

Wedding & New Year Celebrations



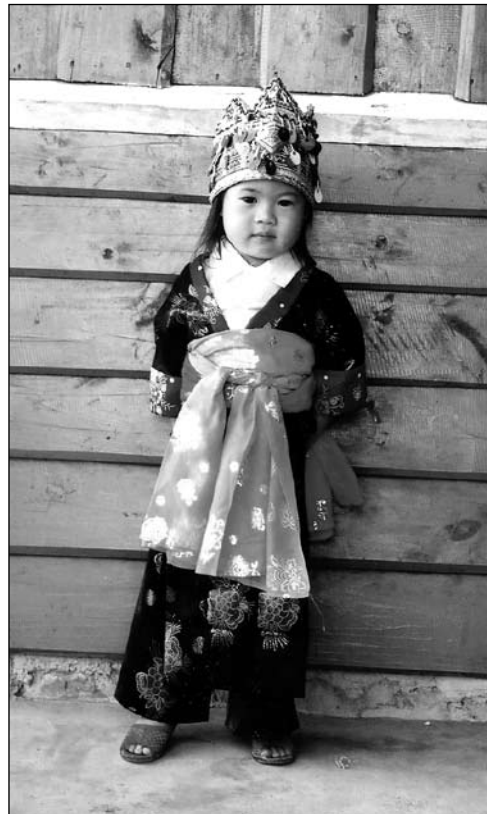
Chapter 6: Wedding & New Year Celebrations

A Link Between Two Days

For many young Hmong, the New Year celebration is a time to choose a mate, and so this holiday is closely tied to another occasion for celebration; the wedding. In Laos, young Hmong men and women often marry a month or two after the New Year. This is an adaptation to life in the highlands, where the young live far from each other and travel is not easy, and where the farming lifestyle does not allow much time away from the fields during which to meet new people.

Meaning of the New Year

The holiday which marks the end of the old year and the beginning of the new is a time for parents to rest and enjoy the fruits of their labor, while the young amuse themselves with and express their talents through a variety of games and similar activities. Music is played on the qeej, a bamboo flute; and there is singing and play with tops and balls. There is even a sort of bullfighting! Most importantly, the Hmong New Year is a time to begin anew with a carefree spirit. Tasty food is abundant, and guests are invited from far away to dine with friends and family members not seen for a long time. Relief from the ordinary cares of life is the order of the day.





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Preparations and Prohibitions

On the night before the festival, a soul calling is performed. Afterward, the father of each family will invite the spirits of ancestors to visit and enjoy dinner. Then, on the day of the celebration, a long rope is fashioned from thatch; one end is tied high on a center pole, and the other end fastened to the ground. Holding a chicken in his hands, an elder man waves it over the heads of those who pass under the rope in order to bless them with good health in the coming year.



New Year's Resolutions

The Hmong observe a few simple "New Year's Resolutions" during the festival and for a short period afterward. For good luck in the coming year, it is considered essential to eat only meat and rice for three days. Those who eat vegetables, it is said, may find themselves unable to obtain sufficient meat throughout the year; this, of course, implies there will be difficulties in raising



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livestock. It is also considered unlucky to eat rice soup during this same three days. Those who do so may encounter difficulties with the coming year's rice crop.

Wedding Traditions

Since the selection of a partner made at the New Year celebration leads so often to marriage, the wedding celebration is considered in the same context. For the bride and groom, a wedding is a transition to adult

responsibilities. Once married, social interaction is limited to more adult forms than before, especially for women. Since it is Hmong tradition that a new bride moves in with the groom's family, this family gains a valuable, new family member, and the newlywed couple is expected to fulfill the roles of a well-behaved son and daughter-in-law.

In this way, dramatic changes are felt by the bride and the family she has left. While the bride's old family has lost a helper in work and a companion in leisure, the bride must make a sometimes difficult transition as she joins a new family and seeks to form her own. She





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must assume her new family's spiritual traditions, which will differ in some respects from those she has known, and she must wear the new family's traditional costume and speak the new family's dialect, which is sometimes different from her own. Most importantly, she must bear children. As for the groom and his parents, they now have a new addition to the family and are responsible for teaching her their expectations and way of life.

As compensation for all the bride must endure in assuming her new duties, and to ensure their earnest intention to treat the bride well, as well as to recognize the effort expended by the bride's parents in raising a daughter, the groom's family makes an offering to them of money and/or gifts. The bride's family, meanwhile, give as lavishly to the newlyweds as they are able, bestowing cash, household items, clothes, and jewelry in order to support the young couple in building their life together. As is customary during the Hmong New Year Celebration, certain restrictions are observed on the day of the wedding; for example, hot peppers are not allowed at table lest the marriage be troubled by arguments caused by hot tempers!





