are treated as closest kin in exactly the same way as family members born in the *tsev*. Adopted children are invariably non-Hmong in origin (usually Chinese, Lao or Thai) and most often are girls.

Size

Hmong houses can vary greatly in size depending on composition and wealth. A house can be enlarged as a family grows in number; more usual, however, is for new sleeping chambers to be made within the existing structure and to leave house size adjustment until relocation requires a new house to be built. Differences in wealth have grown with the introduction of cash crops and the shift towards permanent residence, and the traditionally homogeneous village may now contain some marked contrasts: very large sturdy houses with metal roofs, attached cattle corrals, and lockable storerooms, can exist side by side with small, fragile huts where inhabitants sleep together on mats on the earth.

Authority Structure

The essential authority relationships of Hmong social structure are to be found within the household and are characterized by respect for elders by juniors and for husbands by wives. The eldest male is the household head and, unless he is very old or sick, he will usually make most decisions, which he may or may not discuss with family members.

The elder-junior principle is reflected in kinship terminology: elder brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, etc. are distinguished from younger and treated differently. Sometimes a term applies to two relationships which appear to be structurally different: thus the term *yawm txwv* is applied to the mother's father and the wife's father; in English "grandfather" and "father-in-law" are distinct terms indicating differences in relationship; in Hmong the distinction exists, but a man refers to his grandfather and his father-in-law as *yawm txwv* and treats both with much the same respect.

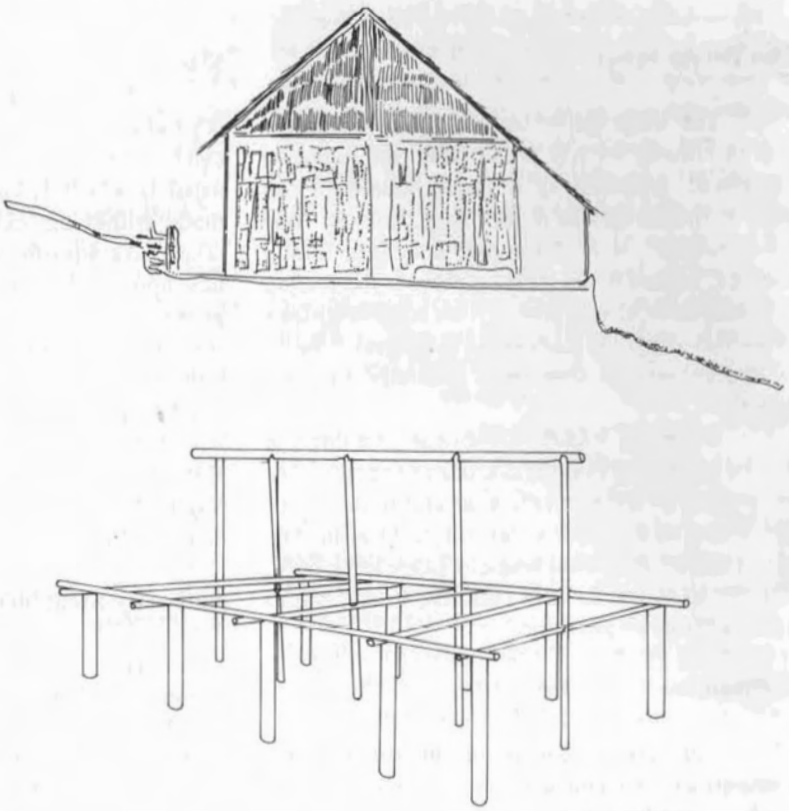
Economic Function

For purposes of basic subsistence (essentially rice and other non-cash crops), the household forms a united and distinct economic unit under the authority and direction of the household head.

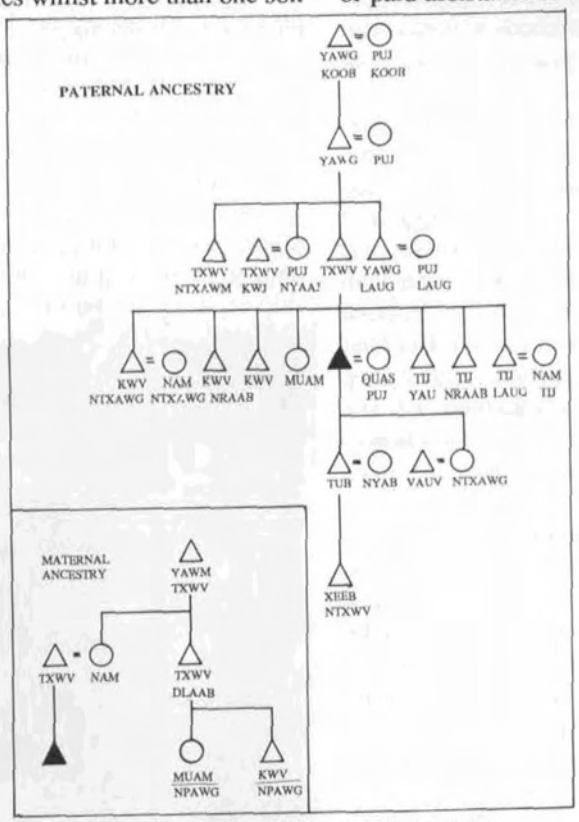
This idealistic type of co-operation, where each produces according to ability and consumes according to need, does not extend into the opium sector of the economy. Opium fields are owned on an individual basis: usually each married male possesses his own field or fields.

Whether he continues to live in his father's house or not, the married male and his wife will, if they are not too distant, join the father's unmarried children of working age to help collect the father's opium harvest, and sometimes his rice harvest. The father does not work for his son in return. Children accompany their parents to the fields from earliest childhood; by the age of twelve, they are helping out and by the age of fourteen they are working.

Variants exist on normal behaviour. In the minority of cases where a man cannot pay the bride price and moves into his wife's household upon marriage, he will usually work for his *yawm txwv* (father-in-law). It is also possible



to find brothers co-operating in opium production, sharing ownership of a field (this is most likely to happen if the father dies whilst more than one son remains in the house). Ownership can also pass to widows, who would, however, require voluntary or paid assistance to work in the fields.



Note: Eldr siblings to the right of ego: younger to the left

GREEN HMONG KINSHIP TERMS

(White Hmong terms can differ)

Insert Diagram here

Animals

Livestock remain outside the house: valued horses in nearby sheltered stables, chickens cooped for the night, cattle, pigs, goats and dogs free to roam the village and surrounds.

Dogs and chickens wander into the house and are tolerated or shooed out on whim. They perform a useful function in cleaning up dropped pieces of food and the excrement of small children. One "judas cock" will usually be tied under the guests' platform. This captured wild chicken is pegged out in the fields when the family is at work and attracts its fellows who are then shot by the Hmong. In the house, this cock serves as an alarm clock.

Relocation

Decision to relocate a household is taken independently in that final responsibility rests with the household head. It is, however, common for a group of households to migrate to the same place, although they do not necessarily go at the same time. There is a strong preference for related households to regroup whenever possible. Rarely does an established village containing perhaps thirty or more households relocate as an entity: rather, it disintegrates as independent households

or groups of households move on. Households usually remain about ten years in one location and a stay of more than 15 years is exceptional.

There is no "natural inclination" to move on the part of the Hmong. Movement disrupts ties of kinship and family and involves much planning and hard work; it is therefore not undertaken lightly. Movement takes place because traditional systems of agriculture require it; to remain too long in one place would be to risk sliding into poverty. This is because rice fields can support successive crops for at most two years before they must be fallowed for a minimum of 5 years. Opium fields can produce successive crops for 7-10 years; however, at the end of that period, even a long fallow is unlikely to result in soil regeneration. The Hmong household migrates through economic necessity: the need to find fresh fields.

Establishing a New Household

The establishment of an independent household marks a man's passage into economic independence. He has freedom of economic decision within his tsev (although he continues to contribute some labour to his father's opium fields).

There is no formal point at which a man leaves the parent household. When he does so, he will certainly be married and is most likely to have one or two children. If economic conditions permit, it is usual for a man to spend several years after marriage in his father's house before moving into a situation of independence.

If adequate agricultural opportunities exist in the area, the new household will usually be established near that of the father; if such opportunities do not exist, it is necessary to migrate to new lands. When migrating, a young man will often seek to enter a growing village where he has a relative. If this is not possible, the nuclear family can pioneer a new area. Pioneering is lonely and can be dangerous but it has economic advantages: plenty of fertile land close at hand. For this reason the successful pioneer is often joined by related households (quite possibly including that of his father). When family reunion takes place, households normally remain separate. Such a pattern of relocation is likely to lead to the growth of a new village.

Inheritance

Inheritance of land and household follows no set pattern among the Hmong. Traditionally, there was little to inherit: agricultural lands were used rather than owned and a house had some value only in relation to the productive land around it. Inheritance of land use and house would depend on when the household head happened to die.

If the household head dies at a time when several sons inhabit the tsev, rice fields will continue to be worked in common (either in partnership or, if significant age differences exist, under the direction of the eldest male). Profits from the father's opium fields are divided between brothers.

It is important that one son remain within the tsev to carry out funeral and rebirth rites for his father and mother, and to maintain his father's ancestral altar. In the natural order of things, elder sons marry first and leave the parent household. Thus, it frequently happens that the household head dies at a time when only the youngest son remains in the house. This son, together with his wife and family, continues to use the tsev and

fields (including the dead father's opium fields) and livestock; in this flexible sense, the youngest son could be seen as a preferential inheritor.

Permanent agricultural lands are a recent innovation to most Hmong and inheritance practices remain to be established.

Polygamy

A Hmong man may have as many wives as he can afford; a Hmong woman may have only one husband. The existence of a substantial bride price

means that, in practice, only a wealthy man can have two or more wives and the majority of families remain monogamous. In polygamous situations, the first wife has a privileged position and subsequent wives are, by custom, under her authority as well as under the authority of the husband (this is not always the case in practice).

Use of Space

All members of a nuclear family possess one sleeping compartment within the parent household. This compartment is little more than a raised split bamboo platform separated by walls of wood or split bamboo. No doors are placed on openings into compartments and privacy is in part assisted by the darkness inside a Hmong house at night. In polygamous families, wives may each occupy separate sleeping compartments together with their young children, but only very rarely occupy separate houses. The space above and below the sleeping platform is used to store individual clothing, jewellery and money (often buried).

The age that children move into a separate sleeping compartment varies widely. Some are still sleeping with their parents at 10 years old. By puberty, all will be sleeping apart from their parents and segregated according to sex.

In addition to the several sleeping compartments found in a typical extended family household of 10-20 people, a simple sleeping platform will be set up next to the main fireplace to accommodate guests. If the number of guests is too great for the sleeping platform, which can usually accommodate four adults, mats will be set out on the main floor space and guests will sleep with the head towards the ancestral altar.

During daylight hours, most Hmong houses are deserted and doors are padlocked. In the evening, food is cooked at the main, open fireplace (the secondary enclosed hearth fireplace is used mostly for cooking pig food). A low table is set up in front of the ancestral altar and the family eats together. When male guests are present, only the men will eat at the table: the women wait until the men have finished.

On days when the family does not go to work in the fields and there is no other work to be done on the house or in the village, women are often to be seen in sewing groups either near the open door or outside the house. These locations are for practical reasons, since there are no windows or other natural light sources in a Hmong house. The simple bench outside almost every house is also used by men, especially when chatting with casual callers from outside the family.

In the evenings, after dinner, it is usual for an exclusively male circle to form around the main fireplace, drinking tea, smoking tobacco in the bamboo *yeeb thooj* water pipe and discussing items of mutual economic and social interest. During this brief period of relaxation, the women form a separate group, either near the men and near enough to the fire to benefit from the light for sewing and embroidery or apart, using faggots of burning wood or small open flame oil lamps for lighting. Women generally retire by about 10 pm.

and the men thereafter.

Anything of value that can be brought into the house will normally be stored in the house. Storage is a somewhat haphazard affair. A storage "loft" is built into the house, but it is common enough to find hunting implements, baskets and agricultural tools leaning against a wall or lying on the ground. Kitchen items (cooking pots, bowls) are set on a shelf near the secondary fireplace. Uneaten food is scraped from pots and plates into a large pot of hot water pig food that is semi-permanently stewing over this fire. A bucket of drinking water and a bamboo scoop hangs nearby. Dried meats and special medicines are hung in the smoke over the fire. Maize cobs hang in clusters from the house rafters.

Opium Smoking

The use of opium in Hmong society is less common than is often supposed. Unmarried men are unlikely to smoke any. Women rarely smoke until old age. It is widely but sparingly used as a medicine - usually eaten in small quantities - against diarrhoea or the aches and pains of old age. When smoked, it is usually in a raw or semi-cooked state, with a comparatively low narcotic content. Smokers will generally lie in facing pairs, with a shared opium lamp between them, on the open sleeping platform for guests or on a mat on the ground. Visitors should not mistake all such smokers for "drug addicts": if they are old men, they will be respected elders, entitled to a dignified retirement or semi-retirement after a lifetime of hard work and caring for their families. To be offered a pipe by such an elder is an honour; refusals should be appropriately polite.

House Spirits (*Dab Qhuas*)

A variety of spirits inhabit and protect the Hmong house and must be treated with respect. With the exception of the *dab xwm kab*, found in every Hmong house, clans and sub-clans recognise some variants on the precise number and location of these spirits.

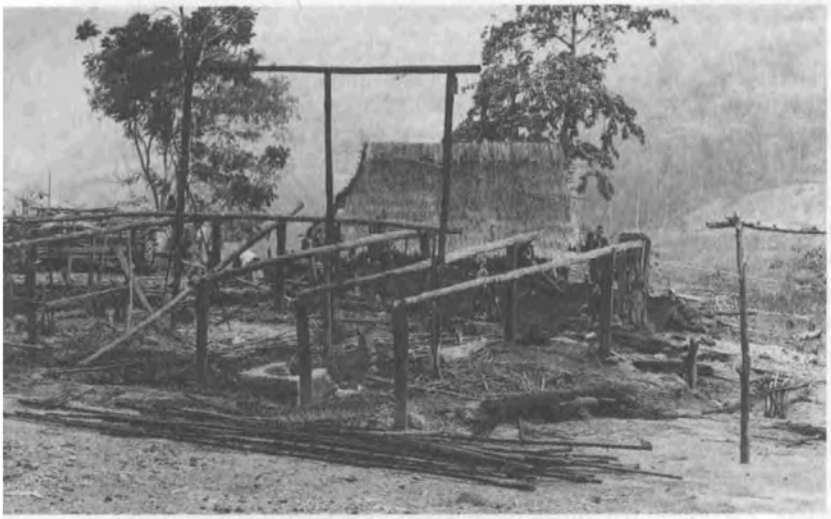
Most commonly, there are said to be seven. These are considered at greater length later in the book and are listed here only for easy reference:

dab xwm kab:
spirits of prosperity located in a ricepaper altar on the wall opposite the door
dab txhij meej : main door lintel
dab qhov cub : main fireplace
dab qhov txos : secondary, enclosed hearth

dab roog : main bedroom
dab ncej cuab : central housepost
dab nthab : guardian of the loft

Taboos

Entrance to the house is forbidden to people outside of household membership during certain periods of ritual significance, sickness and childbirth. This is signalled by a rough piece of interwoven bamboo latticework, smeared with the blood and feathers of a sacrificed chicken, placed outside the house near the door to block the entrance of malevolent spirits. Even if the sign is not evident and the door is open, would-be visitors should not just walk in. It is customary for visitors to call out and announce their presence. They should also ask



if the family is observing any taboos (*caiv*): if the answer is "Yes, but come in anyway", the visitor should not enter, but conclude his business outside the house. Any misfortune which happens following the entrance of an outsider during a taboo period is likely to be attributed to the visit.

One prohibition on external visitors which greatly inconveniences health worker has as its rationale the health of a household member.

This is particularly evident following childbirth, when visiting is forbidden for one month. During the first three days after birth (which takes place in the parents' bedroom with only the father and midwife present), the mother is kept close to the main hearth to sweat out any impurities; she should also eat only chicken and rice during the full thirty-day period.

If a visit is made during a taboo period for any reason, the visitor should remove his shoes before entering (this is not everyday practice in Hmong society, as it is in the lowlands), no matter that the floor of a Hmong house is no more than hard earth. It is also customary to carry a gift of salt if visiting after a birth.

Other taboos, or prohibitions, constrain the actions of household members. The head of the household should not enter his married son's room. Many of these taboos vary between clans, subclans and lineage groupings. Some involve dietary restrictions and many are directed towards women. Examples of such variable taboos are: prohibition on women passing between the main fireplace and the main housepost, sitting on a bench reserved for men only, climbing up to the loft, using the main door of the house (White Hmong only) at certain times and entering the rice granary outside the house.

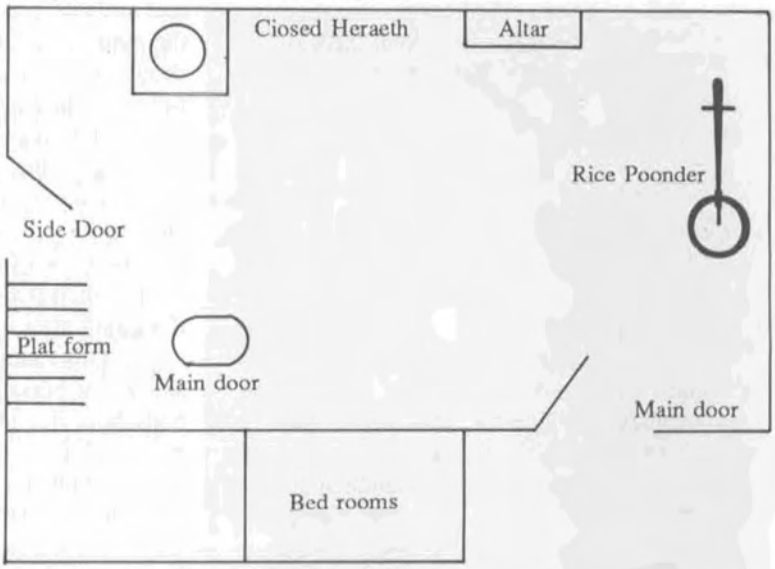
Location

The location of a house is selected with much care. Ideally, a site should be chosen that harmonizes perfectly with the shape of the surrounding mountains. However, the days when land was so plentiful to allow such considerations are long past. Today, village Hmong maintain a notion of the perfect house site but few can remember many of its classical attributes.

In practical terms, the location of a house is limited by the need to be near to the fields for economic reasons and the need to be near other Hmong for protection. Within these general limits, however, there is much latitude and a household head will consult the spirits of the ground before beginning construction. Having selected a possible site, the spirits will be consulted by various

means. One method is to dig a small hole in the spot where the main housepost will be erected, pile rice in the hole in the shape of a conical pyramid and cover the rice with an upturned bowl; this is left overnight. The rice is examined the following morning: if the pyramid remains intact, the house will prosper; if the pyramid has crumbled or partially crumbled, this is taken as a sign of spiritual displeasure which will manifest itself in sickness and death.

Even when a house is fully constructed and a family has been living in it for several years, unnatural disasters (the repeated deaths of livestock, unexplained persistent sickness of a family member) will sometimes prompt a man to move his entire house, even if by only a metre or two to one side, in order to placate the ground spirits.



If a new house is to be built in an existing village, it should not be directly in front or directly behind any other house. This is because spirits travel in straight lines; when ancestral spirits are called into the house, they must not be obstructed or confused; when corpses are moved from the house for burial, they must go straight out of the house (often through an opening make specifically in the wall) and down to the open space at the lower side of the village (for "lying in state") without passing around any other house.

The door of the house always points downhill. This is for practical reasons: few people would choose to open their front door onto a mountain face. The doorway provides ready access to the valuable ponies, locked in a stable at night, chicken coop and, if separate from the house, rice store.

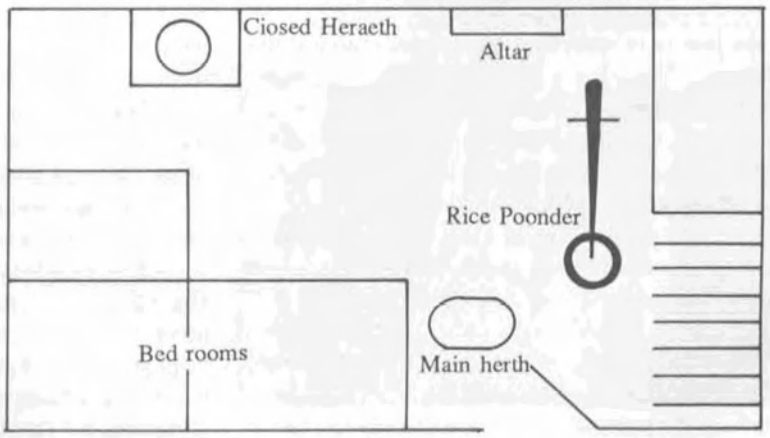
Construction

All members of a household, often calling on the assistance of nearby kin, will come together to cut a large flat terrace from the mountainside. Handhoes and a man-drawn "planer" are used for this work which is usually completed within one day.

The main pillar, *ncej taag* (Green Hmong), always a very solid pole, is erected first. This, and all of the upright pillars, are sunk into the ground to a depth of up to two feet. A house might have fifteen upright pillars. Once these are in position, cross beams are tied in place and the skeleton is complete.

The high roof is completed and usually covered with thatch made from grass fronds or, less frequently, wood tiles. The long, low eaves are sufficient to carry the water away from the house without guttering being necessary.

The walls of the house are roughly hewn solid planks of wood (or, in poorer houses, split bamboo) set more or less side by side with no windows but plenty of unintended gaps. No chim-



Green Hmong

windows but plenty of unintended gaps. No chimney is built and Hmong houses are generally very smokey places. The floor of the house is simply packed earth.

The ancestral altar is placed on the wall opposite the door (or the main door, if a house has more than one): each house will almost certainly include two fires, the main one situated near to the main door. A storage loft will usually be built. Beyond this point, there is much individual variety.

There are two basic design plans for Hmong houses: Green Hmong (*Hmoob Ntsuab*) build a rectangular house with one door, White Hmong (*Hmoob Dawb*) build an L-shaped house with the main door set back into the house and a smaller door at one side. Within these basic designs, there is much variety of size and constructions.

Assuming sufficient friends and relatives are available, a very sturdy house will be built in only 2-3 days. Annual maintenance is usually confined to re-thatching holes in the roof.

CHAPTER 3

LINEAGE AND CLAN

LINEAGE

Membership and Location

A Hmong lineage is a group of people who can trace their descent, in male line, from a common ancestor. Additions to the lineage are possible through birth and marriage. When women marry into a lineage, they undergo a ceremony to introduce them to their new ancestors.

The preferred pattern of settlement would be for a lineage grouping to be located in a single place: such a pattern is rare. More frequent is to find a lineage core in one village and "satellites" to the core in nearby or more distant villages. As members become separated over space and time, links become weakened. Thus, it is rare for members to be able to name ancestors more distant than four generations.

Economic Functions

The economic needs which fracture and disperse a lineage also add to the importance of this social unit. Social rights and obligations are very strong between members, who refer to themselves as *ib cuab kwv tij* (literally: one household brothers - the word *cuab* is probably a corrupted borrowing from the Chinese word for household). A dispersed lineage provides an element of security to farmers who know they must move periodically: it makes available knowledge of and access to alternative resources.

Depending on distance and difficulty, all members of a lineage should be invited for important social or religious occasions and great efforts are made to attend, particularly if the event is a wedding or funeral. The custom of keeping a corpse in the house for up to twelve days allows distant kin to make the journey. Such events focus on the household and lineage but it is usual for villagers, particularly members of the same clan, to attend and help out. Thus, by attending a funeral a man would, in the course of meeting his social responsibility, reinforce or renew lineage ties and at the same time expand his contacts and increase his knowledge of agricultural resources. Information thus gained will enable careful consideration of available alternative locations during the year prior to movement.

When planning household relocation, a man might visit several alternative existing villages where he will be readily fed, sheltered and assisted by any member of his lineage. Having made a move, lineage relatives will assist in house construction and, if necessary and possible, in the clearing of fields and the loan of rice.

Authority

The lineage is under the spiritual leadership of the eldest surviving male. Within a lineage grouping, he is the most respected of the *laus neeg* (elders). His position, for households living away from the parent lineage, is largely symbolic. His advice might be sought but his power is very limited. Locally grouped households will defer to him more and grant certain economic privileges, but no hierarchical power structure exists and authority and decision essentially remain the concerns of individual household heads.

