

# Acknowledgements

## Field Guide to Hmong Culture produced by

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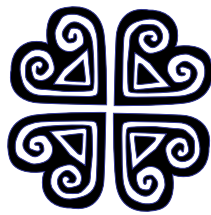
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# History of the Hmong





## Chapter 1: History of the Hmong

### Ancient Times

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

### China

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



### Laos

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



## History of the Hmong

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

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

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



### War in Vietnam

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

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

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





## History of the Hmong

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

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

### New Journeys

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

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





## History of the Hmong

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

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

### Refugees

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





## History of the Hmong

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

### American Life

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

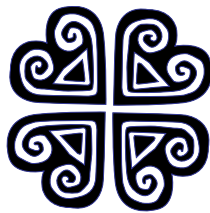


Argentina, French Guyana, and Germany. Today, the Hmong live all over the world; some in China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, others in the United States, Canada, French Guyana, Argentina, Australia, France, and Germany. Of the nations of the West, the United States has the largest Hmong population,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

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

### Questions for Study:

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



---

Clan & Lineage





## Chapter 2: Clan and Lineage

### What is a Clan?

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

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



### Clan Origins

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

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



### What is a Lineage?

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

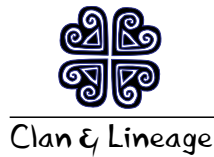
clan can be considered to belong to the same lineage as the author, because they can all show, with a list of names and a diagram of relatives, that they share the same great-great-grandparents.

### Differences Among the Clans

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

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





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

### Similarities Among the Clans

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

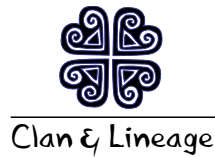
In all cases, each clan elects a male representative for a term of one to three



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

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

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



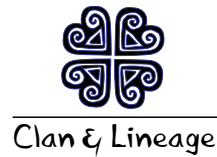
Affairs in the Hmong community will be handled through clan leaders and Hmong social structures. This is a great help in dealing with community difficulties, and even family and individual problems. Health care information is one of many areas in which this clan system makes it possible for news and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

### Drawbacks

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

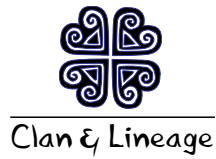
In this way, members of the younger generation of Hmong have to find ways to work with the older generation and the rest of the family, and from clan members generally. Therefore, if a Hmong is faced with a major decision, he will consult with everyone. Ancient Hmong folk wisdom says that, "An individual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





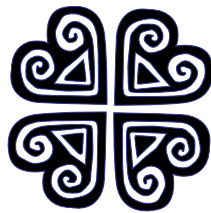
## Benefits

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



### Questions for Study:

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



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## Daily Life in a Hmong Village





## Chapter 3: Daily Life in a Hmong Villiage

### Morning

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

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





## Daily Life in a Hmong Village

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



### The Hmong House

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





## Daily Life in a Hmong Village



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

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

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

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



## Daily Life in a Hmong Village

### Village

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



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

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



## Daily Life in a Hmong Village

### Ready for the New Day

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



### Chores

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

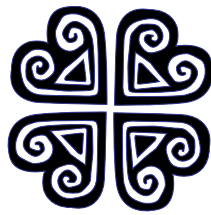


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## Daily Life in a Hmong Village

### Questions for Study:

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



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Food & Farming





## Chapter 4: Food and Farming

### Hmong Dining

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



### Hmong Cuisine

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



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

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

## Farming

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

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

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



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



### Rice Processing

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

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

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



## Hunting

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



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

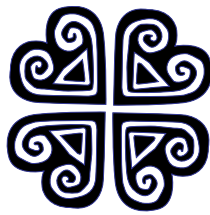
A Hmong hunter knows the woods around his village; there is no need for a map. Taking enough supplies for a one-day excursion, and perhaps accompanied by a few friends, his son or sons, or some of the other boys from the village who have reached their tenth birthday or thereabouts, he will shoulder his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

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



### Questions for Study:

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



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Hmong Art





## Chapter 5: Hmong Art

### Practicality and Aesthetics

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

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

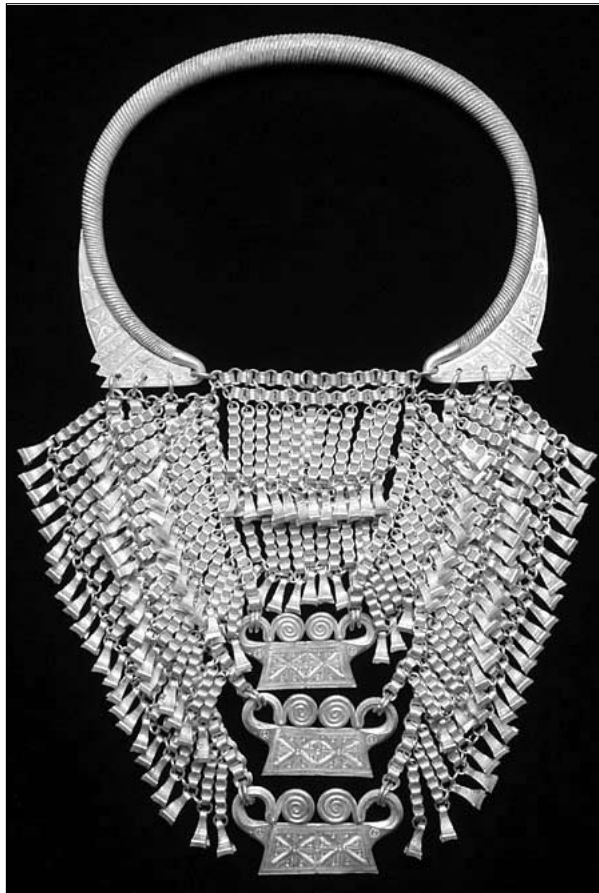


### Jewelry

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



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



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



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

### The Blacksmith's Art

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

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





### Basketry

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

### Needlework – Paj Ntaub

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



With respect to the more traditional paj ntaub, one may see up to five complex variations at work in its construction:

1.) the paj ntaub of cross stitch needlework; 2.) the paj ntaub of reverse appliqué; 3.) the paj ntaub of the elders; 4.) the embroidery paj ntaub; and, 5.) batik.



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



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



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

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

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

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



## Needlework – The Story Cloth

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





### Questions for Study:

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