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Wedding Procedures

After two young Hmong decide to marry, the groom and his parents bear the primary responsibility for the planning of the wedding. A team representing the groom's family interest must be organized for the ritual journey to the bride's home to greet the bride's parents, negotiate gifts, and bring the bride back to his home. Often this "journey" is a short one, and symbolic only. Occasionally it is long, for the bride may live in another village several hours' walk from that of the groom. In any case, a picnic lunch will be prepared and enjoyed along the way – whether the journey requires fifteen minutes, six hours or a whole day.

Another traditional observance is the ritual "packing of three chickens." These cooked delicacies are utilized in the course of the wedding ceremony; one as a spiritual offering and two for consumption. Rice and salt will be packed, and blankets included for the

convenience of guests. Traditional costumes are worn to and from the home of the bride's parents, and the bride's brother will be asked to play the qeej flute as a send off for the wedding party as they return to the groom's home. Such customs as these originated in early times, when the homes of bride and groom were often not only separated by long distances, but when travel in the highlands of Southeast Asia was even more difficult and uncertain than presently.





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Although guests at the festivities may number in the dozens or more, thirteen people make up the wedding party itself. These are: 1. the bride; 2. the groom; 3. the best man; 4. the bridesmaid; 5&6. the bride's marriage negotiators; 7&8. the groom's marriage negotiators; 9. the groom's delegated parent; 10. the bride's delegated parent; 11. the groom's brother; 12. the bride's brother; 13. one elder. Interactions between these principals will be extremely romantic, and even poetic, in nature, for all such interchanges are, by tradition, musical. In fact, at a Hmong wedding everything is done in song. There is a song to ask the bride's parents to open the door as the wedding procession arrives; there is a song to be performed while setting up a table at which the marriage negotiators will sit; there are songs to invite parents, songs to introduce the marriage negotiators to one another, songs for literally everything!

Completing the Formalities

It will come as no surprise, therefore, that a Hmong wedding is a prolonged affair, and takes a great deal of time to finish. After the bride leaves her parents' home, there are still four more steps to be completed before the wedding is final. These are:

1. the introduction of the bride to the spirits of the groom's ancestors
2. the notification of the bride's parents of the bride's whereabouts
3. the soul calling on the third morning
4. the post-wedding.

The first of these is when the bride and groom arrive at the groom's house for the first time. The groom calls his father or an elder man to the door and asks him to perform a welcoming ritual to transfer the bride's allegiance from the spirits of her parents' ancestors to the spirits of the groom's ancestors.



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The second step is to deliver a message from the groom family to the bride's parents; if the wedding was secretly initiated and the bride leaves her parents' home to the groom family without anyone seeing. This message notifies the bride's parents that they should look for their daughter no more, since she is now eternally to be found with the groom's family.

The third step occurs on the third day after the bride's arrival at her new home. On this day, a soul calling is conducted to welcome the new arrival.

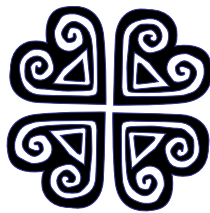
Finally, the groom's family will perform a specific ritual of thanksgiving to express gratitude to all the wedding negotiators or assistants. This is the post-wedding, and, with this, the marriage is complete and the girl becomes a wife. As a symbol of her new status, she will remove forever the black and white striped cloth – called a siv ceeb – from her turban. This striped cloth has been symbolically tied to an umbrella that has accompanied the wedding ritual from day one. This is a symbol of the union of man and wife, for, when the wedding ritual is over, the civ ceeb is untied from the umbrella, and the new bride opens it over her husband to signify that the two young lovers now shelter eternally under one roof. Forever afterward, as Western women wear a wedding ring, the traditional Hmong woman will signal her married status by wearing her turban without the black and white stripe.



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Questions for Study:

1. What is the link between the Hmong New Year celebration and a Hmong wedding?
2. What are some of the activities in which Hmong engage during the New Year celebration?
3. Is the New Year celebration a time of fasting?
4. Do the Hmong make New Year's resolutions?
5. After a marriage, can young Hmong continue to behave as children?
6. Where does the newlywed couple live?
7. With respect to a Hmong wedding, who gives gifts to whom?
8. Who plans a Hmong wedding?
9. Does the bride-to-be always live near the groom?
10. Is it true that, by tradition, music is forbidden at a Hmong wedding?