CLAN

Names

Hmong society is organized into patrilineal clans modelled on the Chinese "surname groups". However, whereas over four hundred surname groups exist among the Chinese, there are probably less than twenty Hmong clans. In Laos and Thailand, eighteen have been identified and are given here in *Hmoob Ntsuab* dialect, with common *Hmoob Dawb* variants in brackets:

Dlub (*Thoj*); *Faj*; *Ndlaug* (*Hawj*); *Nplua* (*Khaab*); *Koo*; *Kwm*; *Lauj*; *Caiv* (*Lis*); *Zag* (*Muas*); *Phab*; *Taag* (*Haam*); *Tsaab* (*Tsab*); *Tsheej*; *Tswb*; *Vaaj*; (*Vaj*) *Vwj*; *Mob* (*Xyooj*); *Yaaj* (*Yaj*)

The writing of these names is always changed in a western setting to correspond more with English or French recognition. Such standardization of the written form hides a wide variety of pronunciation: the clan *Xyooj* is usually transliterated as *Shong*, which corresponds to pronunciation by a French speaker (without the tone); it may also be pronounced *Chong* or *Song*.

The most usual transliteration of Hmong clan names to accommodate American pronunciation is as follows (Hmong writing in brackets):

Chang (*Tsaab*); Chue (*Tswb*); Cheng (*Tsheej*; Fang (*Faj*); Her (*Hawj*); Hang (*Taag/Haam*); Khang (*Khaab*); Kong (*Koo*); Kue (*Kwm*); Lee (*Lis*); Lor (*Lauj*); Moua (*Muas/Zag*); Pha (*Phab*); Thao (*Thoj*); Vang (*Vaaj/Vaj*); Vue (*Vwj*); Shong (*Xyooj*); Yang (*Yaaj*)

Hmong in or from Laos or China often place the clan name first when writing, but not when speaking. Hmong in Thailand place it last and usually precede it with the word *xeem*, a Chinese word meaning "clan". Xeem may be pronounced sent; however, in Thailand it is usually transliterated and pronounced as *ser* or *se*. Thus Yang (Yaaj) Song Jeu, Song Jeu Yang and Song Jeu ser Yang are one person. A man's second name (in this example: Song) is given when he becomes a father. This name, and the name given after birth, can be changed at any time to overcome misfortune. Non-Hmong officials should be aware and tolerant of this practice.

It is usual to refer to a Hmong by his or her name without the clan appendage and, if asked his name, a village Hmong will normally reply without giving the clan unless requested to do so. Between Hmong in regular contact, names are replaced by kinship terms: real or honorific.

There is rarely need for formal introductions between Hmong. However, the outsider should take note that, contrary to what might be expected in a male-dominated society and contrary to practice in the West, the wife's name will almost always be given before the husband's. If asked her clan, a wife will give her clan of origin not that of her husband.

Membership

Clan membership, like a Western surname, is obtained through family membership. For women only this will change on marriage or remarriage. In practice, a woman retains sentiments for her clan of origin as she does for her family of origin, and both continue to play a role in her life. However, unlike the custom in the West, family membership (and hence clan membership) depends on the payment of bride price to the bride's family of origin; it is sometimes impossible to pay fully this substantial sum upon marriage and, pending full payment, children remain within their mother's natal clan. Children could, therefore, have a different surname to their father (non-Hmong officials beware of wrong assumptions).

Taboos

The most important prohibition associated with clan organization is the incest taboo: a man may not have sexual relations with or marry any woman of his clan. This taboo remains strictly in force and is drummed into children by horror stories of what will happen to them should they break it. The taboo is not limited by territoriality and crosses the *Ntsuab/Dawb* and other divisions: thus, for example, a Green Hmong called Yang (Yaaj) born in the United States of parents from Laos should not entertain romantic thoughts or intentions towards a White Hmong called Yang (Yaj) who has never left China.

This broad and rigid incest taboo differs from the Western concept, which is limited to "blood relations". The Hmong taboo permits sexual relations and marriage between certain "blood" relatives: thus, the preferred spouse for a son is his mother's brother's daughter (*muam npawg*), i.e. a first cousin on the mother's side.

Other taboos might be stated by Hmong practitioners as clan taboos but are usually not universal. These most often involve restrictions on eating habits; for example, members of the *Haam* clan state they cannot take cooked rice with them to the fields for fear of turning into snakes, the *Lis* clan distinguishes sub-categories according to whether they may or may not eat the spleen of animals, and the *Yaj* clan has a similar distinction regarding the eating of animals' hearts.

Functions

Hmong refer to the relationship existing

between members of a clan as *kwv tij*, literally "brothers". Many of the mutual-help functions of the lineage extend to clan members. If no lineage relative is to be found, a Hmong passing through a village may present himself at the house of any clansman, even a complete unknown, and expect hospitality. A Hmong wishing to move into an established village can also expect to be "sponsored" by a kwv tij. Where a Hmong has no such relation in a village but is, perhaps only distantly, related to a woman who originally belonged to his clan, her husband might support his application to build a tsev in the village.

Geographically diverse clan contacts are particularly valuable given the nature of Hmong agriculture and the need to move. However, assistance provided by an unknown purely on the basis of common clan name is not likely to be anywhere near as generous and as generously given as assistance given between family or lineage relatives. Distinctions are also evident between clansmen who have known each other a long time, through common residence, and unknown Hmong who happen to belong to the same clan. Any significant assistance provided to the latter is likely to be reimbursed directly.

Clan membership also serves legal functions. Any dispute between two Hmong of different clans will involve all local members of both clans. However, because the village Hmong personality is honest, tolerant and generous, theft and violence are extremely rare and the most clan judicial activity is likely to touch on is an occasional conflict over land use or a case of adultery. More usual activity would be such mundane matters as reconciling quarrelling newlyweds, exacting fines from the genitors of children born out of wedlock and ensuring that individuals fulfil ritual obligations.

Location

The advantages of clan membership lie in the widely dispersed nature of the clan. No attempt is made to group clans together in physical entities. It would be impossible to locate all members of a clan in a certain region and, were it possible, the clan level incest taboo would pose impossible problems. Thus, it is quite usual to find two or more clans coexisting in a single village: indeed, except for the occasions when a few households belonging to a single lineage pioneer fresh agricultural resources, a village is almost never made up of a single clan.

Within the multi-clan village there is a noticeable tendency for members of a clan to reside side by side. This sometimes gives the effect of two or more villages closely located. Social visiting within the clan, and particularly within the lineage, is also much more frequent than with fellow villagers of different clans.

Sub-clans

A few of the xeem are divided into sub-clans which acknowledge differences in ritual, and function more significantly as institutions of mutual help (for example, the *Thoj* clan is said to have three sub-divisions). The strength of sub-clans seems to vary between localities and over time; in certain times and places, a sub-clan may grow to possess almost the stature of a clan in its own right, but nowhere is marriage permitted between members of different sub-clans recognizing the same parent clan. Membership of a sub-clan is acquired through birth or marriage (like clan membership) but is not reflected in a person's proper name.

Authority

No clan level authority structure exists. There are no clan chiefs or elders. At a local level, however, at various places and times, leaders have grown up with significant local clan support. In Laos, French rule allowed a vague "clan autonomy" under clan leaders. This historical mode. plus the natural inclination of a Hmong to side with rather than against a fellow clansman, accounts for the fact that, during the long civil war in Laos, many Hmong of the Wang (*Vaaj*) clan followed the anti-communist general Vang Pao Wang and that many Hmong of the Lo (*Lauj*) clan joined with the pro-communist leader Lo Faydang. Thus, whilst clan structure and function do not require authority figures, political leaders or warlords can attract and make use of clan support.

CHAPTER 4:

VILLAGE

Naming

The Hmong live in their *tsev* (home), preferably within their lineage, near to other members of the *xeem* (clan) and within a *zos*. The word *zos* is a loose concept: it includes any physical grouping of people, from a small group of related households to a town; the most frequent meaning is "village". The Hmong do not give their villages a name. When it is necessary to specify a particular village, they will use the Lao/Thai name of a nearby geographical attribute, usually a mountain or a river, by which the lowland population recognizes the area. Alternatively, they might refer to a village as the home of a prominent elder.

Siting

Ideally, a village site should harmonize with the surrounding topography in the same way as a house site. In practice, such location is rare. Most important is that adequate land and water be available. If necessary, water will be carried to households in large bamboo containers or buckets on poles; but the Hmong much prefer to site the village just below a high water source and let gravity deliver fresh water to the door.

Whenever possible, a village will be served by a system of aqueducts made from large bamboo split lengthways in half and laid end to end in gutter fashion, the end nearest the water source

simply overlapping the next section, thereby avoiding the necessity for joints. The system runs from a spring above the village and is propped up on poles four to five feet above the ground to allow men and animals to pass underneath. Bifurcation and re-bifurcation can bring water directly to each house or group of houses. The bamboo channels require regular repair and unblocking and this is done by anybody who happens to be passing.

Membership

The Hmong village is a loose confederation of independent households and lineages. Although membership is not exclusive, it is important for a newcomer to be "sponsored" by an existing member.

Functions

Living in groups of twenty to thirty households has a protection aspect; this is not apparent since Hmong villages have no fence, moat or other defence and lack even the symbolic "gate" common among many other tribal groups through which visitors should pass. Except for certain villages in bandit areas or war situations, Hmong villages rarely possess plans for dealing with unwanted intruders. The Hmong way is for each household to bolt its door at night and for each man to have his musket and crossbow. In spite of this independence, the Hmong are conscious of the dangers involved in living in isolated households and the simple fact of grouping households in a "village", with plenty of dogs to sound the alarm, could in itself be considered adequate protection against the small groups of armed bandits that roam the mountains of Laos and Thailand.

Economic motives for village residence are lacking. There is no co-operation on agricultural work tasks and no village-level mutual assistance in productive processes. Villages are not large enough to support specialization and although the services of a skilled silversmith or herbal healer will be sought after and paid for, such specialists remain primarily farmers.

The coexistence of two or more clans provides opportunities for courtship and marriage, but many young Hmong men need to look outside of the relatively small village unit for partners.

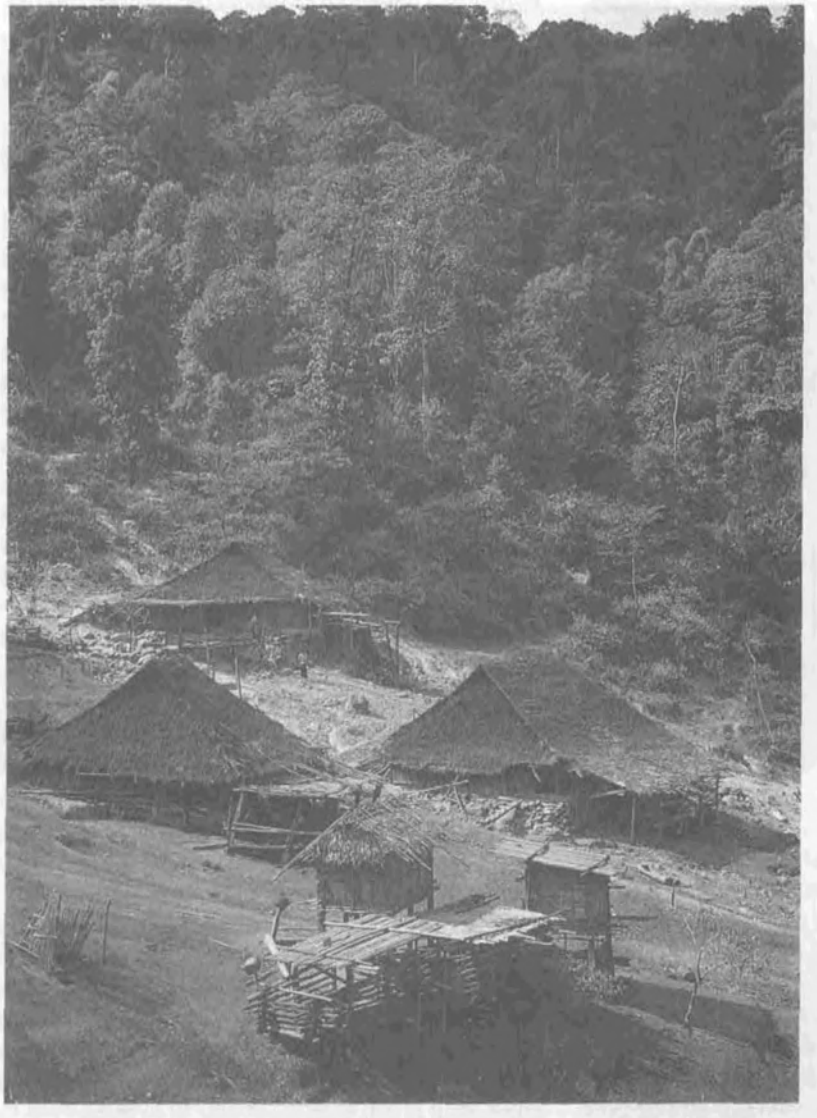
Religious functions are limited. Hmong New Year, weddings, and funerals involve the village but are not specifically village events. The only specifically village ceremony is the *txo dlaab*, which serves to thank the spirits for protecting the village during the previous year, and to seek future protection. In this ceremony, male villagers come together for a few hours in April of each year and share the small costs and labour involved in building a new spirit house next to the tallest tree overlooking the village, and offering paper money and a pig to the spirits (the pig is then eaten by the men present).

Authority

Authority structures within the village are democratic within the confines of male supremacy. The headman, known in Hmong as *tus hau zos* (but frequently called by the Lao/Northern Thai terms *nai baan* or *poh luang*) is either elected by a meeting of household heads or "emerges" among the pioneers of a village; he retains office for an indefinite period. In some Hmong villages of Northern Thailand, official headmen have been recognised or even appointed by the Thai authorities and given uniforms and small stipends; they are not always recognised by all Hmong within their villages.

The functions of the headman are usually limited to dealing with outsiders, particularly

government officials, and providing temporary hospitality to Hmong without kin passing through the village. He does, however, have a judicial role to play in calling together the various *laus neeg* (notable elders) or opposing clansmen to meet in his house to discuss any dispute. Such discussions are very long and the headman is barely compensated for the food, tobacco and opium consumed by that portion of the small fines (usually chickens and whisky) which go to him, not the injured party.



Occasionally, the headman will have a more important role to play in conflicts with neighbouring villages, particularly non-Hmong villages; such occasions are also likely to involve significant hospitality which is rarely fully compensated. He will, however, be expected to report any serious crimes, e.g. murder or kidnapping, to the lowland, usually non-Hmong, authorities.

The village headman is often attributed by non-Hmong with more status and power than he really possesses. The reason for this is easy to find: his principal role is to act as a bridge between Hmong and non-Hmong worlds. Viewed from the outside, he is very obvious. Viewed from the inside, however, a different picture of the headman is evident.

The headman represents the village: he has no mandate to make decisions affecting the village or any members of it outside his own household. Such decisions are made collectively by all of the *laus neeg*, which essentially means by every household head in the village. Within the *laus neeg*, one or more lineage elders are likely to be listened to more than the others, but the headman is unlikely to have particular influence (exceptions exist).

Men are listened to, and followed, on the basis of respect. The respect accorded *laus neeg* is usually (but not always) a result of relative positions in the age and kinship structure. The elder of a strong lineage is likely to be the nearest thing to a "leader" in any Hmong village. There are no badges of office and the outsider must usually go to some lengths to identify such a personage - if one exists.

CHAPTER 5:

HMONG IDENTITY

Unity and Division

The Hmong have a very clear image of themselves as distinct from non-Hmong. Whilst self-identify as Hmong is strong, "the Hmong"

cannot be considered a particularly homogeneous group. In view of Hmong history and way of life, which has scattered the Hmong over large areas of Southern China, Northern Viet Nam, Laos, Thailand and several countries of refugee resettlement, it is perhaps surprising that Hmong identity and culture have remained as strong as they have. This seems to have been achieved largely by marrying within Hmong society and by isolation of social units on mountain crests. However, marriage with non-Hmong is not forbidden and non-Hmong are to be found living in Hmong villages.

The principal divisions of Hmong unity are identified as Green, White or Armband Hmong. These divisions have no geographical basis, although there is a concentration of Armband Hmong in parts of Western Laos and few if any over the border in Thailand (outside of the refugee camps).

Dialects and Divisions

In Laos and Thailand, Hmong identify themselves as *Hmoob Ntsuab* (Green Hmong) or *Hmoob Dawb* (White Hmong) with a much smaller representation of *Hmoob Quas Npab* Armband Hmong). *Hmoob Ntsuab* and *Hmoob Dawb* represent distinct dialect groups with significant distinctions in pronunciation and vocabulary; they remain mutually intelligible. The *Hmoob Quas Npab* speak *Hmoob Dawb* dialect and follow most of the *Dawb* material culture distinctions listed here (with the exception of women's dress which has a series of patchwork rings on the sleeves). Other divisions exist in China and, possibly, Viet Nam.

Language has also been impregnated to a greater or lesser extent by vocabulary from lowland majority-groups. All Hmong have a large smattering of Chinese vocabulary, although neither Hmong nor Chinese might immediately recognize the common origin. Hmong from Xieng Khouang Province in Laos have borrowed many Lao words that are not used by Hmong in the more Western parts of Laos and Thailand.

Clothing

The easiest way to decide if a group of Hmong belong to the Green, While or Armband category is to look at the women. Green Hmong women wear a batiked, embroidered and pleated "blue" skirt (*Ntsuab* refers to a range of colours from deep green to blue; "blue" to Hmong eyes is represented by the term *xiav*). White Hmong women wear blue trousers like their men; this might seem a little confusing but all becomes clear during the

few days of the Hmong New Year when White women dress in a plain white skirt. Women of the Armband category dress like White Hmong but add distinctive bands onto the sleeves of their jackets. (Distinctions are evident in photographs.) Related to these distinctions of dress is the fact that the technique of batik dyeing is known only to Green Hmong women. All women wear similar jackets and "turbans" or headbands.

There is also a clear distinction in the form of trousers worn by Green and White men. Both may be blue or black but White trousers closely resemble those worn by lowland Lao and Northern Thai, with a high crotch. Green trousers, by contrast, are very baggy with the legs being joined just above the feet.

The Hmong are very proud of their dress and embellishments and skill in embroidery is an essential quality in any woman looking for a husband. It is, therefore, perhaps surprising that those Hmong women of Laos displaced by the war have so widely adopted the uniform of cheap printed sarong, nondescript blouse and blue headscarf - all very different from traditional Hmong or Lao dress. This dress has been retained for daily use in the refugee camps in Thailand and has even crossed to the United States; at the superficial level, at least for the outside observer, it blurs divisions of Hmong identity.

Identity and Residence

It has been noted that members of a single lineage live in physical proximity within any village and that clan members also have a tendency to group together. This tendency is more significantly marked where Green and White identity divisions are represented in a single village.

Although intermarriage between divisions occurs (in which case the wife leaves her division and changes dress) and although clan rights and obligations cut across identity divisions (theoretically at least), a kind of voluntary apartheid separates divisions in mixed villages. In practice, it is frequent for clan representation to correspond to division representation: thus in a single village all households belonging to (for example) the *Taag*, *Vaaj* and *Yaaj* clans would be Green Hmong, and households belonging to the *Lis* and *Muas* clans would be White Hmong. In this way, identity distinctions are clearly maintained; Green and White households can live side by side for ten years and maintain full integrity of dialect, dress, house construction, and ritual.

Sides of a Single Coin

Green and White identity divisions line up with dialect differences: this suggests (but does not prove) that the two types of Hmong originate from different places in Southern China. They have

maintained differences whilst recognizing a greater identity as Hmong. Rather than being a matter of choice, the maintenance of identity distinctions would seem to be a logical outcome of the Hmong kinship structure. This structure is common to all Hmong. By fully meeting all obligations of household and lineage, each Hmong is automatically and constantly directed back to his identity.

Whilst differences exist between divisions (and between clans and between regions), the similarities uniting the various components of Hmong identity certainly outweigh the significance of cultural-linguistic distinctions. As every coin must have two sides, so Green and White identities make up a single Hmong identity.

CHAPTER 6:
COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

Choosing Partners

Living in a village of 20-30 households, the young Hmong male has only a limited chance of finding the right girl, of the right clan (any but his) at the right time (when his father can afford the bride price) at the right age (generally fifteen - eighteen years). That almost half of all Hmong find their partners within the village is perhaps surprising: it suggest either that parents are at work arranging matters on behalf of their offspring or, what might seem to be the opposite, that free range is given to natural instincts resulting in pregnancy and marriage. With the Hmong, it is a bit of each. Parents have a say but, compared to many other peoples of Asia, the Hmong are relatively free to choose, and free to refuse, a marriage partner.

Parents will certainly have their preferences. The ideal is for a boy to marry the daughter of his father's sister or the daughter of his mother's brother ("cross cousin" marriage). This strengthens the alliance between two related families, likely to be living in the same village or nearby, whilst respecting the clan taboo. It is also much easier for the young people involved, particularly the girl who can remain in full contact with family and friends. Sometimes, in pursuit of the ideal, parents will "betroth" cross cousins as small children and marry them at the first signs of puberty (rarely before twelve years of age). Failing the minority realization of the ideal, parents are much happier for their daughters to marry into an industrious family which is known to them through current or previous common village residence.

Young men and women also have their preferences. Looks and sexual compatibility are likely to be high on the list. However, even a homely girl fulfilling none of the preferred criteria is likely to get married since women are crucial in the labour force. Pre-marital pregnancy does not impose a rigid obligation on either party to get married and the boy can escape his fate by paying a "fine" to the girl's father (the child then remains with the mother). However, a demonstrated ability to conceive is a strong point in favour of even the plainest girl and marriage usually follows.

The girl could have one more problem to face before she is free to marry her chosen one, if she has an elder sister or sisters, who remain unmarried. Strictly speaking, she should wait for the elder sister to be taken off to pound another family's rice. In practice, the younger sister, if pregnant, will make a formal request to the elder sister for permission to get married. Such a request, to minimize loss of face for the elder girl, is made on the knees and sweetened with the passing of silver (which the younger girl obtains from the boy and the boy usually has to beg from his father). If the amount is considered inadequate, the elder sister will refuse it or ask for more; amounts involved are not great, however, and such customary formalities would not be prolonged unreasonably.

Hmong rarely marry non-Hmong although there is no prohibition against this. Sometimes it does occur. Problems are minimized for the mountain Chinese (usually called Suar by Hmong or "Hor" by Thais) and the Yao, who have a similar social structure to the Hmong, but few lowland girls would be willing to face the rigours of life in the mountains and few Hmong girls would wish to descend to the plains. Traditional, institutionalized forms of courting, with few rare exceptions, limit interaction to Hmong. Physical isolation and the heavy costs of marriage, reinforce this limitation. As the twentieth century enters Hmong villages and thousands of Hmong refugees are thrown into daily contact with alien cultures on the lowlands and overseas, the propensity to marry outside the Hmong community might be expected to increase. However, compared to other Indochinese who are also refugeed and mixing with their new host societies, the Hmong to date show a marked reluctance to marry outside their own communities.

Bride Price

Marriage is recognized in the fullest sense only when an agreed bride price has been passed from the father of the groom to the family of the bride. Any children born to the couple before payment is completed are considered as belonging to the bride's father's clan and could remain there unless an alternative agreement is reached in which the groom works for his bride's father for a number of years in place of bride price. Such situations arise when a poor boy is accepted by a girl from a wealthy family. The humiliating practice, disliked by the Hmong and infrequent, goes some way to encourage young boys to look for partners within their means and explains why with the Hmong, like most other peoples, poor tend to marry poor and rich tend to marry rich.

The amount paid as bride price is a major subject of negotiation and can vary greatly depending on regional differences, wealth of the families involved and the personal qualities of the bride. In most cases, it is considerable and could easily account for all silver earned from a year's opium harvest or more. In addition to the bride price, which should properly be paid in silver bars, the groom's father will be responsible for the costs of wedding feasts for a great number of people. Currently, a good bride price in Thailand is said to be five silver bars, almost US$ 600. Few Hmong in Laos or China could afford such a price.

The very significant costs involved in bride price payments serve to reinforce the social and economic structure. A son relies on his father to meet these costs (at least for the first wife) and knows that any Hmong father would not be inclined to pay a heavy bride price to assist a disrespectful son or a son who preferred to smoke opium rather than to help grow and sell it. After the wedding, the son is indebted to his father and, together with his wife, will continue to assist his father for an indefinite period.

As compensation, or partial compensation, for his expenditure, the groom's father also acquires a new worker in his family, at least for a few years until the couple have children and form their own household. However, the institution of bride price should not be seen simply as the buying and selling of women. It also protects the woman. The groom is under social pressure from his father and from the bride's family (which continues to take an interest in her welfare) to treat his wife reasonably. To mistreat a wife without good reason would be to risk her return to her family and total loss of the bride price. To divorce a wife, unless she had committed adultery, would achieve the same result. Thus, a Hmong does not enter lightly into marriage: he (or his father) chooses a wife with great care.

Bride Wealth

Many anthropologists will not use the term "bride price" because of its connotations of purchasing a woman rather than compensating the bride's family for the loss of a productive member: the more academically fashionable term is now "bride wealth". This book uses "bride price" for

two reasons. Firstly, it is at least as good, if not better, a translation of the Hmong *nqi tshoob* (price of the wedding). Secondly, it indicates clearly that the amount paid remains with the bride's family (mostly with her father, some passed on to close relatives: customs differ on precise division) rather than with the bride.