Spirit & Ceremony



Chapter 7: Spirit and Ceremony

Spirit or Soul

The spirit is often referred to as the soul, and, while it is usual in the West to believe that each of us has one soul, the Hmong believe that each of us has either three or five souls (according to different opinions). Some Hmong believe that one soul occupies the head area, one the region of the torso, and one the leg area. Other Hmong believe that a person has five souls; each of them named after an object in nature: reindeer, running bull, chicken, growing bamboo, and shadow.

In any case, according to Hmong tradition these souls, acting in harmony, produce a happy, healthy life. However, when even one of these souls begins to exhibit a lack of harmony with the others, trouble follows and life may become unpleasant and unhappy. Indeed, illness may be the result, and even, in extreme cases, death. Thus, we can see that the harmony of a Hmong's souls is very important, and when this harmony is lost it must be restored quickly.

Calling the Soul

In fact, the Hmong believe that one or more souls may sometimes not only fall out of harmony with the others, it may even decide to leave the body altogether and go elsewhere. This "soul loss," or poob plig, as it is called in the Hmong language, is a serious situation and requires measures to call the straying soul back. These measures are collectively known as "soul calling," or hu plig. The missing soul may have wandered away to someplace nearby, or it may have wandered far – even to the spirit world, a place similar to our world, but inhabited by spirits and other disembodied beings. In such a case, calling back the soul may be a problem.

This soul calling, although it sounds very difficult, is, in fact, a fairly common ceremony with which all Hmong become familiar at an early age. Although required when an individual falls ill, soul calling may also be performed to prevent illness and promote good health; a soul calling is performed three days



after the birth of every new Hmong baby. In addition, at the time of the Hmong New Year celebration, a soul calling ceremony is performed for the entire family. A soul calling ceremony will be held for a newlywed couple on the third day after their union, and may even be performed for a family member



who is about to undertake a long journey or who has just arrived home from such a journey. When a Hmong is ill, however, or has fallen, or merely become frightened, a soul calling ceremony is most often performed. For that matter, in any instance in which it is felt the individual may have lost one or more of his souls (sometimes even without knowing it!) a soul calling ceremony will be performed. This ceremony may be performed by any individual who is not shy and knows the method; however, it is usually performed by an elderly person, by a Hmong shaman, or by another variety of medical professional or healer.

Back From Where?

Yet, wherever the wandering spirit has gone, it is never very far away in the usual way we understand the word far. Although we could walk for many days, or even months, and never arrive there, the Hmong believe that the spirit world is nearby for that rare individual, the Hmong shaman, who can see it. This shaman lives with us in this world, which is called by the Hmong the *yaj ceeb*, while still being able, in certain circumstances, to see into the



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spirit world, or yeeb ceeb. As the result of our own experience and our classes in school, we all know a great deal about this world in which we live, the yaj ceeb. But what about the spirit world, or yeeb ceeb; what do we know about that?

Most of what we know about the yeeb ceeb comes to us from the insights, experiences, and visions of the Hmong shamans down through the centuries. The Hmong believe that the spirit world is the home of those who once lived here on earth, but who, after growing very old – or, in some cases, after a severe illness or accident, or due to war – departed to live in a world made only of pure energy, or light, or spirit. These departed ones are referred to as spirits, or, in the Hmong language, as dab, and in their world they live in the company both of other spirits who arrived in the same manner and of spirits who never lived on earth, and who are much greater and more powerful than they. Sometimes referred to as Great Spirits, or gods, these others have been given the task of watching over the welfare of those who, like ourselves, live on earth.

The Shaman (Tus Ua Neeb)

A shaman is a spiritual healer. While it is most common for a man to become such a shaman, both men and women may do so. Certainly, the shaman is one of the most important members of Hmong society, and there are several different categories of shaman. All of these, however, fall into two main types.





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The first of these, the traditional Hmong shaman (neeb muag dawb), is selected by circumstance, fate, or destiny. In fact, no one may become this sort of shaman simply by choosing to do so. On the contrary, it is the residents of the spirit world who will make the selection. For the most part, this is accomplished by rendering him ill and refusing to allow him to get well until he agrees to become a shaman. In this way, he realizes it is his destiny to become a shaman, and he will have no choice except to begin his apprenticeship and training. If he does not, his illness will continue on and on. When a shaman so selected and so coerced performs healing ceremonies, he will always go into trance; a kind of mixture of sleep and wakefulness.