There is, however, a form of wealth which remains with the bride, a wedding gift from her family which is not discussed with the family of the groom and which ensures for her a limited independence and security. This *phij cuab* varies from family to family but will certainly include some chickens to begin the brood which will remain under her control and responsibility. Items of the original *phij cuab*, plus what a woman has been able to add to it, are passed on to her daughters at their weddings. The *phij cuab* can sometimes equal the *nqi tshoob* ("bride price") in value. It is highly visible, being composed of silver neckrings, bracelets, rings and clothes. A good *phij cuab* gives a young girl status in her new home and is a constant reminder that she is not entirely dependent on her husband or his father.

Courtship

It is perhaps surprising that male-dominated Hmong society demonstrates an attitude of tolerance towards courtship, including pre-marital sex. Young Hmong of both sexes mix freely in the evenings with no chaperon in sight. From these encounters develop "boyfriend/girlfriend" relationships similar to those in the West. In this respect, Hmong norms differ from those of the Chinese. Whilst few Hmong are promiscuous, partners might change before a final decision is made.

Having found out where in her house a girl sleeps (usually by asking her; indication enough of his intentions), the boy comes to the house at night, after the last lamp is blown out and the family is asleep. He comes prepared to woo and expecting to win, subtly carrying under his arm a rolled up sleeping mat or blanket.

Fortunately for young lovers, the walls of Hmong houses leave plenty of gaps between the planks and, after the boy has softly called the girl, the couple will kneel down in the dark and whisper through the wall. The boy will coax the girl to leave the house and share his sleeping mat or blanket. Often he will play quiet and simple expressions of love, using the music code understood by Hmong, on a jews harp. If the girl really does not wish to go she will make an excuse, "too tired", "headache", "maybe another time"; however, the chances are she was expecting the visit. She is expected to return to the house at first cock's crow, some time around three o'clock in the morning and, although it is very difficult, if not impossible, to unbar, open and close a Hmong door in the dark without making quite a bit of noise, nobody will notice her absence.

To invite the boy, always of another clan, into the house, even when a couple have already established a firm relationship, is not the thing to do. Sex between unmarried lovers would risk angering the house spirits even more than the parents.

If available girls of the home village are just too homely, or if he is rejected in favour of the village beau, a young man may travel widely in search of a bride. For practical reasons of travel on mountain paths and nocturnal courtship customs, the courting season generally corresponds to the dry season and ardour dampens with the coming of the rains in April. During his travels, the boy will stay at the house of any relative or clansman.

The Ball Game

The prime opportunity for finding a wife/husband or of publicly demonstrating an agreed "engagement", is the Hmong New Year in December at this time, boys and girls line up facing each oter to play the ball game. All are dreaaed in their finest clothes and laden with silver jewellery. Girls make themselves attractive by tying silky, long black hair up on top of on top of their heads in a big round bun, or hiding it completely under a turban. Slim waaists are wrapped around with several metres of red sash topped with a silver belt which makes them look quite tubby, and legs, slender or not so slender, are shielded by fancy aprons which reach almost to the ground.

These beautifully bedecked little ladies are capable of carrying a heavy load all day up a rugged mountain. On this day, however, they carryonly a ball of hand-sewn black cloth. Excitement and anticipation reach a quiet height of tension among boys and girls, parents and adult relatives. A few boys might change places in the line; a few girls might do the same. Eventually, they stand in

facing lines a few metres apart.

The girls have the balls and, although things have, in most cases, been arranged in advance (through third parties if the girl is shy or the boy is a stranger to the village) to ensure that the boy opposite is not of the same clan and is otherwise acceptable, it is the girls who decide to whom to direct their soft missiles.

The balls are thrown gently enough, are caught and returned. The game can go on all day and nobody is in a hurry. If the ball goes backwards and forwards with a slow regularity that is too boring, couples might retire and regoups with others more fancied. Not everyybody in the lime is intent on marriage and those who are cannot waste too much time on those with other motices.

By accident or design, a ball is dropped. Whoever drops it must give the partner an article of jewellery or clothing. These may be retrieved in exchange for a song. A rapid retrieval or a poor song is a subtle way of indicating that a change of patrtner might be in order. As the day moves into evening, all but the determind have left the field.Catchers become increasingly maladroit and clothing changes hands and is not immediately retrieved. As darkness halts the game, each couple comes together to retrieve clothing and exchange songs.

A more intoxicating opportunity for courtship games occurs during rebirth ceremonies (tso plig), when whisky and songs are exchanged between couples.

Negotiation

When a boy has convinced his father to "buy " the wife he desires, or, as sometimes happens, when parents have convinced a boy to accept the wife they know is right for him, it is time for negotiations to begin. There is no direct contact between families in the early stages of negotiatiom; if things do not work out, no face is lost.

The father will send a pair of repesentatives off to the girl's father's house to discuss possivilities of marriage. Only if both parties agree in principle, will discussions proceed to the negotiation of bride price. Bargaining is certainly in order; but it is certainly not in order to draw specific attention to real or imagined poverty or demerits in the other household or partner. Above all, no face must be lost by insisting on an unrealistically high or low bride price. Even if everybody is in agreement, negotiations must last a few days. The bride price is paid on the agreed date of the wedding.

Kidnapping

If a young couple wish to get married but fear that the girl's father will object, or that the boy's father will not be able or willing to meet the bride price, they may force events by arranging a "kidnapping". The boy, aided by friends, "kidnaps" the girl ("elopement" might be a better term than "kidnapping", but events are always arranged to place responsibility on the boy). The boy's friends carry the news of the *fait accompli* to both fathers and negotiations begin. Rarely will a boy's father lose face by refusing to pay the bride price, which may be postponed with the agreement of both parties thereby obliging his son to work for his wife's father.

The Hmong say that real kidnappings (without the girl's consent) took place in the past, and still take place occasionally. There is also a play-acting element of kidnapping in the most ordinary wedding. The bride is likely to be pulled through the door or carried over the threshold. Such demonstrations of "force" (which have their parallels in the West) are taken in good heart as a sign that the girl is really wanted.

The Wedding

The entry of a new member to the household and clan is not without danger. Before the wedding ceremony begins the wife to be is received at the groom's household and undergoes the *lwm gaib* ritual, in which a rooster is swung three times around her head to prevent her old ancestors causing trouble.

Ceremonies begin at the home of the groom. A chicken is sacrificed to the household ancestors. There follows a long series of kowtows (*pe*) with the groom and his "best man" on their knees prostrating themselves in turn to all household ancestors, living members of the household and related relatives, starting with the eldest and working through to the youngest.

The wedding party, together with the bride, then moves off to the house of the bride, carrying with them the bride price, a live pig, two live chickens and a plentiful supply of home-made rice

whisky. If the bride lives some distance away, the party might descend to a road and hire a truck or take a bus to the nearest point from which they must start walking.

On arrival at the girl's father's house, the representatives who negotiated the agreement in principle present the two chickens to the bride's father and these are sacrificed to the spirits in the bride's old house. The same kowtowing then takes place by the groom and his best man to all male in-laws.

A ritual offering of two china cups full of alcohol is made by the groom to each male in-law who, of course, reciprocates, The groom, to avert complete inebriation, usually touches his lips to the cups of rice wine and requests permission to pass them to his relatives to drink.

The wedding ceremony is punctuated by chants (*tshoob zaj*) rather than speeches. These are particularly lengthy during formal negotiations for price and during celebration of the wedding "breakfast". Finally, the bride is taken back to the groom's home and another great wedding feast.

Divorce

In comparison to most other South-East Asian societies, divorce is rare among the Hmong. If a wife misbehaves badly, becoming addicted to opium and working poorly or not at all, or committing adultery, the man has the right to divorce and insist on the return of the bride price.

A woman, whilst she can leave her husband at any time, would involve her parental family in a humiliating return of the bride price if she did so. Such loss of face would almost certainly condemn her to a lonely life of spinsterhood. The only justified basis for a woman initiating divorce is cruelty. If she can show, before a court composed of village leaders and members of both clans involved in the marriage, evidence of cruelty without good cause, no bride price is repaid and divorce is immediate. She would return to her original clan. Custody of children goes to the innocent party.

Remarriage

Divorced women able to prove their innocence usually have no trouble finding another husband. Indeed, the children she would bring with her into the new husband's family and clan, plus the reduced bride price likely to be required, sometimes add to her attraction.

Widows should ideally move with their children into the household of the dead husband's younger brother (never the elder brother) and, if he agrees, marry him (what anthropologists call "levirate"). If she does so, she and her children remain within the family and clan of her dead husband and no new bride price is paid. If she chooses not to do so, or if there is no younger brother, she can remarry outside. A smaller bride price will be necessary; if the woman is no longer young, this might be nominal. The children, unless already married, would join the new husband's household and may or may not be adopted into his clan, depending on their ages. However, because of their attachment to the dead husband and his ancestors, they would be expected to marry outside of both their current and previous clans.

Polygamy and Wealth

A man can have any number of wives at the same time but a woman only one husband. The first wife married (*niam hlob*) theoretically remains in charge of household matters. (In practice, an intelligent or aggressive minor wife, *niam nrab/ niam yau*, can take over.) Theoretically, the first wife should agree to her husband marrying again. All wives live under the same roof and, again, in theory, are entitled to share the husband's bed at the same time (in practice, separate sleeping platforms are the norm).

The existence of a high bride price means that polygamy is only possible for the wealthy man. This is not necessarily true for Hmong refugees from Laos. A substantial loss of men in the long war has created a situation where marriage to the dead husband's younger brother and reduced bride price for widows is more common than in the past. There are no obvious economic gains in taking two or more wives for a man in a refugee camp or resettled overseas and this tends to reduce further the bride price payable in camps. However, for the Hmong free to farm the mountains of Northern Thailand, the benefits of polygamy are clear. As the Hmong say, "A man is rich when he has two wives and ten horses".

CHAPTER 7:

THE ECONOMY

The Working Day

Around four o'clock in the morning, wives and elder daughters will be up, dressed and busy dehusking rice for the day, blowing life back into the fire's embers and preparing breakfast. The men rise at dawn, soon after six o'clock, and sit down to the basic Hmong meal: a large bowl of steaming hot rice and a large dish of thin vegetable soup, eaten communally with Chinese spoons. Whilst the women clear away breakfast and place the tools for the day together with the provisions for the mid-day meal in a back basket, the men prepare the horse or horses, place the judas cock in its basketwork poke and shoulder muskets and powder horns. As the morning mists clear, the house is locked up or left in the care of an elder and the family sets off in single file along the narrow paths for the fields. The order of walking rarely varies: the man is first, the horse is second and the women, carrying babies or baskets on their backs, follow along behind.

On arrival at the field or fields (a family is sometimes divided by conflicting demands on time and physically split between different locations) the horse is usually tethered to browse in one corner of the field and the judas cock (a "wild" chicken) is pegged out in another corner.

Unless the family has been exceptionally fortunate and the cries of the judas cock or the hazards of fate have attracted a bird or animal to the field and the man's musket has fired at the first try and his aim has been lucky or true, lunch is a repeat of breakfast. A full hot meal is always prepared in the field house and a good midday rest is taken, with tea drunk and tobacco smoked at leisure.

Without counting the time taken to walk to and from the fields and the labour of carrying (which on return can be significant), a full eight hours are usually spent in productive labour. Rather more than eight hours is done by women, rather less by men, who tend to spend more time walking around with muskets looking for something to

shoot or stopping to think or discuss matters over a smoke, or moving the horse. At harvest times, when the family may leave the village before sun-up, or sleep in the field-house, a productive working day stretches to ten hours. At more normal times, return to the house in the village coincides with sunset, at around half past six. The men put away the horses, the women see to the pigs and chickens and prepare the evening meal.

The Working Year

The Hmong work by sight and feel rather than according to any calendar. Thus, the only real holiday for the Hmong (when all work and commercial activity must cease for at least three days), the *Peb Caug* or New Year, falls on the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month. The New Year cannot usually begin for any particular village until the rice harvest is completed. The thirtieth day of the lunar month after the completion of the harvest will therefore be taken as the start of the year. The fact that Hmong in different areas can celebrate New Year at different times, depending on the harvest and calculation of the moon's phase, appears to create no concern at all. Indeed, for young men it is a positive virtue which permits them to join in festivities, including important courtship games, in more than one village.

The most usual time for New Year is the first half of December. Whenever it falls, Peb Caug marks the beginning of the twelve-month lunar calendar which is measured and named simply "month one", "month two", etc. Little heed is given to this calendar. The Hmong recognize when the opium heads are ready for tapping by looking at and feeling them. They know that once the opium harvest is completed, new forest land must be prepared. They feel the heat and know that the fields must be fired before the first rain clouds appear in the sky. They plant rice after the first light rains have fallen and harvest it when they can see and feel the grains full and mature.

Whilst the Hmong refer to no calendar to plan their work activities, these activities do, however, fit neatly into the Gregorian calendar. The chart below shows when major activities take place; it also demonstrates that the Hmong have a very full working year. Because they produce three crops -rice, opium and maize - the Hmong are more consistently busy in their fields than the great majority of traditional farmers in Asia, most of whom have a single main crop.

An Integrated Economy

The Hmong economy is based on an integration of three crops: opium, rice and maize. Barring the most catastrophic weather conditions, opium will, in any one year, be by far the most productive of the three crops in terms of land and labour use. Reducing opium and rice harvests to their market cash value equivalents, an opium field is on average about six times as productive as the same area of land given over to rice. It thus makes sense to grow as much opium as possible even at the risk of not having enough rice land: additional rice can usually be purchased from the lowlands to make up requirements (this seems to be particularly the case in Thailand). However, all Hmong will try to meet family rice needs as far as possible by home production and there are sound economic reasons for this.

The Agricultural Year

Limitations on production, assuming land is available, are set by the number and strength of the working members of the family and the intensive labour period of the crop. For all three crops, the harvest is the labour intensive period and for opium this period is more intensive than for rice or maize. Fortunately, harvest periods complement each other, permitting the family to produce as much as possible of each crop. The "cash" nature of the opium crop (opium is often used in small quantities as a means of exchange) permits any additional labour required to be hired and the addictive nature of opium ensures the availability of such labour (typically, wandering opium addicts from the lowlands). Paid labour is most unlikely to be used on the opium harvest because it would be too easy to steal the product; there is no point therefore in a family sowing more opium than it can harvest, whilst there is every reason to minimize reliance on lowlanders by growing as much rice as possible.

Of the three crops, minimal attention is given to maize. However, this crop, which can grow in the same field as opium, is important as a stand-by staple and almost every family will stretch its rice supply by eating some of the fresh maize between the August maize harvest and the first picking of the rice harvest in mid-October. But maize does not keep well or suit the Hmong palate and it is seen primarily as food for the pigs (which constitute an important source of protein and cooking fat).

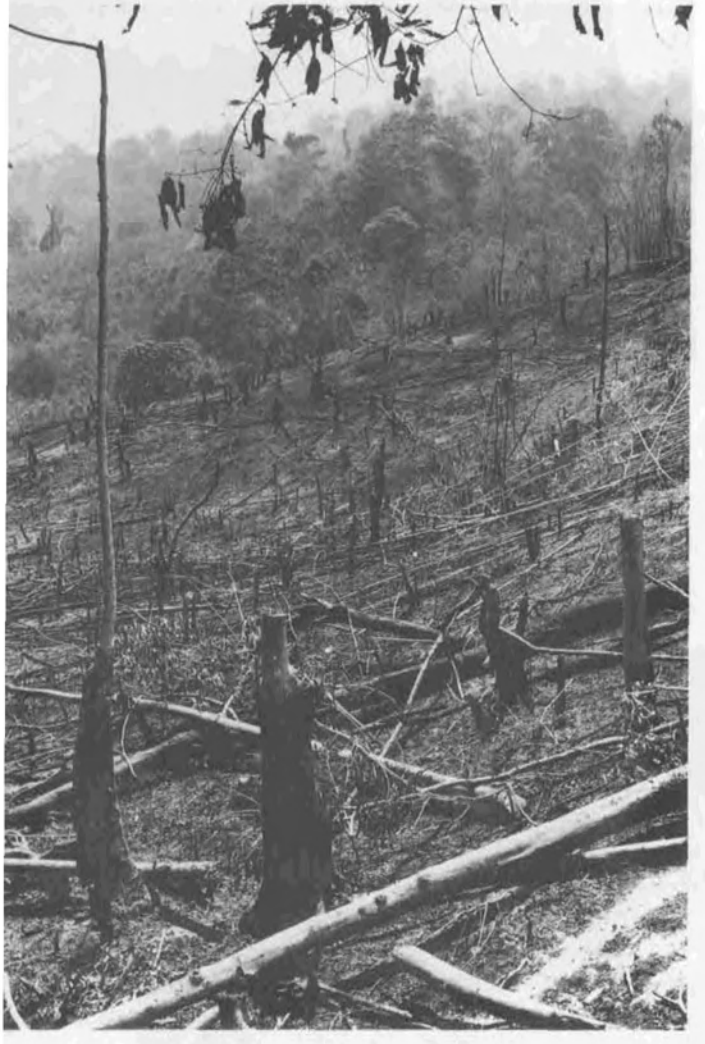
Shifting Cultivation

The Hmong practice swidden or shifting cultivation: trees and bushes are cut down and burnt; seeds are planted into or broadcast onto land.

Shifting cultivation as such does not require the "semi-nomadic" existence that typifies Hmong life. Some tribal neighbours of the Hmong have very stable village residence patterns and rotate their fields yearly around the village, reusing a piece of land after a fallow period of ten years or more. However, without stability of population and systematic rotation of land use the soil becomes exhausted. This is particularly marked where opium is the dominant crop. Leaving an exhausted opium field to "fallow" will not regenerate forest cover and soil fertility: only a coarse grass (imperata) will survive on the eroded land. As a Hmong village grows in size, new opium fields are cut progressively further away from home. When a family's "farm" becomes a widely-scattered series of distant fields, with perhaps a three-hour walk between the most distant, it is time to think of moving. Thus, for the Hmong, continued shifting cultivation, as currently practiced, requires periodic household relocation.

Cutting Fields

The Hmong cultivate any land, however steep, and before a village moves or disintegrates, there is likely to be very little forest land left within reasonable proximity. Land is not, however, used indiscriminately. All Hmong farmers are very much aware of distinctions in quality of land and will use



the most productive first. The best land is distinguished by its forest cover, the higher the trees the better the land, and by soil quality, which is judged by sight and taste. Ideally land should be primary forest, i.e. never previously cut, with soil reddish in colour and limestone based.

New fields are located long before the time comes to cut and clear them in February/March. Boundaries of fields are marked by the prospective user with a stick in a gash in a tree. Disputes are very rare and are settled at a meeting of the village elders before any clearing takes place. "Ownership" remains with the user (the nuclear family) for as long as an opium field is cultivated, which is generally to the limits of its productivity. Rice fields may be left fallow for several years before being reused by the owner (the last person to clear the land); if the owner moves out of the area, or if he does not wish to use the land again, another family may take it over.

The cutting of fields is very hard work. Co-operation is confined to household members but labour capacity can be increased by hiring non-Hmong. This might be necessary if an adult family member is sick, but most families manage to cut all new fields with existing manpower within the three-four weeks following the opium harvest.

Division of labour is very clear: men cut down trees with axes (*taus*), women clear undergrowth with machetes (*txuas*). (Division of labour by sex and task is set out in tabular form below.) Trees are preferably felled in line: starting at the bottom and working up the slope, trunks are cut half through on the lower side; a large tree directly above the others is fully-felled. Ropes tied to the tree direct its fall onto the trees below which collapse under the combined weight. Branches are then lopped off close to the trunk and piled against the tree to maximize the burning that will take place. Highland slopes are dangerous places at this time of the year: trees are falling in all directions and loose trunks are liable to roll and shift without warning.

Firing the Fields

Fields are cut as early as possible in the year to allow the maximum period of time for the felled trees and undergrowth to dry out under the hot sun of March and early April. The farmer is careful, however, to fire the fields (*hlawv*) before the first rains which generally (but not always) fall around the middle of April.

Tinder dry brush is piled on the windward side of the field (if there is any wind) and the man

moves quickly between bundles, lighting each with a long burning faggot. Care is taken that the fire does not spread to the surrounding forest.

As animals flee the flames, hunters are given the opportunity to show their skill in bagging game whilst avoiding or killing snakes.

All farmers fire their fields at around the same time and this causes thick clouds of smoke to hang in the hot air over the mountains. The effect seen from the plains is remarkable: tall mountains visible throughout the year disappear from sight until the rains disperse the smoke. It is a dangerous time to fly over or through the mountains and many small airstrips or helicopter pads are unusable during this period.

Once fields are burnt, no attempt is made to move charred tree trunks which litter the ground taking up much of the cultivatable area.

Rice (*nplej*)

The planting of rice after the first light rains have fallen involves all members of the extended family working uphill from the lowest point of the slope. The men lead carrying dibble sticks (*hmuv*) some six feet (1m 80) long, rapidly pricking the ash-covered soil with holes about one inch (3 cm) in diameter, just over one inch deep and, within the limits set by the littered landscape, some twelve inches (30 cms) apart. The women follow behind, bent low on the slope, taking handfuls of seed rice from an open-topped bag tied pinafore-like around the waist and very rapidly dropping eight-twelve grains in each hole. Some Hmong couples exchange tasks in the afternoon, women dibbling. Depending on the area and the difficulties of slope and litter, planting (*cog nplej*) generally takes about one week.

The rice fields are usually weeded twice, using a short handled hoe, once in June and again in August. As the rainy season tails off in September, the rice grains ripen in the sun and are ready for harvest towards the end of October.

The harvest is mostly, but not entirely, women's work. The rice is usually cut high on the stem (which avoids too much bending) with a small blade fixed into a wooden block and hidden in the palm. When a good handful has been cut, a thin slither of bamboo is twisted around the sheaf and it is put to one side. Another much quicker

method of reaping is the use of a small sickle (*liag*). This is preferred, but is usually only possible on fairly clear land where the rice is growing evenly (on most fields, partly burnt trunks and branches render the sickle impractical).

The grains are separated from the stalks by the women in the fields and carried back to the village in baskets on the backs of horses, cows or humans. The grain is left whole and stored in raised granaries near the house or in the house itself; it is dehusked (but not milled) daily by the women using a foot-actioned pounder; alternatively, water pressure from a stream is sometimes used to activate the pounder.

Opium (yaj yeeb)

Opium grows best on limestone soil located at a high elevation, fully exposed to the sun, yet free of frost. The "Hmong homeland" mountain range stretching from Kweichow Province in Southern China through Northern Viet Nam and Laos, and across Northern Thailand, fulfils these conditions perfectly.

Opium fields are usually planted with maize in April/May. Maize is harvested in August at the time when the fields are prepared to accept the opium seeds. Such preparation requires the soil to be finely broken up and the stems of the maize plant help prevent the heavy rains from washing the topsoil down the slope.

Broadcasting of the very fine opium seeds is made in two stages: one in mid-August, the other in mid-September. Sometimes different types of poppy with different ripening times are also broadcast. The objective is to lengthen harvest time and reduce the risk of loss that would follow a very cold period of weather or unseasonal rain. In villages near to urban centres, where opium can be quickly sold, there is often an emphasis on early harvest, since the price of opium is significantly higher in early December than in early January.

Women weed the fields carefully in October and at the same time cut away any remaining maize stalks to allow the growing opium plant full exposure to the sun. A second weeding which coincides with the rice harvest and is less thorough takes place in November and the opium is ready for tapping by the end of December.

Following a long spell of dry, sunny weather, the petals fall from the opium poppy and the heads, the size of golf balls, are incised. Each member of

a nuclear family works across a field, tapping only those heads that are ripe. During the harvest period, they are likely to work back over the same field three-four times, tapping the larger heads several times before being satisfied that the opium has yielded all of its precious sap.

On one day, the family incises the opium heads. A four-bladed knife is used to score lightly the skin from top to bottom. Three to four movements of the knife are made on each head, producing twelve-sixteen incisions at each tapping. During the day, the sap oozes out of the cuts and hangs in tears on the poppy head. Early the next morning, the family works its way back across the same field, scraping the heads of opium upwards onto curved spatulas, which are periodically wiped off into a metal container. Alternatively, poppies are incised in the morning and the sap collected in the late afternoon.

A quantity of opium will be set aside for use by family members and for various payments (hire of labour, possible purchase of rice and vegetables from non-Hmong) which will be made throughout the year. The rest is likely to be sold off soon after harvest. Prices vary from year to year, depending on supply, but are standard throughout a region. There is therefore no room for bargaining and most Hmong retain contact with a single buyer, who visits the village year after year.