The second, and more recent, type of shaman (neeb muag dub) assumes this career merely by desiring to do so. Such a shaman, after his training is complete and he has begun his work, will not necessarily enter a trance state in order to perform his duties. Although it would seem that, in some sense, a shaman who has been selected by the spirits for his qualifications of temperament and character might be superior to the other variety, either of these two types of shaman can be expected to be capable of diagnosing and treating illness.



The Hmong shaman, thus, in his role of healer, is responsible for two things: first, he must join the patient in the fight for life and health; and, second, he must restore the wholeness of the patient's self by bringing back the patient's wandering soul or souls. The shaman thus takes responsibility for his clan's physical and spiritual well-being as he serves as a bridge between this material world and the spiritual world.

More Work for the Shaman (Tus Ua Neeb)

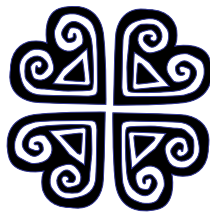
It is clear, then, that the clan's shaman is a very important person. But there is still more he can do. The shaman may also perform many valuable functions both at weddings and at funerals. By custom, if a shaman engages in these ritual activities, he must have additional qualifications beyond those required for the performance of other rites. All of these qualifications – singing, playing certain musical interludes, performing specialized tasks at the funeral, and so on – have to be learned from an expert.





Questions for Study:

1. Are “spirit” and “soul” different or the same?
2. How many souls does a Hmong have?
3. Where are the Hmong souls located?
4. Can you name three Hmong souls?
5. What is a Hmong spiritual healer called?
6. How is he (or she) chosen, and by whom?
7. Is it true that the Hmong always like to have one or two of their souls out wandering around?
8. If a Hmong soul wanders away, what will happen and what can be done about it?
9. How have the Hmong learned most of what they know about the spirit world?
10. What are the two main duties of a shaman?



Folkloric Traditions



Chapter 8: Folkloric Traditions

The Role of the Storyteller

The day is done, and dinner is finished. Grandfather, mother, father, brothers and sisters sit together, tired from work but warm and contented. All around is the deep jungle, above which the moon glows brightly, like a face in the heavens, while the stars shimmer in the hundreds.

The cook fire has burned down to a bed of glowing coals which cast an eerie light in a circle around the room. Dark shadows in odd and mysterious shapes dance along the walls as thin threads of smoke rise up around the ceiling, but not before they fill the room with a fragrant mistiness. Outside, somewhere not far away, a hoot owl calls, "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!" The hum of insects can be heard, and four or five large moths flicker and fly around the room, adding their shadows to the tapestry of light and darkness on the walls.

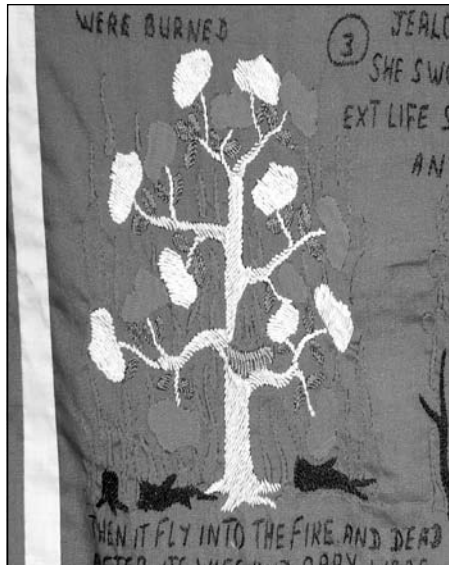
Then grandfather speaks, "A long, long time ago, there lived a Dragon King...."

Now is the time for stories, and the topics of these stories – topics which define the range of Hmong folkloric traditions – are such hidden realities as the creation of the world, the nature of the region of the spirits, the lives and activities of creatures such as dragons, and so on. The scope of these topics is very large, so a small selection follows.





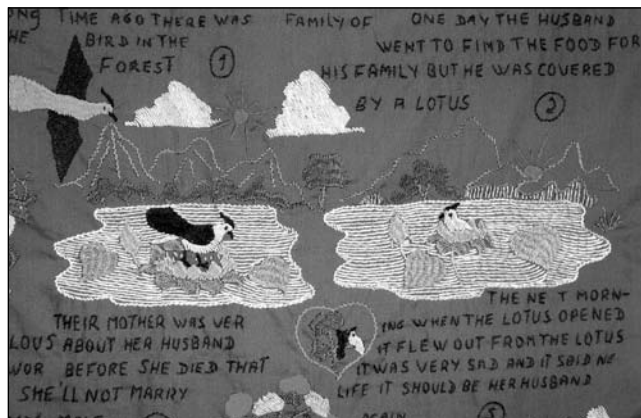
Folkloric Traditions



Folklore – The Creation

The spirit first created at the beginning of the world is called Saub. Among folklore tells of a great flood that covered the world in the beginning of our time, after which Saub created the original twelve clans. Yet Saub is not the greatest of the spirits; he is merely a lieutenant to another one who created him, who is even greater than he. This being is named Huab Tais Ntuj, and he is said to be the creator and ruler of the world. He is the king of heaven and governs everything in the universe.