Maize

Young ears of maize are eaten either whole, after roasting in the fire, or steaming, or in the form of baked cakes, after the grains have been soaked and ground into a paste. The majority of the maize is hung in the high rafters of the house, where smoke dries it. Little is done to prevent the many rats around the house from eating a large part of the harvest

Whilst the Hmong in most parts of Laos and throughout Northern Thailand treat maize as pig food and some state that they only grow it because it is compatible with opium, there are reports that maize rather than rice forms the base of the Hmong diet in parts of Laos and China.

Livestock

Of all the animals raised by the Hmong, the horse (*nees*) is the most spoilt, whilst the handsome, long-haired dog (*dlev*) is the worst treated. Neither of these animals is eaten, although dogs are sometimes killed for ritual purposes. In return for regular food (wild grasses and maize stems) and a dry stable at night, the short sturdy horse carries heavy loads long distances, over steep and difficult pathways. The family dogs receive little or no food and plenty of abuse in return for guarding the house (during and after life); the best they can hope for is to be called into the house to clean up after a child relieves itself on the ground.

Hmong livestock, essentially pigs (*npua*), goats (*tshis*), chickens (*gaib*) and cows (*nyng*), are left free to scavenge and browse in and around the village. Rather than fence in domestic animals, the Hmong build fences around household gardens (where chillies, herbs and other spices are grown) and fields to protect the harvest from both domestic and at least some of the wild animals. Cows, although highly valued and essential for funeral rites, are allowed to roam widely in the forest and are rounded up only occasionally.

Chickens are reasonably well cared for by the women. They are allowed into the house in the morning to glean what they can from the pre-dawn dehusking of rice and droppings from the breakfast table; they are also well fed on maize in the evening before being locked in a raised coop to protect them from the rain and predators (including the dogs). Eggs are infrequent because of the

SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

	Men	Women
Swidden Rice		
cut trees (every year)	x	
clear undergrowth	x	x
burn fields	x	
planting	x	x
hunting	x	
weeding		x
gathering forest produce	x	x
harvest	x	x
carrying	x	x
care of the horses, cows	x	
care of pigs, chickens		xx
carpentry	x	
metal work	x	
cloth and clothes-making		x
basket-making	x	x
collecting firewood, water		xx
pounding rice		xx
grinding maize		xx
cooking		x
child care	x	xx
swidden opium (only changes listed)		
cut forest every 5-10 years	x	
preparing ground	x	x
broadcasting	x	x
opium dealing	x	
Irrigated rice		
construction, maintainance of fields	x	x
ploughing	x	
planting	x	x
transplanting	x	x
harvest	x	x
care of buffaloes	xx	

Note: xx= torsks of ten deleyated to children

chickens' poor diet; they are usually eaten only when shamanic rites or illness require it or when there is occasion for a special feast.

Chickens, more than any other animals, are sacrificed in curing rites and will thus be eaten by any member of the family. However, they could be seen as the "property" of women, and, in polygamous households, of individual wives: a woman will sell one or two of her chickens to buy the needles and thread necessary for her embroidery of the family's clothing.

Pigs are also cared for by the women who carry back banana leaves and trunks from the fields, chop them up and feed them into the perpetually simmering soup in a very large wok on the closed hearth. (Visitors should not taste this soup or comment on how good it smells!) The soup is poured periodically into a long wooden trough at the side of the house and pigs eat it as fast as they can; the dogs dart in to grab the slops. During the rainy season, the pigs and dogs squabble for dry places under the shelter of the overhanging eaves of the house and under the raised floor of the chicken coop and rice store. Pigs are not killed on a regular basis for food but are reserved for important religious and social occasions, principally New Year, weddings and death, rebirth and shamanic rites, all of which require the feeding of guests. Meat left over on such occasions is smoked over the fire; cooking lard is retained in bottles.

Goats run half-wild around the village and little attention is paid to them. Owners know their goats and occasionally one will be killed and eaten. As with other animal sacrifices, the killing is aimed at curing a family member through propitiation of the spirits. Since the cure will inevitably involve the sick person eating all or part of the animal (after the shaman has taken his "fee" of head and one shoulder), Hmong religion (or the spirits) would appear to be making rational use of scarce resources by directing them to those members of the family most in need.

Hunting

Hunting is reserved for men only. The favourite weapon is the muzzle loading musket, although the crossbow remains popular. In open spaces, the musket has the advantage of accuracy over distance, but in the short distances of the forest the crossbow is almost as accurate and possesses the advantage of silence, which means that all game within a mile is not frightened off at the first shot. The crossbow is also much quicker to reload and works every time - more than can be said for the average Hmong musket (held away from the face in case of explosion).

The Hmong prefer to hunt wild pigs, deers and monkeys, but these animals quickly learn to avoid areas near to Hmong villages. Unless a special hunting party is arranged to travel to a more remote area (probably one rocky and unsuitable for farming), the daily bag, if it contains anything at all, is likely to hold only one or two small birds. Any animal killed is shared among family members.

Gathering

Gathering is a continuous and important preoccupation of women and, to a lesser extent, men and children. In the rainy season, the forest yields abundant supplies of bamboo shoots and mushrooms. Without straying from the path, it is quite possible for a family to gather during a one-hour walk home from the fields sufficient vegetables for the evening soup.

Saving and Security

The primary objective of economic activity for the Hmong, as for all people, is to ensure the provision of basic needs. Diversification of the economy into three different crops and three different harvest times goes a long way to minimize the consequences of a bad harvest in any single sector. The inclusion of a cash crop, opium, means that wealth can be stored in silver over the years. This wealth provides a measure of economic security to see a family through a bad year or to purchase provisions during the first year after its move to a new location.

CHAPTER 8:

MUSIC CODES

Singing and Music

The Hmong, like most people, have music, song and dance. These three means of communication are used in a particularly Hmong way. Song does not accompany music or dance; music and dance can - and usually do - accompany each other when the large Hmong mouth organ, known as a *qeej* is played; the only other dance is the sword dance, in which a man twirls two swords skilfully around as he goes through a series of almost gymnastic movements. Music (with the exception of the jews harp during courtship) and dance are confined to men; both men and women sing (but only one at a time). Traditionally, Hmong men and women do not dance together, although Lao dances involving both sexes have been picked up by some Hmong in Laos.

Singing is prized among the Hmong and a visitor to a Hmong household should not be surprised if one of the group of men sitting around the fire after dinner, or one of the women nearby, flows spontaneously into song. To the observer, the strong voice, coming perhaps from an old man, perhaps from a young girl, unaccompanied, in the deep quiet of a Hmong house on a mountain top at night, has a mystical or spiritual quality. It is beautiful. The reason for the song can be purely that if a Hmong feels like singing, he sings; others stop and listen and appreciate the quality of the voice. Nobody applauds, although there might be some quiet words of acknowledgement.

Certain Hmong songs are known to everybody, others, like the quite rapid exchange of *pov pob* "courtship songs" that can take place at the New Year ball game or following rebirth rites (*tso plig*) can be made up by the singer. Still others serve ritual functions and will be learnt with great care or entrusted to specialists (such are the *zaaj tshoob*, or the *kwv txhiaj tshoob*, the songs of the wedding ceremony, and the *ghuab ke* or *taw kev* funeral chants). Still other "songs" are not sung at all, but played on musical instruments in the form of words coded into musical notes and chords.

Music Codes

Simple flutes are played purely for pleasure. Other Hmong instruments, the *geej* (mouth organ), the *nruas* (drum) and the *ncas* (jews harp) are played with a purpose. The *qeej* and the *nruas* are used for contact with the Otherworld of the dead and spirits and are played in the house only during funeral rites. The jews harp is simple to make and widely used by young people to "say" words of love. All three use forms of musical-language code.

In the West, such well-known nursery rhymes as "Jack and Jill went up the hill", or "Frere Jacques" are (or were) sung by mothers to children without musical accompaniment. The child learns the words and the tune at the same time. Since words and tune never vary, if the child hears his mother or father humming the tune, he knows from the tune exactly where the hummer is in the story: it is almost impossible to hear such songs without the words forming in the mind (try it!). In a very simple way, the hummed version represents a musical language code. The Hmong way of speaking through music is about one million times more sophisticated than this.

The simple Western music code, in which notes stand in for words, only functions if the music maker and the listener know the words in advance. The Hmong code, on the other hand, like the beating of drums among the North American Indians and many African peoples, can convey fresh information; the listener hears and interprets the sounds into meaning in much the same way as letters and spaces are interpreted into meaning by the reader of this book. Many of the Hmong people are preliterate in terms of interpreting written language but eminently literate in terms of interpreting musical sounds.

The Hmong music codes, with the exception of that used for the drum, are based on the

Hmong language. Each word in the Hmong language is composed of three components: consonant, vowel, tone (a few words have only vowel plus tone). With the exception of introduced foreign words, the Hmong language is essentially monosyllabic. Compound words are, however, not rare, thus *niam txiv*, literally "husband wife", translates as "parents", *noj mov* = eat food or simply "eat". There is an increasing tendency to write such compounds as one word, e.g. *niamtxiv*, *nojmov*, which has prompted some Hmong to question whether the Hmong language should properly be classified as monosyllabic.

Tonal structure is represented in the written system most widely accepted by Hmong by use of the final unspoken consonants (see tone chart at the end of this book). Hmong music codes do not seek to reproduce or come close to these tones. Instead, notes and chords represent the eight tones. For the most spiritually "dangerous" of songs, a type of "double coding" is used: the words are learnt in song code (see music transcript one) and then relearnt; it is vital that these transcripts are reproduced fully and clearly around/after this point. They are with the photos in qeej code (see music transcript two). The reason for having such a complicated system is given in the myth of the lost book; certainly as good a reason as any that could be advanced by an ethno-musicologist.

The playing of the *gheng* is always accompanied by a slow, ritual dance

The Loss of the Hmong Book

A long time ago, the Hmong people had a Book that unrolled into a long piece of cloth. On that cloth was written precise instructions on what to do when death occurred: how the dead person could cross the Otherworld and find the village of all his ancestors, and how his living relatives could help him in the journey. The book was very valuable. Only one copy existed and the Hmong kept it carefully.

After much fighting with the Chinese, the Hmong were banished to the South. The Hmong

After much fighting with the Chinese, the Hmong were banished to the South. The Hmong people set off in a long trail of refugees into the mountains. It rained very hard and when the people stopped to rest for the night at the market of *yeej yaj*, they untied the Book and stretched it out to dry.

The cows began to eat the Book and, before anybody could intervene, only scraps were left. These scraps were tied up and when the Hmong stopped in a village to spend the next night, the remains of the Book were kept away from the cows by hiding them in the roof of a house. The next morning, it was discovered that the remaining scraps had been entirely eaten by rats and nothing remained of the Book.

The Hmong then appealed to the spiritual lord *Siv Yig* who always took pity on the Hmong. Siv Yig did not provide another Book but showed six brothers how to make musical pipes of different length from bamboo and taught them how to play the six pipes together in order to help a dead person find his way to the ancestral village. When the six brothers died, the Hmong appealed again to Siv Yig, who showed them how to combine the six pipes into a single instrument called the *qeej* and how one person could play it using six fingers. In addition to showing people how to encode music for the dead (*qeej tuag*) and for the soul (*qeej plig*), Siv Yig also showed them how to record hundreds of pieces of music (*qeej noob nrws* or *qeej ntiv*) "telling" legends about famous people and various stages and conditions of life, e.g. widowhood, becoming an orphan.

The *Qeej*

Although some form of "reed pipe" is to be found amongst most of the highland and lowland neighbours of the Hmong, the large size and haunting chords of the qeej make it particularly Hmong.

The qeej is made up of six bamboo pipes, passing through a windchest made of a reddish hardwood, known to the Hmong as *ntoo txiv pem*. The instrument has a long neck (*kav qeej*) which tapers up from the windchest to the brass (or possibly silver) mouthpiece (*ncaug qeej*).

Dimensions vary somewhat but a length of 73 cm (29 inches) from the tip of the mouthpiece to the end of the windbox is normal. The inside diametre of the mouthpiece measures 12 mm (1/2"). The mouthpiece is strengthened and protected by a ring, usually of brass, some 2 cm (3/4") wide. The neck and windchest are bound with rings of silver, brass, copper or tin. When the qeej is not in use, the mouthpiece is stopped up with an ornamental hardwood plug called *lub ntsaws*.

The six pipes of the qeej, known as *ntiv qeej* are of greatly different lengths and diametres. For the short, thick pipe, a type of bamboo called *xyoob tuam tswm* is used; the five other pipes are made from *xyoob qeej* known for having a long distance between nodes.

Playing the Qeej

Part of the hypnotic power of the weaving *qeej* player is caused by the continuity of sounds. Notes and chords of the *qeej* flow into one another like the music from bagpipes, and the player seems, to the non-Hmong observer, to have no need to pause for breath. Unlike bagpipes, the qeej has no reservoir of air. The continuity of sound results from the fact that the player breathes through the qeej, which resounds not only when air is blown through it but also when air is sucked in.

The windchest is held with balls of both thumbs and the small fingers of each hand, leaving the first three fingers of each hand free to close and open the holes in the six pipes.

Qeej Music

The very strong association that the *qeej* has as a means of communication with the Otherworld makes Hmong careful in its use. Except on the occasion of the funeral, the *qeej tuag* is never played in the house and even learning to play and practicing usually takes place in the forest, where, if the chords of the *qeej* do attract the attention of bad spirits, less harm is likely to result. Apart from the funeral, the only occasions requiring the playing of the *qeej* in the village are the rebirth ceremony (*tso plig*) and New Year.

This hesitancy to play the qeej in public does not extend to the *qeej ua si* or *qeej noog nrws*, the hundreds of compositions which, in music

code, tell of famous ancestors, heroes and legends of the past, myth and history, the unspoken memory of the Hmong people. These pieces follow a formal format as follows:

1. *ntiv* (prelude, a warming-up exercise)
2. *xub* (introduction)
3. *nuj nrws* (story; *noog nrws* in White Hmong)
4. *quas nuj nrws* ("rounding out the story")
5. *pluas* ("conclusion")
6. *xaus* (completion)

Compositions for funerals follow a more complex version of this format and a composition can generally be broken down by a player in the sequential order:

1. *ntiv* (prelude)
2. *pluas cim qeej cim nruas* (mixing pipes and drum)
3. *lwm qab nruas* (turning under the drum)
4. *xub tuag* ("introducing death music")
5. *quas xub tuag* ("rounding out the introduction")
6. *zaj qeej tuag* (death music, composition)
7. *quas zaj qeej tuag* ("rounding out the composition")
8. *raib leev or qeej rov qab* (return from Otherworld)
9. *zais roj zais hneev* ("concealing trace of return")
10. *xaus qeej* (completion)

The meaning of these sub-headings is precise to a Hmong, but difficult to interpret and the English translation is approximate. They suggest that the *qeej* player shows the dead person the way to the Otherworld (through the music code) and takes special care (8 and 9) to conceal trace of his return. The "concealment" passage is accompanied by complex footwork in which the player changes direction several times to confuse any spirits trying to follow him in order to bring sickness or death into the world of the living.

Many compositions exist only to be played openly at funerals. The first and most important of these is the *qeej tu siav* ("last breath/expiration"), which begins after the recitation of the *qhuab ke* is completed. The performance lasts at least one hour and can involve the joining together of some 32 sequences. Directed to the dead person, the music code informs, sequence by sequence of the following:

kev mob ("reason for illness")
kev tuag ("the fact of death")
tu zaam (dressing the corpse)
ntxuav muag (washing the face)
ua daab qhuas tsaug (thanking the house spirits)
xaa moog daab teb ("sending to the Other world")
de paag ntxag (plucking flowers for consolation)

As an example of music coding, the *tu zaam* (dressing the corpse) sequence is given, with music, in its sung version (used only for learning the text) in Transcription 1 and in its music-coded version, played on the *qeej* in the house of the dead person, in Transcription 2. If any young Hmong who can read music and has a *qeej* is inclined to try out the piece, please remember the taboo on playing in the house. For non-Hmong, an English translation of this passage is provided here:

> Now (name of the dead person) is dead. Is indeed dead. *Su loo*. (Name) has died. He has stopped breathing. In his mouth the breath was cut off. He is dead and can utter not one single word more. The sons, the brothers, the sons of the younger brothers, the children of (name) had to rake about in the clothes box and get him dressed. (Name) looked dowdy. His hair was shabby like unhackled hemp. Everybody came inside the house and helped comb out the hair. The sisters and cousins of (name) held the silver comb in their left hands. The golden comb they held in the left hand. They combed the hair of (name) smoothly. Now he is prepared to meet his grandmother, meet his grandfather. *Su loo*.

(Note: *Su loo* or *ib su* in White Hmong is a recurrent punctuation and could be compared to the Christian "Amen". The reference to the left is explained by the association of left and death.)

Other important funeral compositions are:

The *qeej nce nees* (to mount the horse, or in White Hmong *tsa nees*, to lift onto the horse). This is played as the dead person is placed on the stretcher and raised up on poles against the back wall of the house.

each of the three meals of the day, breakfast, lunch and dinner, are offered to the spirit of the dead.

The *qeej hlawv ntawv* accompanies the burning of "money" made from rice paper to send it into the Otherworld, where it will help the dead person meet the costs and bribes involved on the way to meet his ancestors.

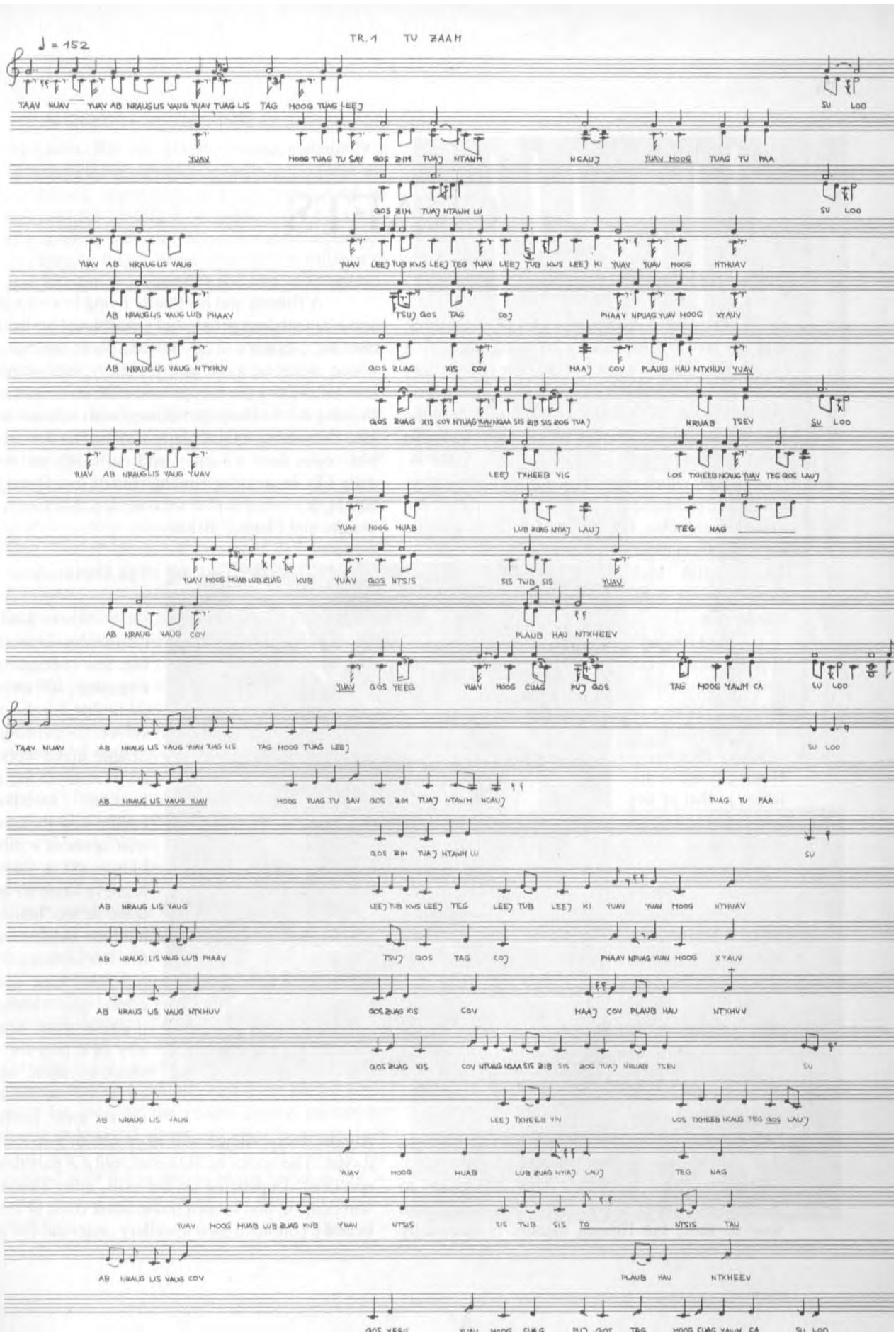
The *qeej sawv kev* is played in the village open space during the final day of the funeral and leads the funeral procession to the outer boundaries of the village. As the party carries the body into the trees the *qeej*, which has played throughout the long funeral period, falls silent.

The Drum (nruas)

The funeral drum (*nruas tuag*) is made from a single tree trunk cut and hollowed out. Stretched across one end, the hide of a cow is held in place with pegs and rope. It is beaten throughout the funeral; no special language code is required, the continual beating of the hide gives out messages of comfort and assistance that can be picked up by the dead person on his journey. The drum, together with the qeej transmits to the dead the kind of information contained in the Book eaten by the cows and rats. This drum is played only at a funeral and is destroyed with an axe immediately the dead person leaves the village for burial. Thus, a new *nruas tuag* must be made for each funeral.

Inside the house, it will be suspended in a fashion current among the descent group involved. Most Green Hmong fasten it to the principal pole of the house; some to the pillar next to it; some White Hmong erect posts in the ground inside the house and suspend the drum from a cross-beam. On the last day of the funeral, the drum will be beaten in the open at the "lying in state" (*tshom tshav*).

A few exceptional families possess another drum called *nruas yug* (the ancestor drum, or literally, "drum to keep"). This drum is retained in the house and is offered a chicken at New Year. The spirit within this drum, which has cow hide on both ends, is addressed as a "flower maiden" (*niam nkauj pag*). These drums are extremely rare and old: some Hmong say that no new nruas yug can be built (although old ones can be repaired). Others say that an elder son of an elder son of an elder son may make one if he is related, by descent, to a family which already possess a drum, or if the drum spirits call upon him to do so.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CHAPTER 9

CRAFTS

Crafts and Identity

At the most immediate and superficial level, it is the products of Hmong craft that identify a Hmong: the clothes worn and the style of jewellery signal plainly that this man, this woman, is Hmong and will speak and behave as Hmong. Within the Hmong world, differences of clothing will also denote different types of Hmong (*Ntsuab, Dawb, Quas Npab)* which often indicate linguistic differences. Differentiation beyond this immediate level, into clan, sub-clan, lineage and family will not be superficially evident. To establish such facts requires communication.

As a Hmong's appearance identifies him/her as Hmong, so the appearance of a Hmong village is uniquely Hmong. A Hmong house is different to that of any non-Hmong in the world. Furthermore, a Green Hmong house is different to a White Hmong house. Forms of song and music are also specifically Hmong.

Every bit as important as the material indications of Hmong identity, is the knowledge of how to produce particularly Hmong clothing, jewellery, houses, etc: Hmong craft in the psycho-material sense of the term. Such knowledge is passed from generation to generation. Things slip in from the outside from time to time, but Hmong identity is essentially autonomous and self-reliant.

A Hmong and his family living in a village environment, can grow, make and decorate their clothing, can work wood, iron and silver, can make house, tools, weapons and jewellery, can weave baskets to carry the harvest and store possessions. In doing so, the Hmong craftsman and craftwoman give everything a particularly Hmong flavour: arts and crafts form a natural and enriching part of daily life. In weaving Hmong clothes or a Hmong basket, a Hmong is also weaving together family, society and Hmong identity.

The Smith

Most adult men can work metal, but few possess a forge and a full set of tools for black or silver smithing. Simple metal work, such as replacing a broken wooden handle into the cast iron heads of a dibbling stick or a hoe head, is likely to be done in the household or field-house fire. For work requiring more time and effort, any Hmong might request, usually in return for a small payment, use of a smith's forge, anvil and tools. Almost every village will have one or two such forges. The smith is, however, only a part-time specialist. Depending on his skill, other Hmong will come to him to melt down silver coins or bars to make commissioned jewellery under the eye of

the client. But the smith remains essentially a farmer; one whose superior skills at the forge are recognized, appreciated and sometimes used by and paid for by fellow villagers. Very occasionally, a smith will acquire such a good reputation that Hmong might travel from distant villages to seek his skill in making a special piece of jewellery.

The Hmong have no knowledge of smelting iron or refining silver. For supplies of metal and silver, they rely on lowlanders or passing Chinese tradesmen; they are very skilled at recycling any metal parts from discarded machinery, bicycles, etc. Silver must be purchased and comes in the form of silver bars (weight around 380 grammes), Indo-Chinese piaster coins (27 grammes, silver standard 900), Burmese rupee, (11.66 grammes, silver standard 915), and sometimes old Thai "bullet" coins of one baht (15 grammes, standard 928). Only the silver content is considered when exchanging opium for silver; old coins that would interest any antique collector are sold and valued purely by weight. Thus a Hmong neckring, even if made yesterday, could contain silver smelted in the seventeenth century.

The *kws hlau* (iron expert) builds his forge (*lub lwj hlau* or *lub tsev lwj*) near his house, with a thatch roof high enough to prevent danger of fire and to allow the light to enter. A wooden box one metre (3 feet) or so square and some 60 cm (2 feet) high is filled with earth. On the top of the earth lies the charcoal, blown into life and maintained at a high temperature by regular blasts of air from a piston bellows, worked by the smith's right hand. The piston bellows will be made by the smith. In design, if differs little from that used throughout East and South-East Asia.

Whilst it is becoming increasingly common to find store-purchased items in even the remotest Hmong village, the smith, and most adult men, can still turn out excellent knives and hoes (axe heads are usually purchased). Some tools of Hmong life, such as the small three-bladed knife used for incising the opium poppy, cannot be found in lowland stores and must be made. It is usual for a smith to make all metal parts of the musket, with the exception of the barrel, which is today almost always brought in from the outside world.

Neckrings (*lub paug caj dlaab* in Green Hmong, *lub xauv* in White dialect)

At the ceremony to celebrate survival of the first thirty days of life, a Hmong baby will receive the first silver neckring. More than anything else, the collection and wearing of neckrings serve to identify a Hmong. Whilst men usually reserve the wearing of neckrings for special occasions, women, except for the very poor, are rarely seen without them. When not in use, rings are stored in locked chests or buried in the ground within the house or at a carefully chosen secret spot in the forest.

The neckring consists of solid silver, moulded and worked into a round bar in a horseshoe shape. The ends of the bar are flattened and bent back upon themselves. The fronts of these flattened ends are decorated. To prevent the ring from falling, the open gap between ends must be smaller than the width of the wearer's neck; sometimes this gap seems very small. There is no flexibility in the adult rings and a non-Hmong might be perplexed as to how a Hmong gets them onto the neck. A very simple operation is involved: one end of a ring is poked up into the soft flesh on one side of the throat and the other end is slipped in a second around the back of the neck. Rings may be worn loosely, several at a time or, to facilitate wear and improve looks, a smith may weld together several (usually five) to be worn as one.

Less often seen, except on such public occasions as New Year, are the silver chains (*dlaim phaj paug*) and flat plates (*dlaim phaj xauv*) that hang from the ends of the neckrings. These plates are decorated by the smith in the same manner as the flat ends of the neckrings. With the help of a ruler and the point of a sharp knife, he engraves lines into the hot silver. The decoration is made with a hammer and a series of seven punches which, used together, make up the floral and geometric designs of Hmong silverwork.

Bracelets (*paug teg/kauj toog npab*)

Silver bracelets are worn by men and women. An opening is left and ends are usually splayed. Most bracelets are flat, although a variety exists. There is always some inscribed decoration.

Finger Rings

Rings are sometimes worn by men but are more frequently seen on women. There is no relationship between finger rings and marriage. A

variety exists; the most traditional are large and curved outwards from the finger. If the Hmong had pockets (which they don't), such rings would be most impractical.

Earrings (*ib hwm kauj co/lub po co, qhws ntsej/kauj ntseg*)

Silver earrings are worn by women only. The most familiar variant is a simple circle. The outer diametre measures about 25 mm (1 inch). The end decorated on both sides with an "eye", represented by a circle, is pulled through a hole in the ear lobe. The other end is decorated by what looks like a very finely worked screw; this "spear" and part of the main curve of the earring is wrapped around with thin spirals of silver thread. Identical earrings are worn by Mien (Yao) women and could have been borrowed from that group (or vice versa).

Other forms of earring are much less common, although a variety exists.

Making Cloth

Making cloth is reserved for women. The process begins with the harvest of hemp (canabis sativa) in July/August. The leaves, so valued by marijuana smokers in the West, are stripped off and thrown away in the fields. The plants, which measure two metres or more in height, are then cut with a sickle; the stalks are tied together in bundles

and carried back to the village. They are dried thoroughly in the sun if the weather permits it, or stacked wigwam-like around the main hearth inside the house.

When the sap has dried from the hemp stalks, which takes about ten to fourteen days, Hmong women snap them in the middle and, using a thumbnail, separate the fibres into rough strips. Fibres are further separated and softened by a good stamping in the rice pounder.

The flax is then twisted together with a home-made spinning wheel onto four bobbins. The next step is to unwind the yarn from the bobbins into "skeins" (measured lengths of coiled yarn: in this case a skein measures some three metres). This is done with the aid of long "arms" of

bamboo, which revolve clockwise and onto which the yarn is fed.

The coils of yarn are then bleached by boiling for several hours in water containing wood ash. This boiling process is usually repeated three times, with the yarn dried in between operations. To make the hemp threads smooth and pliant, beeswax is added to the last boiling.

The wet skeins of flax are "fulled" (thickened) with the help of a strong pair of legs, some rhythmic movements on top of a piece of stone and a rolling tree trunk. The pressure of the stone on the trunk flattens ("fills") the thread; the skeins are then hung up to dry before being replaced on the rotating bamboo arms and reeled off into a basket.

The thread is woven on a home-made loom that resembles one which used to be common in China, Korea and Japan. When not in use, the loom folds against the family house. It is made of wood and bamboo and easily transported when a family moves home. The parts are moved by a draw cord on the foot and backward body motion which pulls on a backsling. The loom produces fabric some 35 cm (13") wide and any length.

The woven cloth is once more washed, this time in cold water, and stretched out in the sun to dry.

Batik

The techniques of batik decoration are known and used only by Green Hmong women and give their skirts the distinctive "blueness" (or, in Hmong eyes, "greenness" - *ntsuab*) which identifies this ethnic sub-group from other Hmong. To decorate with batik is a very long process and an adult woman will spend about one hundred hours on a single skirt. The delicate design is then lost, to all but the discerning observer, amongst the many pleated folds of the swaying skirt. A woman with several young daughters will make skirts for all during her rare moments of "spare" time. Fortunately, hemp is the most endurable of materials and a change of clothing is not often required. However, everybody must have new clothes for New Year's Day, and it is towards this end that the Hmong woman will work on her new skirt throughout the second half of the year.

Before the batik process can take place, the cloth must be made smooth and pliant by rubbing with a stone for several hours. Then the women squat on the low Hmong stool, set up at a convenient height a plank of wood and spread the cloth across it. The first step in the process is to press lines into the material to guide the wax (batik is the

art of dyeing cloth whilst leaving undyed those parts covered with wax, which is removed after the dyeing). Heavy iron tools are used to imprint single or double lines into the plain white cloth.

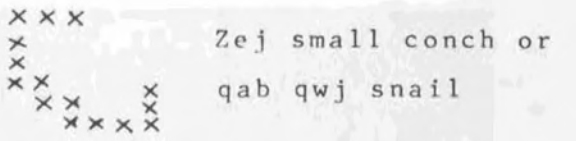
Melted beeswax will be at hand, often in the back socket of an iron ploughshare head set into glowing charcoals in an iron bucket. The wax is collected from wild beehives in April-May, but is kept for several months or a year to produce a darker colour which stands out more and is therefore easier to work with.

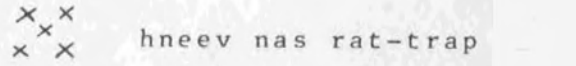
A batik "pen", loaded with liquid wax is traced over the impressed lines. There are several kinds of pens. All have a copper or brass head, which acts as a small reservoir for the wax at the same time as it acts as a "nib". Two or three blunt blades guide the wax onto the pattern.

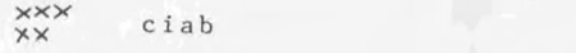
Always drawing the pen away from the body, Hmong women complete a design square by square. Many geometrical patterns exist but do not vary between generations; they are learnt by girls watching their mother and looking at older pieces of work. Whilst most women admit to certain pattern preferences, there is nothing to suggest a link between design and clan membership. There is no spontaneity or originality in the designs which are very much a part of Hmong tradition. Any symbolic meaning, apart from the naming of details, has been lost through time.

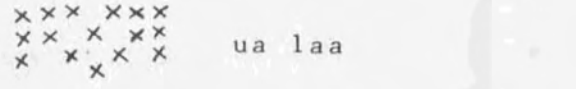
When the wax design has been completed to the satisfaction of the artist and the wax is dry, the cloth is steeped in a vat of dark blue (indigo) dye. The dye is obtained in December-January by cutting twigs from a shrub (of the indigofera family). These twigs are placed in a tub or earthen pot with slaked lime and potash, which has been leached from wood ash.

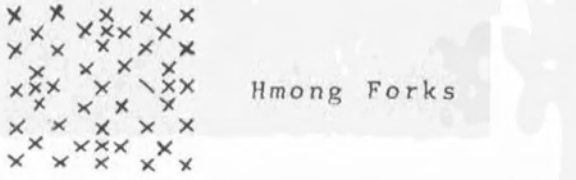
After about an hour soaking in the dye, the cloth is taken out and dried in the sun. The dyeing and drying procedure is repeated several times until the colour of the dried cloth is judged correct. Then it is time to boil the cloth in hot water to remove the wax and see the result. Since only one side has been waxed, the pattern appears clearly, in either white or light blue, on the front side only. The newly-dyed cloth is then washed several times; but no matter how carefully washed, a new skirt inevitably leaves blue thighs.

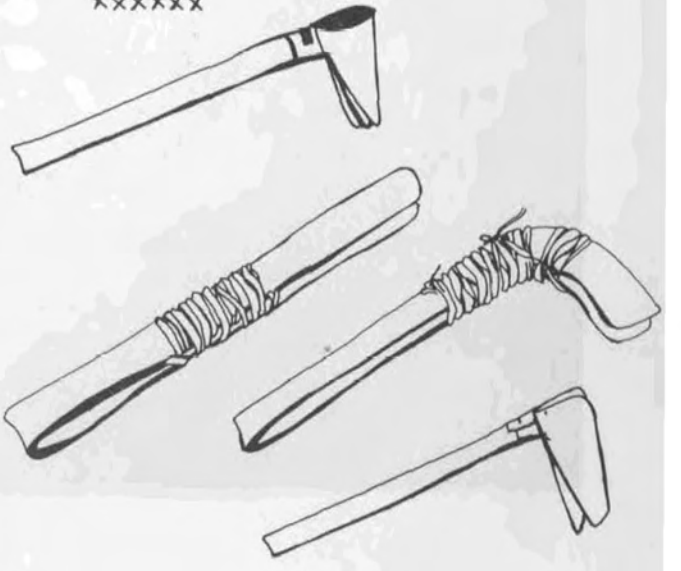












Embroidery and Applique

Almost every article of Hmong clothing, with the exception of trousers, the White Hmong plain white skirt worn only during New Year festivities, and the skullcap-style hat worn by many men, is elaborately embroidered and appliqued by women of all Hmong sub-groups. A strip of embroidery is usual on the overlapping edge of the jacket, on the rear "sailor's collar" of some women, on the ends of the long red sash worn as a cummerbund by men, on children's hats and on an added lower 13-15 cm (6") strip of the Green Hmong skirt.

A combination of stitches is used to form intricate designs. Pieces of cloth are sewn on to complement the stitching and sometimes within the stitching pattern (for example the *cav*, trunk, is usually filled with strips of red).

Embroidery and applique is a skilled but enjoyable and relaxing part of every Hmong woman's day. It is always a social activity, providing an opportunity for the exchange of news and views on much more than the subject of sewing.

The major piece of Hmong art is perhaps the Green Hmong skirt. But it is art made to wear, not only to look beautiful. The long material must, therefore, be pleated, done by running a sharp-edged stone along the pleat lines on alternate sides of the cloth, and sewing the pleats into place at the waistband. The skirt must allow ease of movement while walking up or down mountains, must be tough enough to stand considerable wear in a rugged environment, and must be beautiful enough to match the physical character of the Hmong and the manners of Hmong village society.

Txiaj (Silver Coin)

Zej (Small Conch)

Nplai (Scale)

Cav (Trunk)

Nkauj Paa Taub
(pumkin flower)

Tswv (Empty Spacw)

CHAPTER 10

THE OTHERWORLD

Worlds of Men and Spirits

The Hmong believe in a variety of natural, ancestral, and supernatural spirits, which live in, and animate, all things. As with much in Hmong religion, Chinese influence is strong, and the Hmong Otherworld is closely modelled on the Chinese Otherworld. The Hmong world of *yeeb ceeb* parallels the Chinese world of *yin*, the dark world of the spirits: the Hmong world of *yaj ceeb* parallels the Chinese world of *yang*, the bright world of men and women, of material objects and nature. The Hmong say that in previous times men and spirits could meet and talk to each other, and the passage between the two worlds was much easier. Now, the two worlds have become divided and only the shaman may, with impunity, venture into the Otherworld and return safely.

The Frog's Curse

In the Hmong Song of Creation, sung during the funeral rites, it is told how the frog *Nplooj Lwg* created heaven and earth. A single world occupied by men and spirits. Men disturbed this peaceful scene by killing the frog, claiming that he had lied to them about the size of the world (he had said it was no larger than the palm of a hand, the sole of a foot). The frog's dying curse was that henceforth men and spirits would be separated into two worlds; the world of mankind would know sickness and death, alternate rain and heat, the leaves would fall from the trees, the forests grow thin and men would no longer be able rise up again, as they had previously done, on the thirteenth day after death.

Lords of the Otherworld

The two Lords of the Otherworld are dreaded and fearful figures. One is *Ntxwj Nyug*, who judges the souls of the dead and determines an appropriate animal, vegetable, or human form of reincarnation. Ntxwj Nyug resides at the top of a mighty mountain, guarding the gates which must be passed before the souls of the dead can return to the village of their ancestors. He is fond of feasting, and for this purpose keeps a great herd of heavenly cattle (reincarnations of some Hmong judged worthy of punishment). He is seconded by *Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem*, who issues licenses for rebirth from behind a great writing desk, seated on a magnificent and terrifying throne. Ntxwj Nyug and Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem together control life and death. Once somebody's licence for life has expired, only the shaman can intervene, sometimes, with Ntxwj Nyug for an extension of its term, to prolong life on earth.

Saub the Benevolent

Another important deity is *Saub*, a kindly figure who, although he has now become to some extent disinterested in the affairs of men, may still be appealed to in times of need. Saub was present at the creation of mankind, and is still believed to be living somewhere in the far realms of the Otherworld. Saub is associated with fertility and reproduction. It was Suab who supplied the first seeds and Saub who caused the first hen to lay eggs. It was Saub who, after the mighty floods receded from the Earth, told the surviving brother and sister to carve up the shapeless flesh of their incestuous child. From the pieces of flesh grew the twelve original Hmong clans.

The First Shaman

In a story told to account for the origins or "roots" (*hauvpaus*) of shamanism, it is recounted how at the dawn of time Ntxwj Nyug (who is incorrigibly wicked) was observed to be killing humans faster than they were reproducing. Seeing the human race in danger of extinction, Saub entrusted some of his medical instruments to a mortal named *Siv Yis*, who was given the power to cure illness and disease. This he did very success-

fully until, in the course of time, he died and went up to join Saub. Before dying, Siv Yis promised to return to Earth and help mankind on the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month (New Year). Siv Yis kept his promise and, at the appointed time, was halfway down the celestial ladder which joins the two worlds when he saw mankind still fast asleep. There being nobody to welcome him, Siv Yis threw a tantrum and dropped his instruments down upon Earth. Despairing of humankind, he then returned to his heavenly abode. Some of these instruments were picked up by different people, who tried them and found they worked in curing the sick. These people were the first shamans and the instruments they used continued to form the equipment of the shaman. Shamans today still refer to themselves as "Siv Yis" when in trance, (they refer to the real Siv Yis as "Nyiaj Yig").

A host of shamanic spirits known as *dab neeb* accompany the shaman on his journey to the Otherworld to assist and protect him. These dab neeb include a great number of natural and supernatural forces and figures: sparrowhawks, swallows, dragons, tigers, soldiers and cavalry, and a spider to stretch a bridge of copper and iron for the troops of the shaman to cross safely into the Otherworld.

The Watery Dragons

Other important inhabitants of the Otherworld include ancient dragons. The oldest dragon of all, the *Zaj Laug*, controls the waters which surround the flat Earth, held up on the shoulders of four giants. The Zaj Lgua also controls the rains which fall upon the Earth and ensure plentiful harvests. The Hmong say that this dragon takes the form of a rainbow (*zaj sawv*). The Dragon King is said to reside in a palace at the bottom of the sea where he rules an aquatic world and is waited on by servants who take the form of fish. Often large pools or lakes, known as *lub pas zaj*, are said to be inhabited by dragons who should not be disturbed.

The Dab

Spirits are frequently referred to as *dab*, the widest category of spirits and supernatural forces known to the Hmong. The dab are divided into several groups, of which the most important are the *dab nyeg* and the *dab qus*. The dab nyeg include the household spirits (*dab qhuas*) which inhabit various parts of the Hmong house and protect the household. The dab qus are wild, forest spirits, who inhabit particular points on the natural landscape and roam around their home areas ready to attack or capture human souls. All nature is imbued with spiritual essences, but dab qus have a particular predilection for wild and uncultivated spots, prominent crags or solitary boulders, dark clumps of bushes and isolated groves of trees. Throwing a stone at such a grove of trees, or disturbing a boulder, will goad any dab qus living there into the attack. Other groups of dab are associated with hunting, herbalism and blacksmithing.

A particularly frightening class of spirits is formed by *vij sub vij sw*, spirits of accident and disaster. These spirits set their sights on the household and must be periodically exorcised.

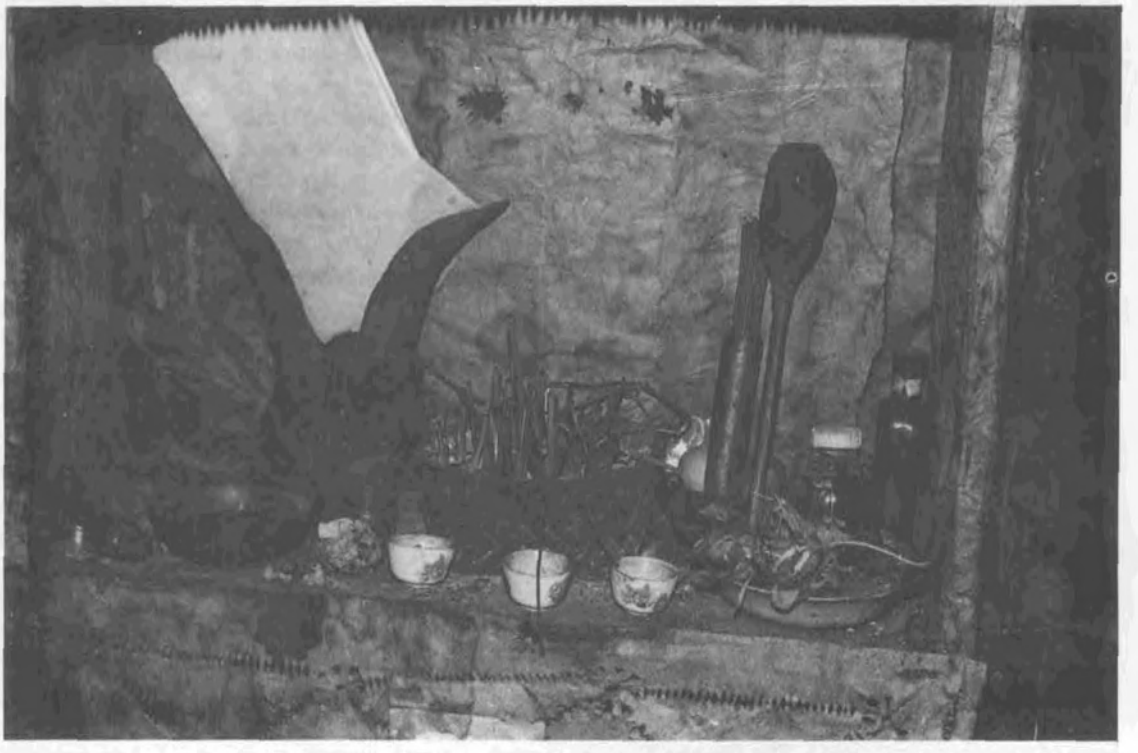
Sun, Moon and Thunder

Particular forces of nature are personified. The most important of these are *Nkauj Hnub* and *Nraug Hli*, or the Lady Sun and the Lord Moon (which is the opposite of the way the Chinese think about the sun and moon) and *Xob*, thunder, or the God of Thunder. Many stories are told of how Xob, pictured as a winged creature, was once trapped and hung above the fire to dry. He escaped and flew booming away across the rice fields, causing stunted rice crops for ever afterwards. In stories of the flood, it is also said that the waters mounted up so high that they knocked against the gong at the mountain roof-top of the world, rousing Xob who came to man's rescue.

The Heavenly Archer

Various semi-legendary, heroic figures are called upon by the shaman in his trance. Although not quite in the same class of "Immortals" as Saub, Ntxwj Nyug, or Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem, nor belonging to the category of personified natural forces like the Lady Sun, the Lord Moon, or Xob, God of Thunder, they are thought to be resting like Siv Yis somewhere in the Otherworld. *Kaj Yuam*, the

Heavenly Archer, is one of these. Kaj Yuam fashioned the first crossbow out of iron and copper and fired it at each of the nine suns that turned around the world. He shot eight of them and they fell out of the sky, causing drought and death. The last sun was so frightened she disappeared and would not re-emerge until she heard the crowing of a cock, the head of which, struck by the sun's first rays, ever afterwards bore a red plume. This is why the sun will not appear until after cock's crow in the morning, and also why the cock is seen as a heavenly herald who leads the soul of the deceased into the Otherworld.



The Hmong Emperor

Tswb Tchoj is another of these heroic figures of the Hmong past. Tswb Tchoj was born of the magical union between a boar and a human maiden. In various incarnations he fought many times against the Chinese. Tswb Tchoj became the King (*Vaj*) or Emperor (*Huab Tais*) of all China, but was tricked out of his rightful inheritance by the clever Chinese, and so died. Tswb Tchoj, however, like Siv Yis, promised to return to the Earth one day to help his people, and some Hmong still believe that he will return. It is the figure of Tswb Tchoj which has inspired the prophetic leaders of the various messianic movements of the Hmong against numerically dominant peoples.

House and Cosmos

The Hmong house is a reflection of the Hmong cosmos. The roof and rafters of the house represent the vault of heaven, the earthen floor represents the world of nature, and between heaven and earth is the world of men.

In the pillars of the house dwell the (patrilineal) ancestral spirits and each quarter of the house has its presiding deity, to which various offerings must be made. These include the *dab ncej cuab*, or spirit of the main house-post. The Head of a Green Hmong household will sacrifice a pig to this spirit once every two or three years. Other spirits in the Hmong house are the *dab qhov cub*, or spirit of the main cooking hearth, and the

dab qhov txos, or spirit of the ritual hearth, the large enclosed fire used for ceremonial occasions (and for cooking pigswill). Above the fire, the loft is guarded by the *dab nthab*, while outside the house the *dab txhiaj meej* is the special spirit which guards the lintel of the front door, honoured in the form of a red cloth pinned above the door and covering several silver coins. This cloth must be renewed every New Year. Inside the bedrooms of the house the *dab roog*, or spirit of the marital bedroom, resides in a gourd in the main bedroom, and is maintained by the woman of the house (although all ceremonies related to it are performed by her husband). Immediately opposite the front door is the *dab xwm kab*, known as the spirit of wealth and richness, who protects the entire household and all its members. The dab xwm kab is represented by a special altar in the form of a piece of rice-paper on the wall opposite the front door, which is daubed with the blood and feathers of sacrificed chickens, and silver and gold leaf. Sub-clans vary according to the number of household spirits they worship, but all traditional households will maintain the dab xwm kab, closely associated with the men of the house.

The Shaman's Altar

Next to the altar of the dab xwm kab, in houses where a shaman lives, will be the altar of the shaman. This is a special hanging or standing altar, which can be quite elaborate, with two or three tiers depending on the status of the shaman. It is believed to represent Siv Yis' grotto near the top of a supernatural mountain, above a pool near which grows the flower of immortality. This pool is represented by a bowl of water placed upon the altar. From the altar several cotton threads run up to the central rafter and down to the door frame. It is along these threads that the *dab neeb* travel when they visit the altar of the shaman, or when at the New Year they return to their home with Siv Yis for a few days of rest.