Aside from these two, there are many lesser gods and spirits living in the spirit world. There are spirits of the household; there are spirits of medicine; there are nature spirits; there are spirits whose job it is to help the Hmong shaman with his many tasks; and there are a great many others. The spirits of medicine are worshipped by healers, and, when called upon, banish negative influences which may be causing illness. Nature spirits inhabit wild and uncultivated places such as forests and jungles, and are widely respected by the Hmong and treated with courtesy, even deference. As but one mark of this deference, the Hmong will always refrain from throwing rocks while in jungle or forest, lest they disturb a forest spirit.





Folklore – The Dragon and the Princess

One of the most appealing creatures in Hmong folkloric traditions is the dragon. He is a kindhearted fellow, and the Hmong sing a song about him at every wedding. This tradition began as follows: A long, long time ago, four Hmong boys went hunting. Each had his own special talent. One was a fortune-teller, could see the future; one was a skilled archer; the third was a powerful swimmer; and the fourth a magic healer.

As they were walking, the fortune teller said, "In a little while, a bird will fly overhead. Shortly after, the group noted a bird soaring aloft, and, without thinking, the archer retrieved his bow and shot the bird down, which landed in a river. Seeing this, the swimmer pulled himself through the river to get the fallen creature, but much to his surprise, he found that when he had arrived beside it,



the bird had been transformed into a beautiful woman. With powerful strokes, the swimmer brought this beauty to shore, but she was no longer breathing. The healer, counseling the others to stand back, then used his skills to bring her back to life. When she awakened, all four began to chat with her, and, charmed, she chose the swimmer to be her husband.

On their wedding day, the woman revealed to her fiancé that she was secretly the princess daughter of the Dragon King, and had assumed the shape first of a bird and then of a woman in order to meet the handsome young man. She



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then said, "My father is a kindhearted old man, and will no doubt agree to our marriage. Nevertheless, to show the serious nature of your intentions, please sing a song to him when we arrive at his palace."

Thus, when the young man arrived at the palace of the Dragon King, he sang a romantic song to the girl's father, asking him to open the door to his dragon palace so the youth might ask for the hand of the princess in marriage. Hearing this, the gentle dragon was pleased and gave his permission for the couple to wed. Since that time, the Hmong refer to all songs sung during the wedding ritual as the "dragon songs" or Zaj Tshoob.

Folklore – The Dragon and the Umbrella

The Hmong association with the kindhearted Dragon King has been a close one ever since, and the Dragon King has been of great help on at least one other occasion. One day, a Hmong girl, who had been courted by a handsome young man, decided the time was right to marry and start her own family. Her parents, however, loved her very much and did not want her to leave home to live with the groom, as is the Hmong custom. Undeterred, the girl made up her mind she would elope, and, concerned about interference from her parents, called out and asked for assistance from her guardian spirits, who agreed to make her parents sleepy that night so she could slip away with her beloved.

The next morning, the parents arose and looked around for their daughter, but she was gone. Furious, and seeing the girl had eloped,





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they bitterly upbraided the girl's guardian spirits and claimed to all who would listen that, without their knowledge or permission, the girl was not truly married. This left the way open for a major dispute: was the girl really married?

The case was argued among the highest authorities in the world, but no one was able to establish his opinion as definitive, and, since human beings could not resolve it, the matter was taken to the palace of the Dragon King. The Dragon King, who lived underwater, was then asked by the visitors to come and resolve the case. Applying himself, the Dragon King reviewed the details of the case, and, as he pondered, he clutched an umbrella that one of the people involved had brought with him and left hanging on the palace coat rack.

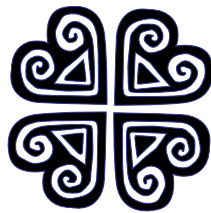
At length, and holding this item as he spoke, he intoned, "I have examined the evidence, and I have thought on this matter, and I find that the young couple are married! Moreover, henceforth I will use this umbrella as a symbol for those Hmong who wish to marry. From this day forward, when the marriage negotiator carries an umbrella with him as he walks along the path, all the people who see him should understand that he is engaged in arranging a wedding for someone."