Spirits of Medicine

Another altar may be set up to either side of the shaman's altar or the altar to the dab xwm kab. This is devoted to a special category of spirits known as the *dab tshuaj*, or spirits of medicine, which are generally propitiated by women, since it is usually women who specialize in the knowledge of herbal medicine.

Between Worlds

Beyond the house and its gardens are the fields cultivated by members of the family, surrounded by the wild world of uncultivated forest and the ambiguity of former fields reverting to forest, where the fierce dab qus may dwell. Here too a spirit known as *Poj Ntxoog*, or "Lady Ntxoog", may be encountered. Poj Ntxoog is a dreaded unkempt female spirit the size of a small girl who lives in the depths of the forest and is often associated with tigers, feared by the Hmong, who have a great range of beliefs about were-tigers.

The Otherworld is thought of as a harsh, mountainous landscape, similar to that of the natural world, and often entered through holes or underground caves. At the meeting of the two worlds there is a great piece of water, crossed by a bridge. Here the souls of men can meet with the spirits and communicate with them, although none know which are spirits and which are men. Sometimes there is said to be a market place on or around this bridge, where men and spirits trade, deal and bargain with each other. This may be the origin of the phrase, *yeeb yaj kiab*, the market of yin and yang, which refers to the abode of the dead. Here we see something of the influence of the traditional environment of the Hmong in China, for it was the marketplace which marked the traditional boundary between the forested, mountainous world of the Hmong, and the open, flat world of the rice fields: a place of exchange and transformation.

Twelve great mountains, each one higher than the one before, lead up into the heavens, to the great mountain inhabited by Ntxwj Nyug, above which Siv Yis dwells. The soul of the dead must traverse these mountains in order first to reach *Ntxwj Nyug*, where he is judged, and then return to the village of his ancestors where he will dwell for a while before being reincarnated. The way there is fraught with ordeals: one mountain is made up of poisonous hairy caterpillars and can only be safely crossed with the aid of a pair of hemp slippers (which are placed on the feet of the dead).

CHAPTER 11

COMMUNICATION WITH THE OTHERWORLD

Ways of Communication

There are various means by which mortals may communicate with the supernatural world. The two most important are *ua dab* (propitiating the spirits) and *ua neeb* (shamanism). Ua neeb is itself divided into two main kinds: *ua neeb muag duab*, the dark-faced shamanism of the *yin* world, which is associated with possessive trance and, it is said, can only be learned from the neeb themselves, and *ua neeb muag dawb*, the white-faced shamanism of the yang world, which is not associated with any kind of trance, and may be learned by anyone from another shaman. Both these kinds of shamanism are said to have been originally taught by Siv Yis. There is also sometimes said to be a third kind of shamanism said to have been taught by him known as *ua txheeb*, a special form of divination of the future or the state of a sick person's soul through the drawing of lots among thirty-two bamboo sticks and one porcupine's quill.

Ua dab, or the practice of propitiating the ordinary spirits, is distinguished from ua neeb, in that any adult male, usually the head of a household, may perform it, while shamanism is a specialized vocation to which relatively few men and women are called. It is also said that ua dab is for self or family, whilst ua neeb must be for the benefit of others. Thus, a shaman practices for the benefit of a sick person who has consulted him, or for whose benefit he has been consulted by somebody else (such as the father of a sick child), who is not a member of his family (a shaman will usually call in another shaman if he or a member of his family is sick). Ua dab, on the other hand, consists of particular rituals which are performed for the benefit of members of one's own household. Thus most Hmong will know something about ua dab; only a few will know much about ua neeb. The Otherworld can also be contacted through magic and through medicine.

Herbal Medicine

The spirits of medicine are usually propitiated by a woman, often the oldest woman of a household, at a special hanging altar set up to one side of the dab xwm kab altar. "Wild" herbs which grow in the forest are distinguished from "tame" herbs which may be planted secretly around the house or close to the village, and the wise woman carries in her head an enormous store of knowledge about these plants and the ailments for which they are useful. Often, rare herbs must be sought from very far' fr afield, and in the travels which Hmong often make during the slack work period of March-April, after the fields have been cleared, herbs are exchanged over great distances. Usually only the roots are used, but sometimes infusions are made from the leaves, boiled in chicken broth, often with an egg mixed in.

Herbal experts are frequently consulted before a shaman is resorted to, or at the same time as a course of shamanic treatment is under way. Many of the remedies are specifically for women's complaints, such as breast pains during pregnancy or menstrual problems. If a woman wishes to learn the art of herbalism, she will request knowledge from an older woman, often her aunt. The teacher will collect a great bunch of different types of herbs and lay these on the floor before the altar in her house. She will then light incense, burn spirit paper and chant propitiatory words before her spirits of medicine (*dab tshuaj*), before dividing the heap of herbs into two piles, one for herself and one for her niece. In this way, the spirits of medicine are symbolically divided (*faib dab tshuaj*) between the two women.

Magic and Massage

Magic (*ua khawvkoob*) is not regarded as particularly Hmong, although many Hmong know a few magical rites to avert misfortune caused by an enemy, or ensure possession of a lover. Often the words of magic rites are in other languages, such as Chinese, Thai and Karen, and Hmong who claim to know about magic may say that they learned their knowledge from one of these groups. The Karen, who live in Thailand at lower altitudes to the Hmong, are reputed to be excellent magicians, and sometimes sell love charms to the Hmong. Misfortune, such as a wife's miscarriage, may be blamed on the magical spell of an enemy, which can only be countered by killing the enemy or by another magical spell. Often, minor and informal rituals are associated with these spells; a child's ears may be lightly blown into three times while a few words are whispered, to rid him of a headache in the evening; after the day's work, a winnowing tray full of burning embers may be circled around the head of a sick person; paper effigies may be hung above the fire with holes pierced in their noses to cure a child's cold.

Sometimes magic can be associated with massage, which in turn often goes with the use of herbal or pressure-point medicine; a man with backache may be laid upon a table while his great-aunt lightly scratches his back with a continuous, downwards motion, having lit incense before and muttering a few words under her breath as she does so; headaches may be cured by repeated pinching on nerve points in the chest. A whole range of informal and unsystematic knowledge of this kind is associated with charms of various kinds, protective spells, the simple use of herbs to treat common complaints, and the kind of light massage a wife may request from her husband, or a child from its father, before the family retire to sleep in the evenings.

CHAPTER 12

PROPITIATING THE SPIRITS (*UA DAB*)

It is sometimes said that, while the Hmong have learned many things from other people in the course of their history, and have had many of their customs altered by contact with other societies, particularly the Chinese, two of the oldest *kevcai*, or customs, have always been Hmong and have never changed. These are rituals of *hu plig* and *laig dab*.

Feeding the Ancestors

Laig dab is the custom of feeding the ancestral spirits. Rice and meat are used. Very slowly, a spoonful of each is ladled onto a heap in the centre of the table, before the altar of the dab xwm kab, by the male head of the household, who calls to invite the spirits of his immediate ancestors to come and share in the feast and to protect him and his family against the spirits of accident and disease. He is seated alone, while the rest of the family may carry on their household business as usual. This is like a thanksgiving, for it is performed as soon as the first rice is cut, as soon as the first maize is harvested, and by some clans as soon as the first of a particular kind of cucumber (dib) has been reaped, again on the last day of the old year, before the New Year celebrations begin and also at weddings. It may take half an hour or so, and when it is over the family will sit down to eat, together with close relatives from the village, who must be invited.

Calling a Soul

Hu plig is the ritual for calling or summoning the soul. It is often performed for a sick person, and always for a newly-born child or a new bride. It is believed that among the souls which every human possesses, there is one in particular (referred to as the "chicken soul") which is easily alarmed, playful and likes to wander. Such souls leave the body during sleep and go off to play like children with other souls. Like children, they may wander too far and get lost, or they may fall into the Otherworld through a hole in the Earth, or they may be ambushed and captured by hungry and malevolent *dab qus*. They may also leave the body at other times, particularly during long and arduous journeys, in case of sudden shock or during grief.

The soul is said to have "fallen" (*poob plig*), and special means must be employed to recall it to its sick owner, who might eventually die unless it is recalled in time. The purpose of the silver necklets, or *xauv*, worn by children and adults who have been seriously ill, is to "bind" this *plig* more firmly to its "*tsev*", (literally "house", meaning the human body, *cev*). These, or a particular necklet made of three intertwined metals - silver, copper, and iron, may be prescribed after serious illness. It is, of course, the shaman's business to travel to the Otherworld to bargain with the spirits who may have trapped such a soul, but in less serious cases a simpler *hu plig* ritual is sufficient to overcome sickness or mental distress.

Birth Rites

At birth a child's body is not in full possession of, or possessed by, its souls. If the child survives for three days after birth, a hu plig ritual must be conducted to summon the soul into its body. After this, a prohibition is placed on outsiders entering the house for a period of one lunar month (30 days). The ritual may be performed by anybody who knows the appropriate words and formulae, but in practice it is usually a man of some standing who is asked, who may also be a shaman, although he does not have to be.

This ceremony may be compared to a "christening" since it is at this time that the child's first name is given by the caller of the soul. He will receive an "elder", or mature, name after becom-

ing a father; either name can be changed to avert continued sickness or misfortune.

The ritual to call the soul is performed on the porch at the front of the house. Four sprigs of maple are planted in the ground at the four corners of the porch and linked together with hemp, to make a large "box". Holding a chicken, burning paper money and incense before an egg in a saucer of rice set on a stool, the person who is calling the soul of the child stands facing the valley and repeats a very sweet and beautiful incantation to invite the wandering soul into the body of the newborn child. Afterwards, the soul-caller will eat with the family and tie hemp thread as a protective bond around the wrists of all present.

The ritual of thread-tying (*khi hluas*) is often performed on other occasions as well, before a long journey for example, when a family must be parted, or if a shaman has diagnosed that the souls of a particular family have wandered in different directions, when khi hluas must be performed to bind the souls more firmly to the household and prevent future "discord" between them.

On-Site Rites

Hu plig is often performed at the actual site, usually outside the house, where it is diagnosed that the soul of a patient has "fallen". The soul-caller will go to that site with a chicken and incense, spirit-money to burn, and a bottle of rice wine, and squatting by the site will quietly summon the soul to return to its abode. He will take back with him an insect from the site which symbolizes the returning soul. On other occasions, the ritual is performed at the open door, where a chicken is released to search for the insect and, having found it, is sacrificed.

As souls and spirits have difficulty in crossing water, a "spirit bridge" may be constructed over a stream, to guide the soul back to the village.

A special hu plig "preventative" ritual is performed by each household at the New Year, when the souls not only of the inhabitants of the house, but also of their domestic animals and crops

ing tools and domestic utensils are ritually blessed.

New Year

Several types of *ua dab* are performed. Many take place for the household spirits (*dab qhuas*), and must be carried out by the male head of the household during the course of the New Year celebrations, which last a minimum of three days. This is the time when the *Txhiaj Meej* spirit, which guards the front door, and therefore all the benign or evil influences which enter that way must be revived (*tsa txhiaj meej*). On the first day of the New Year, a small altar is set up on a bench in front of the open door. On the bench are placed a candle and a bowl of water, a bottle of wine, two cups of wine, and a cooked chicken. The head of the household and his assistant will stand inside the house and hold a short but cheerful dialogue with two men outside, with whom they exchange a piece of chicken in return for their alcohol. The two men outside are seen as the "messengers of heaven", and during the course of the ritual they will symbolically raise and wash the sides of the door, pinning up new coins beneath the red tissue over the lintel of the door which forms the altar of Txhiaj Meej and daubing it with chicken's blood. The messengers throw paper money into the house, and the old paper altar is burned and replaced. Finally a cock held inside the house is released, and its behaviour carefully watched as an omen for the New Year. This bird is considered a mascot and is not killed. After the messengers of heaven, invited into the house, have taken five steps towards the dab xwm kab altar, representing wealth in terms of many children, chickens, pigs, horses, cattle, rice, corn and gold, the door is ceremonially closed behind them to keep out illness and misfortune, and the ritual concluded.

This is also the time when the dab xwm kab spirit must be honoured by the sacrifice of a chicken and renovation of its altar. On the last day of the old year, beneath the altar of the dab xwm kab is set up another altar on a bench, containing a lighted lamp, spirit-paper, puffed maize, three cups of alcohol, a bowl of rice, an egg and incense. A live cock and incense are proffered to the altar, the divination horns are consulted, and the bird is sacrificed. After it has been cooked, it is again offered, together with cooked rice, soup and an egg, and a lengthy prayer, to the dab xwm kab. The blood of the sacrificed chicken is daubed on the paper altar of the dab xwm kab.

Remembering the Forgotten

Other rituals are also performed at particular times of the year which vary according to clan or descent group ("those who share the same household spirits": *ib tus dab qhuas*). One of these is the special *ua npuas tai* ritual, performed by certain Hmong descent groups at irregular intervals, but ideally every three years, indoors and at night, in honour of "those ancestors of long ago, of whom we know neither the voice or the name", and the spirit which guided them in their flight across the great water from China. No women witness this ritual.

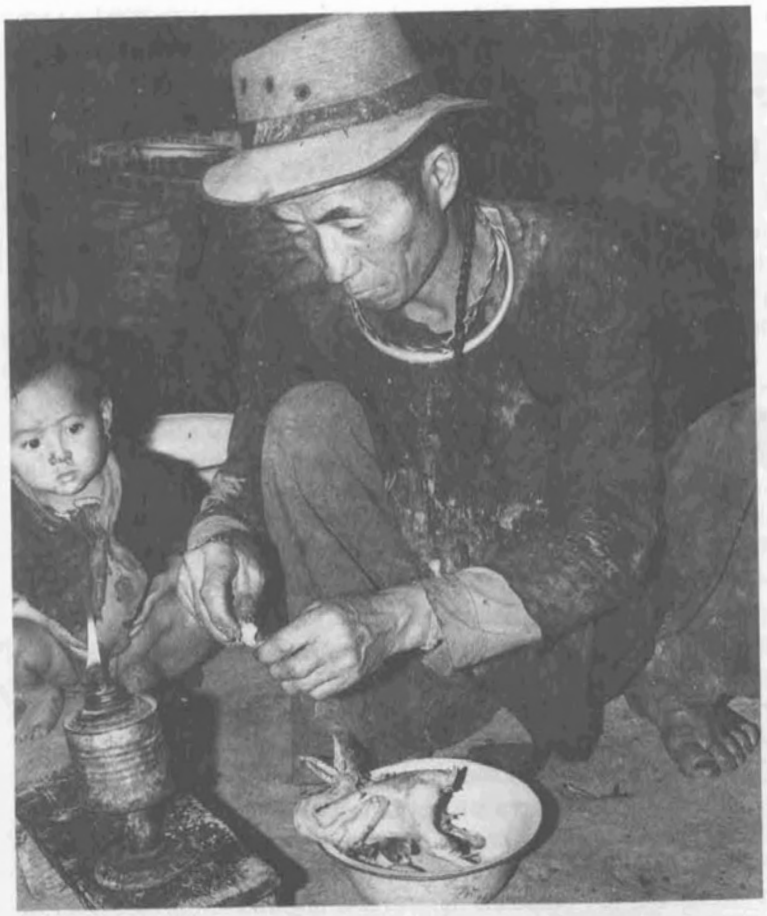
Marital Harmony

The *dab roog*, or spirit of the marital bedroom, resides in a dried gourd resembling a water-carrier which is kept inside the bedroom. A ritual for this spirit, which looks after marital harmony, is performed by the husband for his wife at least once every three years.

Most of the ua dab rituals have as their aim that of ensuring the peace and prosperity of the household or its individual members. They usually involve the sacrifice of a number of chickens or pigs, or a combination of both. They generally must be performed by the male household head. They all necessitate the burning of spirit-money and at least three sticks of incense.

Divination and Chickens

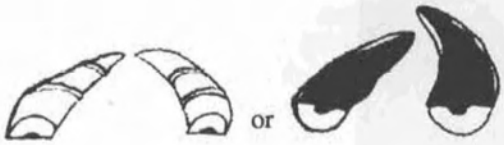
Offerings of sacrifice (*txi dab*) may also be made to the spirits in return for a favour granted; for example, one may promise to sacrifice a chicken or a pig if a certain crop does not fail, and then the sacrifice must be made (*fiv yeem*). Very often the bones of the sacrificed chickens are inspected after the sacrifice as an omen of the success of the ritual. In consulting the omens from a sacrificed chicken, the colour and positions of its claws, eyes, thigh-bones, skull and tongue are all examined for signs



1. Answer to a simple question:

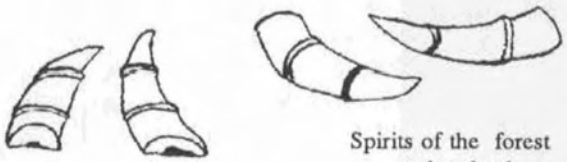
Yes Maybe No

2. Is a cure necessary ?



No Necd (paticut will recover)

3. What is the reason for sickness ?



House spirits require propitiation

Spirits of the forest are involved

Ancestor requires a sacrifice

No hope of successful intervention by (this) shaman

MESSAGES FROM DIUINATION HORNS

the colour and positions of its claws, eyes, thigh-bones, skull and tongue are all examined for signs of good or bad fortune. Eggs can also be dissected and examined as a form of oracle.

Divination Horns

For similar reasons, the ritual of *ntaus kuam* - throwing the divination horns - takes place. Two halves of a single buffalo horn are thrown several times before and after rituals to determine whether the time is propitious for a ritual to be performed, or whether a ritual has been successful (whether a god has accepted a sacrifice, for example). This is probably the most common ritual to be observed in any ordinary Hmong house and, like many others, it is Taoist in origin.

The pair of horns form a couple which are referred to as male or female, *yaj kuam yeeb kuam*, or the kuam (from the Chinese "Pa Koua" or "Eight Trigrams") of yin and the *kuam*, of yang. They are also called "Lady and Lord Kuam" or "Mother and Father Kuam". Because these two horns are cut from and represent the two sides of the original horn, they both have a round and a flat side. When they are thrown to the ground after their holder has clicked them together in his hand several times, they can fall pointing towards each other to the left or to the right, or pointing away from each other. A large range of position combinations is possible; these correspond to different situations in the world of yin and the world of yang.

If a single horn lands on its flat side, it is said to be in a yaj (yang) position; on the rounded side it is yeeb (yin). Dialogue between the world of men and the world of spirits is established if the two horns land in opposite positions (one face up, one face down). In this way, at the simplest level, it can be discovered whether a soul has left or returned to the human world, and whether the shaman's *neeb* are or are not powerful enough to deal with a particular situation. But the system is more complex than this, and although individual interpretations may vary, more exact positions in which the horns fall may be used to determine whether, for example, a malady is the result of a lost soul or an ancestral soul in difficulties in the Otherworld, and whether ua neeb or ua dab would be the most appropriate remedy.

CHAPTER 13

SHAMANISM

Becoming a Shaman

Shamanism is usually distinguished from spirit-mediumship because the shaman always remains in control of his familiar spirits and is not possessed by them. The Hmong shaman is called a *txiv neeb*, or practitioner of the neeb spirits, who serve as his allies. However, in the early days of becoming a *txiv neeb muag dub*, the shaman may be more controlled by than in control of his spiritual allies.

The Hmong always deny that it is possible to learn this sort of shamanism from another person. It is the neeb spirits themselves who choose a particular person to become a vehicle for their healing powers in their ceaseless battle with the destructive force of the *Ntxwj Nyug*. These people may be either male or female, although nowadays male shamans seem to be more common. The spirit allies will reveal themselves to such a person through dreams of a special kind. If the chosen person refuses to accept that he or she is a shaman, the neeb spirits will trouble him and he will become strangely ill, with fevers and headaches and weaknesses which no ordinary remedies can cure. If that person still does not realize the cause of his problems, he is sure to consult a shaman, or more than one shaman, and if his illness continues, eventually a shaman is sure to diagnose that dab neeb are seeking to serve through him. It is then the future shaman's business to seek help from a Master Shaman, a *Xib Hwm*.

The Master's Role

This Master need not be the shaman who diagnosed the apprentice shaman's "complaint", and need not even be a member of the apprentice shaman's family. As the Hmong see it, he does not teach shamanism, since nobody can do that but the shaman's familiar spirits or dab neeb. He only guides and supports.

The Hmong say that if shamanism could be learnt, one would expect old shamans to be much better than young ones, since they would have had so much more time to practice. The opposite seems to be the case: young and new shamans are much clearer and stronger in their words and movements than those who have been shamans for some time. This is because they are closer to their original encounter with the dab neeb.

When the new shaman feels strong enough to control his spirit allies, he will sit on the same bench (or on a different bench side by side) with his Master in the new shaman's house. Together, the two of them will conduct a shamanic rite, invoking the neeb spirits and riding off together into the Otherworld for the first time. Afterwards, water from the Master's bowl will be put into the bowl of the new shaman, which he will keep on his altar, which the Master helps him to construct. Henceforth, these neeb spirits are divided between the altars and houses of the two shamans. The young shaman, however, unless he specially commissions them, must receive the ritual paraphernalia of shamanism from a member of his own descent group, some of whose own spirits will come along with the equipment. Often, paraphernalia will be received from the father or a paternal uncle, or paternal grandfather or great-uncle. To this extent, ua neeb, shamanism, is hereditary, since that person must also have been a shaman to have such equipment. But there is no contradiction between the handing down of instruments and finding a Master outside one's own family. The price paid for training by a Master, where a Master is not closely related to his student, is fixed in silver rupees. Instruction generally takes place in the forest, except when the two are in the process of practicing their calling in a house.

The Shaman's Status

While a man's practice of shamanism would normally add to his status in the community, it does not always do so (in the case of a lazy or

indulgent man, for example). The best shaman would find it difficult to live only on earnings from consultations; the shaman must tend to his family and fields like all other villagers.

By no means everyone becomes a shaman, but shamanism can be relatively common in a community. In one village of twenty-five households, for example, there were nine txiv neeb muag dub, although these were not all in separate households and several were father and son.

Something of the relative status of any individual shaman can be judged by the size of his altar and by the number of lower jawbones of pigs hanging from the central pillar of the shaman's house. Each represents one sacrifice (from which the shaman receives head and one foreleg). At New Year these jawbones are burnt to allow the pigs to be reborn; the number of jawbones at any one time will give an indication of the number of times a shaman's services have been requested since the last New Year (December).

The Shaman's Instruments

The accessories of a shaman are all-important. They include the hood of black, dark blue or bright red cloth which covers his eyes, a sword which he plants before the altar when he performs a service, bell-rings placed upon his index fingers a gong which his assistant will beat behind him to summon the neeb as he enters trance and again during and at the end of the seance, and a rattle made of an iron hoop with pieces of round metal through it, which he shakes regularly as he goes into trance and throughout proceedings. This rattle is seen as the "harness bells" of the shaman's "winged horse". The "horse" is represented by a long bench which must be provided for the shaman by the family of the household which has invited him. The shaman bounces frenziedly on this bench: he has become Siv Yis riding his legendary winged horse.

On the shaman's altar, in his house, is the bowl of water called *dej zaj* representing *lub pas zaj*, a dragon's pool which corresponds to the pool beneath the cave of Siv Yis. There also must be a porkfat candle to light the way into the beyond. There should be a saucer of husked rice in the centre of which an egg is placed, representing the *leej nkaub* or parakeet which is the special spirit of the shaman, and into which three sticks of incense are stuck as food-offerings to the dab neeb. Three small bamboo, wood or china containers should also contain respectively water, tea and rice wine for the spirits. Unhusked rice or maize may also be offered on the altar as fodder for the shaman's horse, and there is always a container full of puffed maize which the shaman uses at the beginning and end of his trance, when he throws grains over his shoulder, shouting "Phaib!", to command his spirit allies. Other equipment used by the shaman include the pair of divination horns, which are also used by most heads of households.

Consulting a Shaman

If a member of the family falls ill, and it is decided to consult a shaman, it is usual to choose one of the same clan and, if possible, of the same lineage.

To decide which particular shaman to consult, the household head performs a simple ritual. This entails balancing an egg on a bottle or on the back of the hand, while repeating the name of the shaman one has in mind. If the egg stays in place, that is the shaman to consult. The next step is to

visit the chosen shaman's house and *kow tow* (*pe*) with head and knuckles to the ground, three times. The name of the sick person is given and the shaman requested to intercede with the spirit world to effect a cure. Without further ado, the shaman will usually throw his divination horns upon the ground to see what kind of illness is in question and whether his helper-spirits are sufficiently strong to be able to deal with the situation. A delay is then usually fixed for a period of three days and nights, during which it will be seen whether the patient shows any signs of improvement. If the sickness worsens, it will be clear to everyone that the shaman's helper-spirits did not feel sufficiently powerful to deal with the situation, and another shaman may then be consulted.

If, however, the patient shows signs of improvement in the three days - by an improved appetite, for example, or increased facial colour - then it is clear that the shaman's diagnosis is appropriate and he will be invited to proceed to the healing services proper. Up to this time, the shaman has usually not examined his patient. Some shamans, however, prefer to examine the pulses of the patient on each of his wrists, as an alternative to throwing the divination horns.

The shaman's concern throughout, as with the traditional practitioners of Chinese medicine, is with signs of health, rather than illness. If the patient's health shows some signs of improving, the shaman will try to hasten the process by proceeding into the Otherworld with his army of helper-spirits and bargaining or pleading with, or even threatening or tricking, the dab qus who may have trapped the wandering plig. The shaman might descend into a deep hole or to the bottom of the ocean to retrieve a lost soul. In other cases, he might bargain directly with *Ntxwj Nug*, the Lord of the Otherworld, for an extension of the patient's license for life on earth. To assist him in his quest, a variety of means are at the disposal of the shaman.

The commonest means of dealing with the forces of the Otherworld is for the shaman to request return of the patient's plig in exchange for the plig of an animal. This is why pigs and chickens are sacrificed during shamanic sessions. Their plig may be substituted by the shaman for the plig of the afflicted person, or may be used to confuse the passage of the evil spirits to this world, as a kind of decoy. On rare occasions, the shaman may even substitute his own plig, his own life-substance, for

that of the patient; in such a case, the shaman is said to have already died, but to have been restored again by Saub, who grants a special extension of the life-license.

Wandering Souls

The shaman, like a modern psychotherapist, restores the balance of the psyche by first identifying, then retrieving, the absent or lost parts of the self. Shamans divide the self into five parts: the soul of the birds (*ntsuj qaib ntsuj noog*), the soul of the trees (*ntsuj xyooj ntsuj ntoo*), the soul of the bull (*ntsuj nyuj rag ntsuj nyuj rhi*), of the buck-that-lives-in-the-pine-trees (*ntsuj nyuj cab ntsuj nyuj kauv*), and of the shadow (*ntsuj daub ntsuj hlau*). More usually it is the bird, bamboo and bull souls which are spoken of, although the "shadow" soul is also often referred to, and serves as a general metaphor for the plig. This division of the self into animal, vegetable and images of the human, parallels the division of the Hmong natural worlds.

These souls are not necessarily singular, and each part of the body may possess one or more plig which can wander and encounter misfortune. On its journeys from the body, the plig is pictured as taking the form of a tiny winged insect. It is for this reason that during the hu plig ritual of calling the soul, the person performing the rite will dig and scrape at the spot where it is supposed that the plig has fallen in order to retrieve a small insect which he will return to the home of the patient.

The Souls of the Dead

The souls of the dead are believed to take on the form of the cicadas which begin to sing in the seventh lunar month of the year, after the rains have come, to remind their descendants to plant their crops. This is the time when, it is believed, the ancestors return to the Earth to visit their living relatives (a belief shared with the Chinese). The cicada is particularly venerated, in part for its longevity (some seventeen years), but mainly because after spending its first four years underground and emerging in the form of a mobile pupa, it splits open and out steps a perfect insect. Thus, it is the perfect symbol of resurrection from the grave.

Diagnosis

The shamanic session itself usually has two parts, known as *ua neeb saib* (to see) or *ua neeb qhua* and *ua neeb kho* (to heal). If the divination horns and other means of divination such as consulting the pulses do not suffice to determine the cause of the illness, the shaman will proceed directly to the first part of the shamanic session, *ua neeb saib* for his diagnosis, which requires no sacrifice and can be performed at any time. It is after this that the healing session (which requires a sacrificed animal) can take place, sometimes again after a delay of some days, or weeks, in order to determine the progress of the patient, or to allow the family to obtain the requisite animal.

For the ua neeb saib, the shaman will proceed to the house of the patient with his equipment, which is usually carried by an assistant. In the house, a small altar will have been set up for him against the wall facing the door, with a long bench before it which will function as his "horse". After throwing the horns, lighting the spirit-paper and burning three sticks of incense, the shaman, seated on the bench before the altar, with his face covered by the black veil fastened with a headband, will begin to jerk and tremble. The tremors will run through his body, and soon it will be observed that they are most violent in his feet and hands, which begin to take on a rhythm of their own until the whole body of the shaman is steadily bounding up and down upon the bench, exactly as though he were cantering on a horse, while the assistant stands behind him beating the gong. The sounds of the gong mingle with those of the shaman's finger-bell and the rattle which he holds in his right hand.

These sounds, the smell of the burning incense, and the rhythmic motions of his body, all aid the shaman to enter into the trance which overtakes him as his helper-spirits, dab neeb, descend and accompany him on his journey into the Otherworld in search of the afflicted self. This may continue for some two hours, or longer. On his return to the world of mortals, the shaman will be exhausted; after he has been given some time to recover, he will be anxiously questioned by the family of the patient. Women often join in these discussions, in the course of which the shaman will communicate his diagnosis. It may be that an

ancestral spirit, on its journey through the Otherworld towards rebirth, for whom the appropriate post-mortuary ritual has not yet been performed, has encountered difficulties or hunger and is making this known to his living descendants. If this is the case, the shaman's services will no longer be required; it is the business of the family to ensure that the appropriate rites are performed as soon as possible. It may be that the lost soul of the patient remains in this world but has become entwined with a foetus awaiting birth, in which case a special shamanic ritual to separate the two (*faib thiab*) will have to be performed. More usually, the wandering soul has fallen into a pit or hole, and the shaman must proceed to a second shamanic session, *ua neeb kho*, to heal the patient.

Healing

The external form of the healing session resembles the form of diagnostic session very closely. In both, the shaman is seated on his wooden horse, enters in trance into the Otherworld with the help of his dab neeb, and returns to the world of humans. In both, the various stages of his passage are marked by cries which the shaman utters throughout his trance, invoking all his spiritual helpers to aid and assist him in various ways. Many of the words of these shamanic ejaculations are as unintelligible to the average Hmong as Latin church services are to the average Christian, or chants in Pali are to most Buddhists, but this adds to the power and mystique of the occasion. It is sometimes said that the spirits are frightened or confused when they hear a man speaking in different tongues, and loosen their hold on the fallen soul of the patient.

If the shaman's diagnosis has been correct, the identification of the illness in itself often causes the patient to show some signs of recovery. If the shaman has been able to make an accurate diagnosis, he is considered qualified to proceed to the cure and the family will request him to perform the healing ritual. While there is a great variety of different healing rituals for different circumstances, the sessions themselves can be divided into five main parts. The first part is formed by the entrance of the shaman into trance and his invocation of helper-spirits. The second part is formed by the procession of the shaman and all his troops to the house of the patient to search there for his lost soul. The third part is formed by the hunt of the soul. The fourth part is formed by the return of the cavalcade, with the fugitive soul carried on the back of a female spirit (just as Hmong women carry their children) back to its home. The fifth and final part is formed by the return of the dab neeb to their altar, and the shaman's return to normal consciousness.

Such is the intensity of his experience that the shaman may remember very little of what has passed. Some even say that they do not "see" in the Otherworld at all, but that they "feel" for the afflicted in their "livers" (hearts).

During the healing session, a combination of pigs or chickens or both will have been sacrificed behind the shaman's bench by the men of the house - whatever has been specified by the shaman after his preliminary diagnosis. Usually spirit-paper is burnt at the throat of the pig when it is sacrificed and the shaman may address the soul of the pig with a few words of exhortation as to its conduct in the Otherworld, where it may be ex-

changed or substituted for the afflicted human soul. The paper is burned as a means of sending money to the Otherworld to aid the stricken soul and often the clothes of the patient, who during *ua neeb kho* is seated behind the shaman on a low stool, will be daubed with the blood of the sacrifice so that, it is said, the dab will recognize the patient. The men will skin and clean the pig at the nearest watering place to the house, and the women will cook it while the shaman concludes his service. Afterwards, there will be a great feast in the house, to which the shaman is invited as the guest of honour, and before returning to his house he will receive the head and a foreleg of the animal in tribute for his services. It is only rarely that Hmong households sacrifice animals and eat meat; it is therefore very appropriate that such sacrifices should be performed at times of sickness and disease.

In the course of the session, the shaman may perform other actions. Often he leaps backwards from his bench with a great shout, his assistant catching him or supporting him as he does so, before landing again on his seat to continue bounding rhythmically as before. He may shout "Phaib!" as an invocation to his helper-spirits, and scatter puffed corn over his shoulders around the

house, or blow sprays of water from the corners of his mouth into the "four branches of heaven" - the four directions. Sometimes his possession will be so extreme that he will seem to lose all control of his instruments, in particular his rattle, which will be thrown with great vigour by an involuntary movement of the arm over his shoulder. His assistant will run to retrieve it and place it tenderly back in his still shaking hand, but it may happen again.

Other Shamanic Rites

There are very many types and variations of shamanic rite. At the New Year, for example, a special ritual must be performed by all shamans to *xa qhua neeb*, or send the neeb off from the altar where they normally reside to celebrate their own New Year in their world of spirits. Various presents are made to the shaman for his *qhua neeb* by those he has treated, and several chickens must be sacrificed for the qhua dab neeb. It is also at this time that the altar and its strings, the bridge of the neeb, must be remade. After the New Year celebrations, the shaman must again perform a service to invite the qhua neeb back to their customary home in the house.

A shaman might also be engaged to change an unfortunate year into a fortunate one (*ntxeev nyeej*), or to exorcise the spirits of accident and catastrophe (*sau sub*), a solitary rite performed for the entire family, after the New Year and before new fields are cut, which has the purpose of encircling and retaining the souls of the family within the family compound. This is achieved by winding a thread from the neck of the sacrificial pig slowly around the seated family.

Shamanism and Religion

Hmong shamanism is, in effect, a psychodrama of great subtlety and power. Its ultimate aim, however, is not so much religious as medical: to heal an afflicted person, whether that affliction be physical or mental, and to restore to the patient a damaged part of his or her own self. For this reason, it need not be seen as forming a threat to other religions which Hmong may adopt.

Shamanism and Modern Medicine

Shamanism does not preclude the use of other forms of medicine, in particular herbal medicine. Indeed, it is often said that the best cures are those where one first consults a shaman, then obtains medical attention from a clinic or hospital, and then returns again to the shaman. However, there is no doubt that the comparative effectiveness of modern medicine compared to shamanism can and does cause considerable problems to the traditional belief system. The Hmong rationalize this by stating that shamanism has never been considered infallible, since use of Siv Yis's instruments by others has never been as effective as when he used them and knowledge has deteriorated over the course of time.

Shamanism and Christianity

The conflict of new and traditional medical systems has been instrumental in fostering the conversion of many Hmong individuals and whole villages to Christianity. Missionaries have been working constantly in sections of the Hmong world over the past hundred years. Conversion to Christianity causes particular problems to a kinship system strongly associated with ancestor worship and funeral rites, which are both opposed by missionaries.

Traditional customs such as the payment of the bride-price are often rejected by Hmong converts to Christianity, while burials for Christians in some cases cannot be performed by their clan members because the converts have rejected their original mortuary customs. This has led to a situation where Christians tend to marry Christians or the non-Christian converts before marriage. Often, however, even Hmong Christians retain considerable faith in their traditional beliefs, and particularly in shamans, and may consult shamans and also attend Christian services.

CHAPTER 14

THE WAY OF DEATH

The Performance of Rites

Apart from the lengthy and elaborate ceremonies connected with weddings (*kab tshoob kev kos*), the Hmong have no other rites to rival in depth and complexity those associated with the "way of death" (*kev mob kev tuag*). These rites have as their ultimate aim the safe despatch of the soul of the deceased to the Otherworld and its reincarnation as a member of the same clan.

Full mortuary rites are not performed for everyone. The souls of those killed mysteriously or violently are thought to assume the shape of hungry ghosts, and their bodies are disposed of as swiftly as possible, with the barest of preliminaries possible. If there is a funeral for them, their bodies may not be carried out of the house through the door: a special opening must be made in the side of the house. The same is done with the bodies of stillborn children, or those who die within the first three days of life. Such children lack souls since they have not undergone the appropriate soul-calling and naming rituals and funeral rites cannot be performed for them.

The Funeral

The shaman, who maintains life, is quite distinct from the ritual experts who conduct funeral and post-mortuary rites. It may be that shamans do perform such rites, but they do so outside of their capacity as shamans.

The funeral will begin among most clans with a salvo of musket shots fired outside the house by close male relatives. It is said that this is to frighten away evil *dab qus* who may seek to attack the departing soul or his household at this time. It also serves to notify the village that a death has taken place; for the same purpose a white flag is hung outside the house.

The sons and male relatives of the house will be sent out immediately with whisky to invite guests from the neighbouring houses, and a "master of ceremonies", to the funeral; all the locally available male near kin of the deceased should be present before the funeral rites can begin. Others may come from villages several days away before funeral rites are completed. Meanwhile, the body is washed with warm water by the sons of the house, and is then dressed in the colourful and elaborate clothing which the Hmong make specially for the occasion of death. The deceased must wear all new clothes before undertaking the long journey to his ancestors' village.

The Opening of the Way

As soon as possible, a person must be found who can chant the *qhuab kē* (called *tawv ke* by the Green Hmong), "the opening of the way", to the soul of the deceased. The purpose of this incantation is to guide the soul through the many hazards and ordeals of the Otherworld back to the village of his ancestors, where he will dwell for a while before being reincarnated on Earth. On the way, he must pick up his placenta, referred to as his "coat", which is buried beneath the central pillar of the house (or near the place of birth for a woman), which he will wear during his long journey. The poetic geography of the words of the quab ke parallels the long migration of the Hmong from a country probably to the North of China. The words describe the creation of the world and of the first couple, the deluge and the first drought. A historical journey is recreated backwards through time to the origins of humanity, to which the deceased must return before being reborn:

> Now, ah, your ghost, my brother
> richly dressed
> Appears on the other side - tall like you,
> your spitting image
> Is it you or not? Cock your ears, turn
> your head
> Look: that man, the stranger, he sings
> you a spirit song

Your ghost takes you by the hand,
you cross your
arms, you cross your legs
You rise up with your ghost, is that
not so.
You can no longer talk with men,
You have glided into the Beyond,
you can talk with spirits.
Let your feet glide and follow the
spirits....
(recorded and translated by
Jacques Lem oine)

Ritual Helpers

More shots are fired to announce the ending of the preparation of the body, and a variety of ritual helpers will then be appointed from within the village or surrounding villages. Very often these helpers will be younger men, as fathers usually prefer their sons to attend so that they may learn how to perform the rites properly, and considerable discussion on exact procedure may take place while the rituals are being performed, with advice being heeded from older men. Thus, besides its overt purposes, the funeral is also an occasion for learning and an occasion when kinship structure is ritually enacted; funeral customs and differences of ritual are one of the main means whereby different descent groups within clans are distinguished. A funeral can only take place in a household belonging to the same descent group (dab qhuas) as the deceased, because only such households will perform rituals in the same way.

Ritual officiants come in pairs: two pipers, two drummers, two men in charge of cutting and supplying the firewood, two coffin-makers, two water carriers, two masters of ceremonies, two gunners, two singers of the qhuab ke, two women

to set the table and two girls to husk the rice. There should be two of each kind of helper; single, odd numbers are usually inauspicious, but there are also pragmatic reasons for this requirement: such work as the constant beating of the drum and blowing of the pipes, which continues throughout the long funeral cannot be done by one man alone. (The Hmong are not always very strict about this, and other assistants may help out too.)

Rites of Reversal

For the purposes of the funeral, normal sex-roles are reversed: women are not supposed to take part in most of the ritual proceedings. Thus men take charge of serving the food and supplying wood and water to the house, although they do not actually cook the food, and women are invited to eat first on the day of the burial.

The Guests Arrive

A bottle of alcohol and a cooked chicken in the two halves of a gourd, together with a boiled egg, a crossbow, a knife and a paper umbrella, will be placed by the head of the corpse, and hemp sandals placed on the feet; he will require all those things to cross to the Overworld safely. A piece of bamboo is split into two to serve as divination horns for the duration of the funeral. These may not be used again afterwards, and are added to the other objects by the dead man's head. The cock will serve as a guide under whose wings the departing soul will shelter on its flight to the Otherworld. The whisky will be symbolically presented to the corpse during the recitation of the qhuab ke. As each guest arrives, he will present some paper money to the master of ceremonies, as well as incense and some rice. Then he will make his way to the corpse and, taking hold of the corpse's hand, will shade the eyes of the dead man and begin to lament. Although these "keens" fall into a set, sing-song form, their content is entirely spontaneous and can be very moving. They may last for a long or a short time.

It is the business of the women of the house to keep constant watch by the corpse, fanning away any flies or insects which may gather there as the days of the funeral proceed. Incense is frequently burned at the feet and head of the corpse, both as an offering in the world of spirits and to fumigate the stench of putrefaction. Guests and family members roll up green leaves and stuff their nostrils against the smell. It is considered important that the corpse show such signs of decay before burial. The more important the dead man is, the longer will be his funeral, and the longer his body is kept in the house. As at least one pig must be sacrificed by his family for each day of the funeral, and all guests must be fed, a funeral is very expensive. The guests - there may be a hundred or more of them - will stay in and around the house throughout the funeral, although some may visit other houses or return to their own houses in the village to sleep for a few hours at night. Funerals last a minimum of three days but, ideally, the body should be kept in the house for twelve days.

Within each day of the funeral, activity focuses on the morning, noon and evening meals. Before each meal, the pipes are played, a different tune for each time of day, and the drum is beaten. Various songs (*nkauj tuag*) may also be sung by those who know them, alternating with the music of the pipes and drum. After the playing of the *qeej tu siav* tune, which "sings" of expiring life, the corpse, dressed in the special clothes of death, is ceremonially raised onto an elevated bier against the wall of the altar (opposite the door), as the *qeej tsa nees* is played. The body remains there, stretched out at the height of the mourners' chests until the day of the burial.

Pipes and Drum

The wooden drum, used only for funerals and which must be destroyed after the burial, is suspended from a sapling strapped against a pillar of the house. As it is being beaten, the qeej piper performs a unique dance, weaving round and round the pillars of the house. Combinations of notes and chords played on the qeej have literal meaning, representing words which are never spoken on normal occasions, although they may be recited for the purpose of learning.

Before each meal, the corpse is ceremonially offered food, as the pipes and drum are played. Pork and rice must be symbolically offered to the corpse's mouth while the two men play the *rab qeej*

in mournful procession around the pillars of the house. Guns are fired again as the corpse is symbolically fed.

Paying Debts

Before the corpse is buried, all debts outstanding in the dead man's name must be paid off. This is a highly ritualized procedure, involving frequent offerings of drinks by both parties, plaintiffs and defendants, in order to minimize any possible tensions. The family of the deceased are usually very keen to pay off all debts of their relative since debts outstanding in this life will be carried over into the next, and in popular belief may result in rebirth as a pig or other animal in the household of the creditor.

Siting the Grave

The geomantic system for the siting of graves (and villages), which the Hmong share with the Chinese, is based upon the belief that the present-day fortunes of humans depend on the welfare of their ancestors in the Otherworld. So the lie of the mountains and valleys and rivers is carefully inspected to find an auspicious burial site which will ensure prosperity to the male descendants of the deceased. Sighting from the top ridge of a line of mountains, the left-hand mountain is known as the Azure Dragon, and the right-hand one as the White Tiger. The left-hand (male) one should be lower than the right-hand (female) one, and in their gulleys two water-courses should ideally lead down towards a pool known as the Dragon's Pool, where reincarnation is thought to begin.

Burial

On the day of the burial, after the morning meal, the corpse is carried out through the side of the house onto the mountain. Moving at a rapid pace, the cortege takes great care not to pass above any other house, as the body is borne directly downhill to the open space at the entrance to the village, where a great crowd will have gathered. As the final *qeej sawv kev*, indicating "departure", is played on the pipes, the stretcher-like bier bearing the corpse is set up in state on posts previously driven into the ground. A number of bulls or oxen have been tethered to stakes: ideally there should be one from each married son and son-in-law of the deceased, as well as one from his wife on behalf of her father. The divination horns are cast to determine if the deceased is ready to accept the cattle. If the answer is "no", the horns are thrown again until the reply is positive. The cattle are then killed by a male relative of the dead person, using blows with the blunt side of an axe to the forehead. The work of skinning, cleaning, washing and cooking the cattle occupies several hours. Then, everyone

in the village is invited to eat by the master of ceremonies, who allocates parts of the dead animals to the various funeral helpers. Contrary to the normal practice when guests are present, women eat first on this occasion. Once more, the horns are thrown to ensure the dead person is ready for burial. The funeral procession will then set out carrying the bier into the forest.

Both the place and the most auspicious day and time for the burial will have been carefully determined beforehand, by lengthy discussions with the elders. The funeral procession, usually in the late afternoon, is led by the piper, who is followed by the master of ceremonies carrying a chicken, bottle of whisky, rice and half of a boiled egg. He is accompanied by a young girl, bearing a burning brand to light the way for the deceased. She will cast it down and run back to the village before the first stop, where the piper will stop playing. No women are allowed to witness events after this point. Many men may carry the bier, and it is good luck to do so. The procession may make several stops along the way to confuse the evil spirits which could be pursuing them. For the same reason, the funeral party moves in several directions before finally turning towards the West (the direction of death).

Death attracts all kinds of evil influences, so many ruses and subterfuges are employed to avert these and ensure that the souls of all those in the procession stay with them and do not follow the deceased into the world of darkness. While the corpse is laid in the open coffin, previously buried up to the rim, the pipes are again played. Since all that is buried in the grave must perish if effective reincarnation is to take place, no metal, jewellery or synthetic materials can accompany the corpse. Incense and spirit-paper are burnt, and a final prayer is said which directs the soul of the deceased on its way. After the coffin has been covered with its lid and buried under a mound of earth, an arrow is fired from a crossbow into the air over the grave to frighten evil spirits. The stretcher is chopped up and placed upon the grave.

Various purification and cleansing rituals are performed by the relatives of the deceased on their way back from the burial, on the day after the burial and on the third day after the burial. As with many of the steps in a funeral, these differ in detail

according to the clan and descent group. Usually, on the third day after burial the grave is revisited, tidied and swept. According to whether the family of the deceased follows Hmong or Chinese burial practices, branches and leaves are placed over the grave (for a Hmong-style grave), or a cairn of stones built upon it. There is also an intermediate style, which is fenced. Also, according to the family's custom, the corpse will be buried laterally (Chinese-style) to the slope of the mountain, or vertically to it (Hmong-style). It is considered unpropitious for the head of the corpse to be pointing due east or to be facing directly upwards, and sometimes the head will be adjusted a little in the coffin to avoid this. "Blinded by the sun he cannot see, thus his sons and daughters will suffer misfortune."

Thirteen Days After

Thirteen days after death, a special ritual must be performed by the immediate family of the deceased which is known as *xi plig*. The purpose of this ritual is to invite one of the souls of the deceased to return to the house before sending it back finally to the grave. It is not the soul which will be reborn which is invited, but the soul which stays with the body in its grave and might become a ghost or evil dab qus if not properly appeased and told not to return during this ritual. Thus, the purpose of the family's visit to the grave at the xi plig, and the ritual held in the house afterwards, is to alleviate the lonely agony of this soul which must remain beside the grave. This is private and the house is closed to those outside the family.

The xi plig no doubt has its origins in the belief that the Hmong share with the Chinese, that the spirit is composed of three parts or "souls": at death, one soul undertakes the long journey towards rebirth, one remains at the grave site and one mounts to Heaven to become an Immortal, a protective ancestor. The Hmong, however, do not give such clear-cut explanations. Different ideas exist about how many souls an individual has. Some say that there are two, which live in the ears, others that

there are seven or thirty-two (a belief probably adopted from Thai or Lao). According to the shamanic tradition, there are three main souls. A few individuals may have formulated their own ideas about exactly what goes on in the Otherworld, but most Hmong, if pressed, will answer quite honestly that they do not know, since they have never been there.

Between Grave and Home

At the xi plig the head of the household will proceed with his entourage to the tomb, where, after making various offerings, he will invite the soul of the deceased to return with him to the house, making a small opening in the covering of the grave. A sword, crossbow and clothes belonging to the deceased may be placed on the grave. On return to the house, rice and whisky are offered to the deceased. The bamboo divinatory horns which were used during the funeral are burnt at this time, after they have been used to determine whether the soul has returned to the home. A chicken is sacrificed and its boiled blood offered with the rice and wine. Other deceased ancestors are invited to partake of different portions of the chicken. But the soul is not allowed to remain in the house after this ceremony, and will be told to return to the grave.

Until the xi plig is performed however, the soul will remain between "two houses" of grave and home, not knowing where to dwell. After the ritual is performed, the soul will return to dwell in the grave. No pipes or drum are played during xi plig. The soul of the deceased is represented by a winnowing tray of the type normally used for rice. Strips of bamboo are used to make a frame about it, and hung with a jacket belonging to the deceased; a roll of cloth represents the head. The offerings are made in the house onto this tray on which sticky rice cakes are also placed, together with several bamboo cups of wine.