This is how the old Dragon came to resolve the Hmong dispute, and forever afterward the Hmong marriage negotiator has carried an umbrella while arranging the union of a young man and a young woman.



Questions for Study:

1. At what time are stories told?
2. Do the Hmong enjoy stories?
3. Who created the twelve clans?
4. Is he the chief among the spirits?
5. Did the Dragon King have any children?
6. Who were the four young men who went walking?
7. What did they see in the air?
8. Which of the four got married?
9. What did the Dragon King find hanging on his coat rack?
10. Was the girl who ran away to elope really married or not?



The Hmong Language



Chapter 9: The Hmong Language

Making and Using Language

We make language using our chests, lungs, mouths, lips, tongues, and vocal cords. With these tools we make sounds and shape them into a form that will be recognized by others, and we do this to communicate feelings, ideas, needs, and a variety of information. This is accomplished by the use of words, and by putting these words into the correct order according to rules which are known to and accepted by the people around us in our society. These rules govern both the meanings of words, called definitions, and the order in which those words can be used to convey meaning, called grammar.

The Origins of Hmong

We have already seen, in our chapter on Hmong history, that when the French began to create colonies in the southeastern part of Asia, French explorers spread out throughout the region in search of whatever of value they could find. One of them, Father F.M. Savina, a Catholic priest, was not seeking gold, silver, gems and jewels, or other such precious things; he was looking for people who might wish to become Catholic. He settled in with the Hmong in their highland villages, and there he studied the Hmong language in great detail, learning it well. Finally,





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in 1920, he published a book about the Hmong in which he declared that, after much thought, he considered that the Hmong language was related to other languages from places far away, such as Mongolia, the southeastern part of Europe, and even Turkey. Thus, the Hmong language may have originated far from Laos and China. We cannot know where it originated precisely, but two things are certain: the Hmong have traveled far in their long history and their language is quite unusual.

Tones in Hmong

One characteristic of the Hmong language which may be somewhat difficult for us to understand is that Hmong is a “tonal” language. This means the definition of a word will change depending on the tone with which it is spoken. Let’s consider some examples. As Americans we use tones ourselves in our everyday speech.



When we inquire, “Excuse me, can you tell me what time it is?” our voices rise a little at the end. We can say, then, that this is an example of a rising tone. When we find that the dog has torn apart our favorite pillow, we may groan, “Oh, no...” Often our tone of voice as we groan these words will fall slightly, so that we might say this is an example of a falling tone. Another tone will be used when we say, “For my vacation, Mom and Dad are taking me to Hawai’i.” Between the two final letters of Hawai’i – that is, between one letter “i” and the other letter “i,” we leave a slight break or pause, so we might call this a broken tone. If we say, in a matter of fact voice, “This is my school book,” our voices do not change at all, and so we might call this a flat tone. And so on.



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In the Hmong language, a word spoken in one tone will have an entirely different meaning from the same word spoken in a different tone. We who have been born and raised in the United States may feel this is a bit unusual, but it is also true of the Chinese language and the languages

of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. In fact, there are seven tones in the Hmong language, and some people even say eight, since two of the tones are so similar that people disagree whether they are different or not! Some of these Hmong tones are referred to with such terms as “high tone,” “high falling tone,” “low tone,” “low falling tone,” and even “breathy mid-low tone.” At all events, the final letter of the printed form of a Hmong word will indicate to us which tone it is in which that word is to be spoken.

Syllables in Hmong

Hmong words are usually quite short; most are not more than one syllable. Thus, many words in Hmong sound the same to someone not used to listening for the difference. Foreign students of English often have the same trouble, and cannot tell when to use the words “to,” “too,” and “two.” So, we can appreciate that, in the Hmong language, one word such as “cee” can have several meanings depending on whether it is spoken with a high tone, a low tone, or some other tone. Indeed, in our chapter on ceremony, we have already seen that this word, when spoken with a specific tone indicated by the final letter “b,” means “world” – as in yaj ceeb, our material world; or yeeb ceeb, the world of the spirits.



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Words in Hmong

Some Hmong words we might like to know are:

Hello - Nyob zoo

How are you? - Koj nyob li cas (A literal translation of this phrase would be, "How do you stay,")?

I'm fine - Kuv nyob zoo (Literally, "I stay well").

My name is Joe - Kuv lub npe hu ua Joe

You are my friend - Koj yog kuv tus phooj ywg

Good-bye - Sib ntsib dua (This means, "See you next time").