Releasing the Soul

The last of the mortuary rites as such is the great ritual of the *tso plig*, which should be performed within a year if possible after the death. It represents many of the rites of the funeral: animals are sacrificed and the pipes are played; the tray used at the xi plig ceremony, which is called the *kauj vab kauj lig*, is again used to represent the departed. The purpose of this ritual is to "release the soul", the literal meaning of tso *plig*, for rebirth, and it may last for one or two days. The "rebirth-soul", having completed the journey back to the ancestral village, is ready to be reborn.

The tso plig may be performed for more than one person simultaneously, and where a member of the family has not returned home for a long time and is presumed dead in war, a tso plig may be performed for him and those of his clan relatives who accompanied him.

Like the funeral, and other larger-scale ritual activity, the tso plig provides plenty of opportunity for social encounter. As on the last day of the funeral, so on the occasion of the tso plig, people should not go to the fields. It is a holiday for everyone. Unlike the funeral, however, it is a time for being happy. The dead person will be reborn, if all goes well, in an unknown family and in an unknown village, but reborn as Hmong and reborn as a member of the same clan.

The day begins with an action that might shock a non-Hmong visitor. A family dog is caught. Its throat is cut and its four paws are cut off. The paws are attached to both sides of a spirit gate, constructed in the open, some distance in front of the main door of the house.

If it is true that understanding is the basis of tolerance, the visitor can rationalize the killing of the dog with the following logic: in life, the dog guarded the house from mortal intruders; in death, he prevents spirits other than that of the dead family member from passing through the spirit gate. A multitude of spirits attracted by the sound of the qeej, would rush at the chance to be reborn. The spirit of the humble family dog keeps them at bay.

The candidate for rebirth is honoured by male guest who pe (kow tow) in front of the anthropomorphic figure. The soul of the dead is offered food and alcohol and divination horns are thrown to show that he has returned to accept these.

At least one large pig must be sacrificed for this event. After the reincarnating soul has eaten the spirit of the food, the flesh serves more worldy purposes of feeding the many guests. The Hmong rarely drink alcohol except on ceremonial occasions. On the days of the tso plig, the ceremonial blends into the social and a great deal of home-made rice whisky is consumed.

It is a truly happy occasion for all. Whisky is poured from long bamboo "flutes" into small bamboo cups and offered among boys and girls in exchange for a song. On this day of resurrection, everybody, from quite young children to the most respected of elders, should drink and be merry. It is a very good day to be born or reborn.

POSTFACE

CHANGE

This book has described traditional Hmong village society; the way life continues to be experienced by many Hmong. Centuries of isolation on mountain tops have helped to preserve Hmong culture. But the Hmong are not fossils like the shellfish left behind when the Great Flood receded from their mountains. Change is human: and the Hmong are no exceptions.

Thirty years of intermittent civil war in Laos, most deadly in the heavily Hmong-populated province of Xieng Khouang, has had tremendously destructive effects. As far as it is possible to do so, the Hmong remaining in Laos continue to follow a more or less traditional economic life, although their opium is now legally purchased only by the State at prices much below that of the free market.

The Hmong of Thailand have come under pressure to give up opium production, which fuels a drug problem as great in the East as in the West, and to give up or reform their economic system of shifting cultivation, which is blamed for deforestation. Thanks to the personal interest of the King of Thailand and the Royal Family, and a realistic long-term approach of development agencies, encouragement to change has been made in an enlightened way. The Hmong have been given the time and means to make the transition.

Some Hmong villages in Thailand have become fully permanent and a great many more are experiencing the benefits and problems of change. It is no longer rare to find primary schools in Hmong villages, and usually they have a Hmong teacher. It is now almost commonplace for villages to receive extended visits by Thai development teams, demonstrating the advantages of alterna-

tive cash crops to opium, along with Thai literacy and hygiene programmes, to villagers increasingly inclined to listen. For a long time, the Hmong (and other tribal peoples) have enjoyed radio programmes in their own language, and even the remotest village will possess a few battery-operated radio sets. Ten years ago, it was rare to see a Hmong in the northern capital of Chiang Mai; today, they trade on the markets and happily enter into the many entrepreneurial opportunities thrown up by a booming tourist trade.

Perhaps the movement towards a permanent way of life has progressed furthest in parts of Southern China, where the Hmong enjoy a status of "semi-autonomy". Permanent, irrigated rice fields have gone. Very gradually, and not without competition, it has been accepted and developed by Hmong, Christian and non-Christian, and has helped to broaden communications within a greater Hmong identity. The first doctoral theses by Hmong, awarded only a generation ago, were written in French and English, for a non-Hmong reader. Today, the Hmong are writing novels about Hmong in the Hmong script. After a slow start, the last decade has seen a comparative revolution in Hmong literacy.

Missionary activity has brought benefits to the Hmong but it has also been divisive, cutting converts off from their ancestors and household spirits. It has also disrupted the important institutions of bride price and funeral. An effect not

and settled villages have increased access to education and to alternative forms of medicine: modern, in the sense of Western, and traditional, in other (non-Hmong) forms of herbalism and acupuncture.

Some of the earliest agents of change among the Hmong were Christian missionaries, who carved out between the sects various spheres of influence on the China to Thailand mountain chain. With the word of Jesus, the missionaries introduced Western medicine and, eventually, a written script for the Hmong language. This romanised script remains in China and Laos after the missionaries intended by the missionaries has been for a degree of segregation to appear between Christian Hmong and their non-Christian kin.

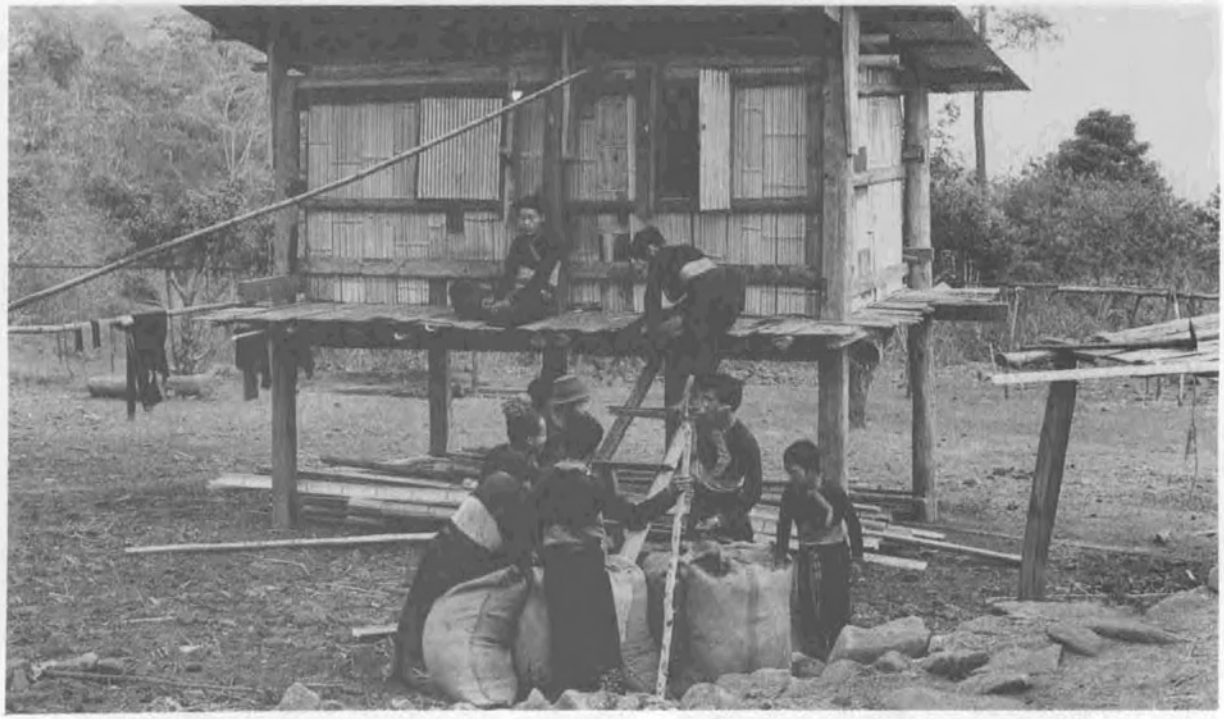
There is little evidence of the "Protestant ethic" among Christian converts, many of whom are poor Hmong attracted to the saviour aspect of their new religion. Often the convert, if encouraged by the kind of missionary who makes a virtue of poverty, waits patiently for a supreme force to intervene in his favour. Meanwhile, the non-Christian Hmong in the house next door is busy building up numbers of cows and pigs, to be killed in ceremonies which the Christian cannot counte-

nance, building up his family workforce and converting surplus product into silver. Long before the advent of agricultural change and "modernization", Hmong traditional life encouraged hard work and the accumulation of wealth. The problems of change are, paradoxically, felt more by Hmong Christians than by the majority who have not accepted Christianity. (This is a generalisation: not all missionaries equate poverty and virtue and some have played important roles in development programmes.)

Change has produced greatest stress among the refugee population. Sudden movement from a pre-literate mountain village, through a refugee camp to a modern Western nation state has, understandably, confused a great many people. Some, particularly the young, learn quickly and have adapted well; others have retreated into their new homes in the West.

"Cultural orientation" is provided before the Hmong leave refugee camps and after arrival in a resettlement country. It helps in adjustment to an everyday material world which is vastly different to the traditional Hmong way of doing things: work, wages and taxes, supermarkets, cars, flush toilets, electricity, schools. Most Hmong do manage to survive the initial shock to the senses and adapt. Much more difficult, however, is to adjust psychologically to the absence of much that gives life meaning. The alien Western society will rarely tolerate the presence of a shaman or a herbalist at a hospital, it cannot tolerate the social smoking of opium, seen by many old Hmong as the equivalent of an evening beer with friends, and will not allow Hmong funeral rites and the sacrifice of animals to spirits and ancestors. The Hmong is counselled to understand his new society and the new *kev cai* (prohibitions/taboos), but such counselling does not provide an alternative meaning to life to replace that left behind with the ancestors and the ages-old Hmong Way. Not surprisingly, after an initial attempt to come to terms with the demands of a new life, many Hmong gravitate to existing Hmong communities, where people think and act alike.

To reduce the pain of inevitable integration, give and take, and a lot of understanding, is required on both sides. It is hoped that this book will help promote such understanding.



SELECTED FURTHER READING

(Books Only)

Bernatzik, H.A.

Akha Und Meau: Probleme der Angewandten Voelkerkunde in HInterindien (2 vols).

Wagnerische Univ. Buchdrukerei, Innsbruck, 1947, Trans. by Alois Nagler. *Akha and Miao*:

Problems of Applied Ethnography in Farther India,

New Haven: HRAF 1970.

A lot to wade through. Hmong studies have come a long way since Bernatzik's pioneering fieldwork in 1937. Both versions currently out of print.

Cooper, R.G.

Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response, Singapore University Press, Singapore, 1984.

Studies and contrasts the reaction of four Hmong villages in Thailand to a situation of agricultural change.

Geddes, W.R.

Migrants of the Mountains: The Cultural Ecology of the Blue Miao (*Hmong Njua*) of Thailand,

Oxford: oxford University Press, 1976.

Focus on Hmong economy.

Heimbach, E. E.

White Meo-English Dictionary, Cornell University Data Paper, no. 75, 1969.

Hendricks, G. L., et al (eds.)

The Hmong in Transition,

Centre for Migration Studies of New York/ South-East Asian Refugee Studies Project of the University of Minnesota, 1986.

Very comprehensive collection of papers, mainly on problems of adaptation in the USA.Contains chapters by cooper, Lee and tapp.

Lemoine, J.

Un Village Hmong Vert du Haut Laos, Paris:

Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1972.

Excellent and full account of life in one Green Hmong village. French only.

McCoy, A.W.

The Politics of Heroin in South-East Asia, New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

Read with caution. Exciting and sensational modern history of the area in which the Hmong figure largely. The text is controversial and has been criticised by Hmong and non-Hmong scholars.

Tapp, N.

Sovereignty and Independence: the White Hmong of Thailand, Oxford University Press, 1990.

Examines ethnic identity and change from a generous prespective built on a solid data base of detailed research.

Yang, Dao

Les Hmong du Laos Face au Development, Vientiane: Edition Siaosavath, 1975.

Describes economic developments among the Hmong of Laos prior to the 1975 change of regimes. Dr. Yang Dao is the first Hmong to write extensively on Hmong society. French only.

Xiong, Lang (etc)

English - Mong - English Dictionary (*Phoo Txhais Lug Aakiv - Moob - Aakiv*), 1983.

Available by post from: Xiong, P.O. Box 15801, Milwaukee, WI 52315.U.S.A

Hmong Script Pronunciation Guide

The Hmong have yet to agree fully on the use of English letters to denote Hmong sounds. The only two dictionaries currently available contain some variations (for example one writes *Hmong* as *Hmoob* and one as Moob). There are also some little-used alternative scripts based on Thai and Lao and a small quasi-religious use of what is claimed to be an original Hmong script, usually referred to as "ee-bee". Most Hmong would agree with most of the following; some would not.

Vowels

a : as "a" in father
ai : as "y" in try
au : something like "ow" in cow
aw : like "ow" in glow
e : like "a" in day
i : like "e" in we
ia : like "ia"in India
o : similar to "o" in lost
u : like "ue" in true
ua : like "oe" in doer
w : between Hmong "i" and "u"

Note: All single letter vowels may be nasalised. This is shown by doubling the vowel, e.g. Hmoob = Hmong. There are no long or short vowels in Hmong (as there are in Thai/Lao).

Consonants

c : like English "ch", unaspirated
ch : like English "ch", aspirated
d : like English but unaspirated (glottal stop before it)
dh : like English "d", aspirated
f : as English
h : as English
h_ : indicates breathy pronunciation of consonant, e.g. "Hm" in Hmoob (Hmong)
k : between English "k" and "g" (as in Thai)
kh : like English "k"
l : as English
m : as English
n : as English
n_ : indicates initial n blending into consonant or consonant cluster e.g. *nplh* is pronounced like "`n' p" when saying quickly "go and play" (go 'n play).
p : unaspirated, similar to French and Thai "p"
ph : as English "p"
pl : like "pl" in explode
plh : like "pl" in play
q : a hard "k", almost "g"
qh : softer version of Hmong "q"
r " very light, unaspirated, unrolled
rh : more like English "r"
s : as English "sh"
t : as French/Thai "t", unaspirated
th : as English "t"
ts : like English "j"
tsh : like English "ch"
tx : like "ds" in adds
txh : like "ts" in cats
v : as English "v" or "w"
x : like English "s"
xy : like "si"in sign
y : as English
z : as English

Tone Markers

Final consonants are not pronounced; they indicate the word's spoken tone. Words without final consonants are spoken on a neutral (mid) tone. Dictionary listings under each consonant follow vowel order (as above). Words ending on the same vowel follow tone order: neutral (no final), b, d, g, j, m, s, v. Spoken tones are set out in the following chart, with final consonant tone markers indicated.

Lexicon of Hmong Terms Used in Text

GENERAL

cev: human body
cog nplej: planting rice
cuab: household
dab: spirits
dab qhuas: descent group
dab xwm kab: main household altar
dlaim phaj paug/xauv: silver chains/plates (jewellery)
dawb: white
hlawv: to set fire (to fields)
Hmoob: Hmong
hmuv: dibble stick
ib cuab kwv tij: lineage
ib hwm kauj co: (lub po co/qhws ntsej/kaub ntseg): earrings
ib tus dab qhuas: those who share the same household spirits (descent group)
ib tsev neeg: household
ib yim tuab neeg: one family
kws hlau: blacksmith
kwv tij: brothers/membrs of one clan
kwv txhiaj tshoob: wedding chant
laus neeg: elders
leej nkaub: shamanic spirit in shape of a parakeet
liag: sickle
lub lwj hlau: blacksmith's forge
lub paug caj/lub xauv: neckrings
lub pas zaj: pools and lakes inhabited by dragons (do not disturb
muam npawg: first cousin (mother's side)
nees: horse
niam hlob: big/first wife
niam nrab: middle wife
niam yau: little wife
ncas: jews harp
ncej taag: main house pillar (Green Hmong)
npua: pigs
nplej: rice
Nplooj Lwg: name of mythical frog creator of heaven and earth
nqi tshoob: bride price
nruas: drum
nruas tuag: funeral drum
nruas yug: "drum to keep"
ntaus kuam: throwing divination horns
ntsuab: green
nyug: cows
paug teg: bracelet
pe: formal sign of respect (kow tow)
Peb Caug: New Year
Poh Ntxoog: small, fierce, female spirit
pov pob: courtship songs
poob plig: fallen soul (condition requiring the hu plig ritual)
phij cuab: wedding gift from bride's mother to bride
plig: soul (general term)
kab tshoob kev kos: lengthy ceremonies connected with weddings
kauj toog npab: bracelet
kauj vab kauj lig: anthropomorphic tray used at certain rituals
kev cai: customs
khawv koob: magic
qaib: chickens
qeej: reed pipes/mouth organ
quas npab: armband (division of Hmong identity)
qhuab ke: funeral chants
Sauv: mountain Chinese
taus: axe
tawv ke: see qhuab ke
tus hau zos: headman
tsev: home/house/building
tshis: goats
tshom tshav: lying in state
txi dab: votive offering/sacrifice to the spirits
txiv neeb: shaman
txuas: long knife/machete
ua: to make/to do
vuv: reaping blade (held in palm)
xauv: necklets to treat sickness
xeem: clan
xiav: blue
yaj ceeb: the bright world of man and nature (Chinese: yang)

yaj yeeb: opium
yawm txwv: father-in-law
yeeb ceeb: the dark world (Chinese: yin)
yeeb thooj: water pipe
yeeb yaj kiab: the abode of the dead
yib hwm: master shaman
zaj sawv: rainbow
zaj tshoob: wedding chants
zos: village

SPIRITS

dab qhuas: (house spirits) guardians of:
dab ncej cuab: central housepost
dab nthab: loft
dab qhov cub: main fireplace
dab qhov txos: secondary, enclosed hearth
dab roog: main bedroom
dab txhij meej: main door linte
dab xwm kab: prosperity: ricepaper altar opposite main door
dab qus: forest spirits
dab tshuaj: spirits of medicine
vijsub vijsw: spirits of accident and disaster

DIETIES

Kaj Yuam: the Heavenly Archer
Nkauj Hnub: lady Sun
Nraug Hli: lord Moon
Ntxwj Nyug: judge of Souls
Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem: issues licenses for rebirth
Saub: associated with the creation of mankind and HMong clans
Siv Yis: (referred to as Nyiaj Yig): the original provider of shamanic instruments
Tswb Tchoj: King or emperor of the Hmong said to have ruled China long ago/promised to return and lead the Hmong/inspiration of Hmong messianic movements
Xob: God of Thunder
Zag Laug: Dragon King/controls rain

SOUL (DIVISIONS OF)

plig: human soul (general term)
ntsuj duab ntsuj hlau: the shadow soul
ntsuj nyuj cab nusug nyuj kauv: the soul of the buck-that-lives-in-the-pine-trees
ntsuj nyuj rag ntsuj nyuj rhi: the soul of the bull
ntsuj qaib ntsuj noog: the soul of birds
ntsuj xyoob ntsuj ntoo: the soul of trees

QEEJ (PARTS OF THE INSTRUMENT)

see chapter 8

QEEJ COMPOSITIONS.

standard parts of compositions: see chapter 8
qeej noob nrws/qeej ntiv: organ music telling of legends/conditions of life/etc.
qeej tuag/plig: organ music for the dead
qeej sawv kev: departing soul music
qeej tu siav: "last breath" composition
qeej tsa nees: music accompanying the raising of the corpse on its beir

RITUALS

hu plig: calling a soul
kev mob kev tuag: collective term for the many rites associated with the "way of death"
khi hluas: tying threads onto wrists to retain a soul
laig dab: feeding ancestral spirits
ntxeev nyeej: rite to change the fortunes of a year
sau sub: to exorcise the spirits of accident and catastrophe
tso plig: releasing the soul for rebirth
txo dlaab: village welfare ceremony
xa qhua neeb: sending off the altar spirits at New Year *(conxi plig*: private ritual performed by immediate family thirteen days after a member's death).
ua daba: propitiate spirits (general term)
ua neeb: shamanism (general term)
ua neeb muag dawb: non-trance shamanism (white face shamanism)
ua neeb muag dub: possessive trance shamanism (dark face shamanism))
ua neeb saib/ua neeb kho: parts of a shamanic session (to see/to heal)
ua neeb koos plig: shamanic rites performed between New Year and the cutting of fields for the welfare of any single family

ua npuas tai: rites to honour ancestors of long ago
ua txheeb: divination by drawing lots

THE AUTHORS

All obtained their Ph.D.s after extensive periods of fieldwork among the Hmong of Northern Thailand.

Robert Cooper lectured in anthropology at the University of Singapore until 1980, when he joined the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to serve in Laos, Geneva, Malawi, the Philippines and, currently, Northern Thailand. He has written three books: Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response, Culture Shock Thailand and Thais Mean Business.

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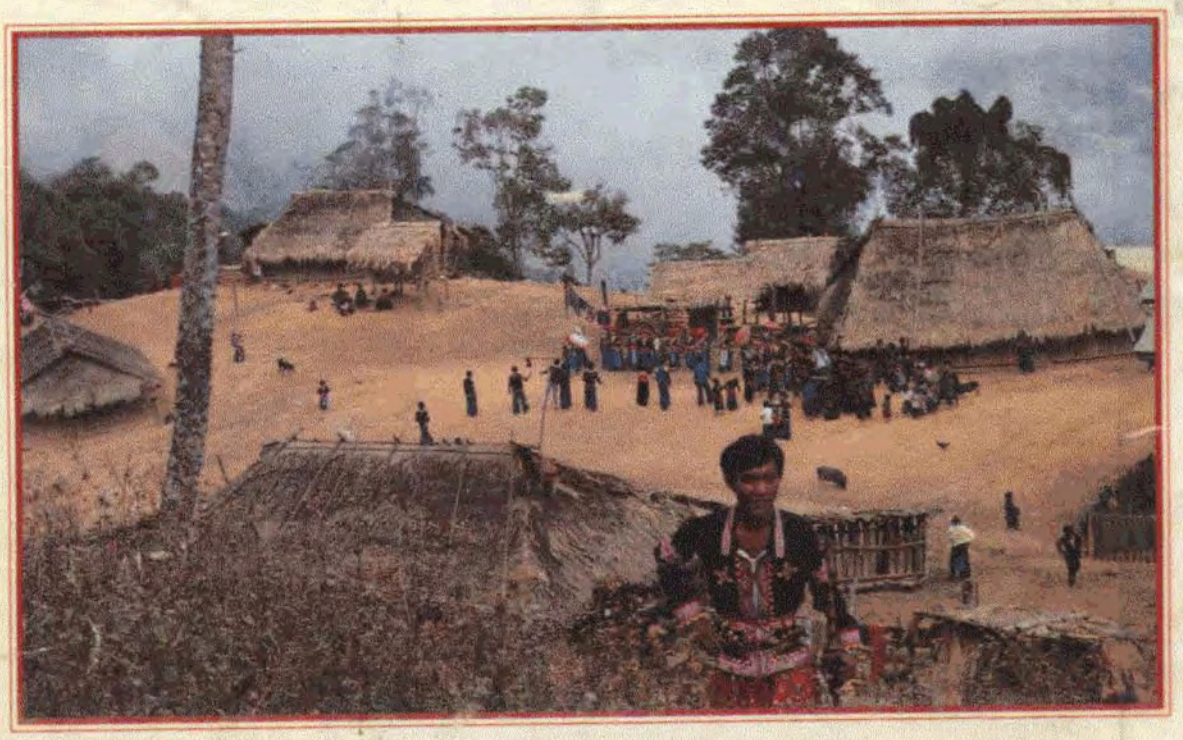
All ROYALTIES FROM THE SALE OF THIS BOOK WILL BENEFIT HMONG CHILDREN THROUGH THE PROVISION OF EDUCATIONAL GRANTS UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF THE SEAMP FOUNDATION



The Hmong, a tribal group of several million people straddling the peaks of a mountain range that runs from southern China, through Vietnam and Laos, into northern Thailand, are best known as one of the tourist attractions of Southeast Asia.

The essence of Hmong culture and society has survived the guns of a protracted civil war, the economic revolution of crop substitution programmes aimed at eradicating opium, and the cameras of new tourist armies. Whether it will survive the will of the Hmong to embrace the benefits and responsibilities of modern life and national citizenship remains to be seen.

In this book, four of the world's leading authorities on Hmong studies - Robert Cooper, Gary Yia Lee, Nicholas Tapp and Gretel Schwoer-Kohl - have come together to record Hmong traditional life as it was and as it remains in the more remote locations.