- Mus zoo ("Go well").

Hmong Language and Tradition

Although the Hmong language may seem complicated, no doubt a similar discussion of English will seem quite the same to foreign students of our language. We should not conclude from this that the Hmong language is difficult for young Hmong children to learn. In fact, as we may readily suppose, all young Hmong children learn to speak Hmong, as we may observe in the wide variety of Hmong stories, jokes, and riddles enjoyed by children and adults alike, taken together with the large number of proverbs calculated to educate and inform.

We have already seen one example in our chapter on clan and lineage: a wise proverb which states, "An individual is but a drop of water in a bucket – if it crosses





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the rim and falls, it is tiny and will soon dry out.” Another is, “We see the pigeon, but we don’t see its nest.” This means that while the bird may appear beautiful to the eye, it may secretly have made an ugly mess of things at home. In English we say much the same thing with the words, “Beauty is only skin



deep.” Related to this is the riddle, “What is a bowl that cannot hold water?” The answer: A bird’s nest. Another is, “Who is the old man with a pot on his head who walks up and down the river?” Give up? The answer is: a crab.

The Hmong language is a rich, full, and very effective means by which to express and preserve the hopes, history, and values of a people with

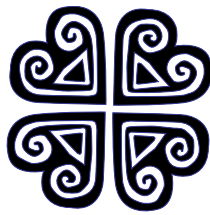
a cultural heritage developed over thousands of years. While it is certainly, in many ways, very different from English, and may therefore seem complex to English speakers, it is certainly not complex to the Hmong. The Hmong, rather, enjoy the use of their language in expressing themselves in daily life, just as, with great delight, they enjoy a variety of jokes, proverbs, riddles, and stories.



The Hmong Language

Questions for Study:

1. For what do we use language?
2. How does a human being make language?
3. What do we call the meanings of words?
4. What do we call the rules for using those words?
5. Who was the man from France who first studied the Hmong language?
6. Can you name two languages sometimes said to be related to Hmong?
7. The Hmong language is a “tonal” language; what does this mean?
8. How many tones are there in the Hmong language?
9. Can you name two other “tonal” languages?
10. Who is the old man with a pot on his head?



Games & Recreation



Chapter 10: Games and Recreation

Games We All Know

The Hmong work hard, and when time is available they like to enjoy themselves. In our chapters on Hmong language and folkloric traditions, we have seen that evening is the time for stories, jokes, and riddles; but evening is not the only time for fun. For adults, there are holidays, such as the New Year celebration, who take advantage of this happy occasion to feast and make music. For children (especially those too young to work long hours) playtime is available, as well as games like jump rope, tag, hide and seek, and the spinning of tops. In the highlands, toys are

hand-made from available materials; and with much time available, loving attention can be paid to the construction of toy bows and arrows, and tops of many sizes. These tops are spun as tops used to be spun in the United States, and in some places still are, by means of a hard toss at the end of a string. Hmong boys, as do boys the world over, also stage make-



believe hunts and make-believe battles with fierce animals of the jungle or with even more fierce creatures of myth that may lurk in the darkness of night. Surrounded by enormous forests, these Hmong boys have a wonderful natural playground at their disposal; a playground which stretches out ten, twenty, fifty miles in all directions. Hmong girls, meanwhile, in helping their mothers



with household chores and babysitting duties, are well-versed in the tasks required in caring for home and family, and this enables them to play house in an extraordinarily realistic and skillful manner as they dream of life ahead.

Catch a Special Friend

The New Year celebration, perhaps more than any other time, is an occasion for games, and we may expect to witness participation from almost everyone. Teenagers in particular, will join in playing a special and unique game of catch which often leads to the acquisition of a special friend; a special friend who may, in time, become a mate. To play this game, the young men and women of the village, as well as visitors and guests of a similar age from outlying regions, form two lines, with boys standing side by side facing a line of girls who also stand side by side. There is no limit to how many can play, and, as the lines face each other about ten feet apart, participants toss a home-made ball (about the same size as a softball) back and forth. If anyone drops the ball, he or she must give a token, such as a bangle or a piece of cloth, to the one who threw it. If the one who drops the ball has no token, he or she must sing a song.

It all sounds very simple, but the girls often manage to drop the ball when it is tossed by the boys they like. Likewise, somehow the boys often seem to be clumsy when the ball is thrown by the girls they admire. In this way, many tokens and songs are exchanged between the boys and the girls who have eyes for each other, and frequently love blossoms, to be followed eventually by marriage.



Highland Games

In an environment of nearly year-round sunshine, lush vegetation, and an abundance of wild creatures, much activity centers on the forest. Some take walks in the woods and others wade in streams that provide a cooling alternative to the heat of the day. Many activities which might otherwise be considered chores can be made into play by imaginative children. One such way is a Hmong children's game called Hitting the Tepee.

We have seen that the Hmong dinner is cooked over an open fire placed on the floor of the home's main room. Naturally, with all the families in the village cooking in such a way, much firewood is required, and the gathering of firewood is often assigned to the village boys. It is in the performance of this chore that the game of Hitting the Tepee can be of great value – for the winner.

The game is played by several participants, each of whom forages in the surrounding woods to gather as much firewood as possible. After this, the group assembles at a prearranged location, which is usually fairly flat and open. Side by side the boys construct



small, model tepees with a set number of sticks from the supply of firewood each has gathered. When all tepees are finished, each boy selects two additional pieces of wood as his throwing sticks, stands before his tepee, and throws the two sticks he has selected for the purpose. He may throw them far or he may throw them near; he may even drop them at his feet. However, the boy who has thrown the farthest goes first during the next phase of play.



Now the boys walk to their throwing sticks and take turns throwing them back again – this time aiming at the tepees in an attempt to knock them down. These tepees may all fall on the first round, or it may take many rounds to knock them down; however, when a tepee falls, the boy who knocked it down gets to keep the firewood from which it was constructed and add it to the pile he has gathered to bring home. Once they have finished one round, the players may, if they choose, select more sticks from their piles, fashion new tepees, and begin again; laughing, joking, and enjoying a long afternoon.

Music – A Hmong Variety

For the adults, eating and storytelling are supplemented by music and song. Several instruments create this music, all of them home-made and capable of producing the complex, lovely, often hauntingly beautiful sounds of the highlands of Laos. Several of these are wind instruments, which means that air blown into them (like the flute) produces sound, while fingerings produce melody. These wind instruments are the reed flute, the leaf flute, and the bamboo flute. There is a violin made with a single string and played with a bow, and there is a mouth harp, smaller than a single hand, but which is held to the mouth with two hands and plucked. Indeed, the Hmong are even adept at taking a leaf from a tree or bush, and, by blowing across it in a specific and highly skilled manner, producing moving highland melodies. In addition, there is a drum which is





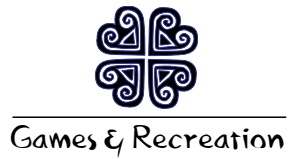
used on many occasions, chiefly ceremonial; and a variety of bells, as well as a pair of small cymbals, employed by the Hmong shaman – in the conduct of his ceremonies.

Probably the most versatile and widely used Hmong musical instrument, however, is a fourth wind instrument which consists of several reeds of different lengths bound together. This forms the qeej, the use of which we have discussed in our chapter on wedding and New Year celebrations. In the hands of a skilled and sensitive musician, this instrument is capable of generating music which is both moving and expressive of great emotional depth. For this reason, it is employed in the conduct of most Hmong ceremonies, although it is by no means restricted to these. In fact, inasmuch as it can be used not only to express solemn feelings, but also happiness, exuberance, romance, and even humor, it is frequently heard when any emotion is to be represented in musical form.

Song

Of course, the Hmong voice can also express the full range of feelings and emotions, and songs are largely featured in Hmong tradition. We have already seen in our chapters on folkloric traditions that a song about the Dragon King is sung at all Hmong weddings. At that happy time, there are also many other songs for which all to join in and sing.

There are songs for other moods and other situations, not all of them ceremonial. There are songs sung during the performance of chores to make the time pass quickly; there are songs sung while walking to the fields or woods to plant or harvest or hunt; there are songs sung during leisure time. As is the case the world over, there are love songs, too; both happy love songs – to be sung when love is returned – and sad love songs – to be sung when it is not. Indeed, there are very few aspects of Hmong life which are not given a musical representation, for song celebrates happiness when the heart is light and lightens the spirit when the heart is heavy.



Questions for Study:

1. Which games played by Hmong children are also played in the United States?
2. Do Hmong girls know how to play house?
3. How does a Hmong boy spin his top?
4. When is it a good idea to drop the ball in a game of catch?
5. If you drop the ball, what must you do then?
6. Who gets to keep the firewood in a game of Hitting the Tepee?
7. What is a "wind instrument?"
8. Can you name two Hmong wind instruments?
9. What is the most popular Hmong musical instrument?
10. About who or what is a song always sung at a Hmong wedding?

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