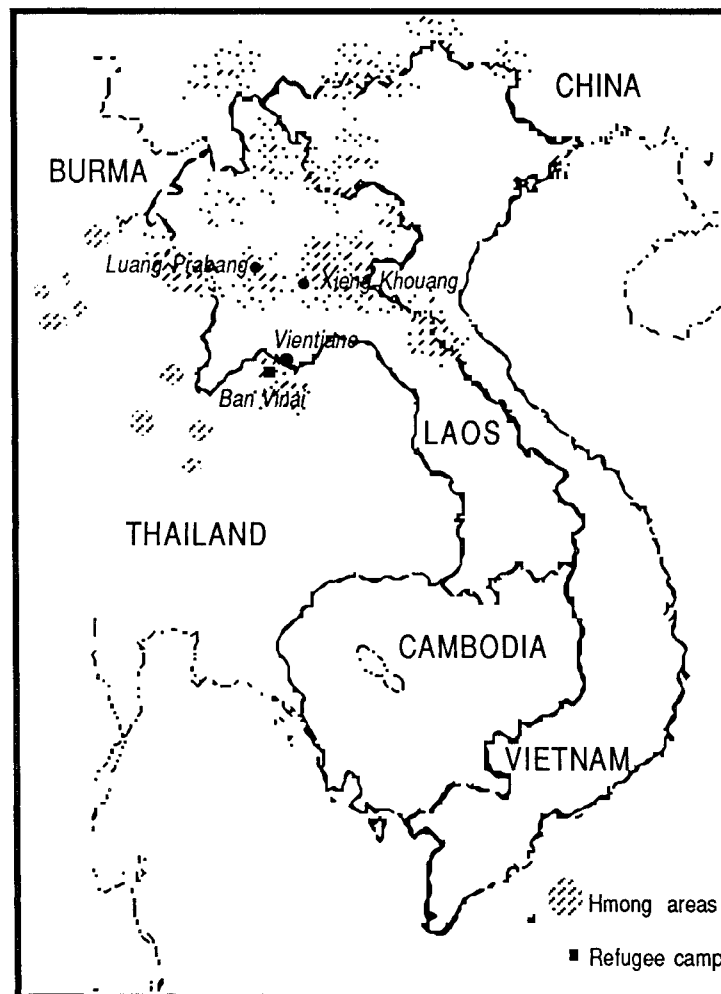


BACKGROUND: THE HMONG

WHERE DO THE HMONG COME FROM?

The most recent home of the Hmong people living in the United States has been Laos. Laos is a landlocked country, lying between China, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The country is mountainous, with very few large cities, but many isolated villages, where many of the more than sixty minority groups live. The climate is tropical: a dry season (December to May), and a rainy season (June to November). There are tropical jungles, and scrub growth (small trees, bushes, and tall grass) in areas where fields have been abandoned.



HISTORY

The Hmong have been a group of people without a homeland for at least 4,000 years. The history of the Hmong people is difficult to know, because there are no written records of their history. Some experts believe that at one time in the past, the Hmong must have had a highly developed civilization, because their culture has a complex and sophisticated legal system, which does not fit with most societies who are "slash-and-burn" farmers.²

The Hmong history has been passed down through legends and ritual ceremonies, from one generation to another. The legends tell of a time when Hmong lived in a cold land, covered with ice and snow, and where night lasted for half the year. The Hmong were living in Western China before the Han Chinese lived there, but they were always known as outsiders or barbarians, because they spoke a non-Chinese language, and wore special clothes that were not like Chinese. To avoid conflict with the Chinese, the Hmong settled in remote mountain areas, living and supporting themselves with agriculture. When the Chinese attempted to force the Hmong to become Chinese, giving up their language, customs, dress and life-style, many groups of Hmong refused, and the Chinese persecuted them and attempted to kill the leaders. This caused the Hmong to move southward, looking for places where they could live in peace. Eventually, about 200 years ago, Hmong began to be found in northern Vietnam, in the mountainous areas near the Laotian border. Over the last 200 years, groups of Hmong have moved further and further south, into Laos, where they again settled in the high mountains, far away from the majority group (the Lao people), who lived in the lowlands near the rivers and flat fields. The Hmong in Laos were eventually taxed by the government, and because they had very little money, they were allowed and encouraged to pay the head tax with raw opium, which grew well in their mountain fields. Like the British in China, the French used opium profits to finance their colonial empire.

When the Communists began to come into Laos in the 1950's, the Hmong villagers had to choose to join the Communists or move on. Some Hmong joined the Communists, but the most moved on and on, until they reached the lowlands in the center of Laos. There they were contacted by the United States in the early 1960's to become a guerilla army to fight the Communists and help U.S. pilots who were shot down over Laos. The Hmong became a loyal and hard-fighting army, supplied and supported by the United States, and managed to keep the Communists from winning for about 15 years; they were called the "U.S. Secret Army", and people in the United States did not know about them until after the war was over. When the Communists

²Bernazik, 1970.

won in 1975, the Hmong who were U.S. allies had to flee for their lives. The Communists have tried to eliminate all the Hmong in Laos, because they were such strong supporters of the United States.

No one knows for sure how many Hmong lived in Laos before the war, since there was no census taken, but experts estimate that there were about 300,000. About 30,000 to 40,000 Hmong died while fighting as the Secret Army, and about 150,000 have made it safely to Thailand as refugees. No one knows how many died trying. There are today about 90,000 Hmong who have come to the United States and another 35,000 Hmong children who have been born here. There are still about 40,000 still in Thai refugee camps, in 1990. Some Hmong have lived in Ban Vinai, the major Hmong refugee camp, for fifteen years.

Since the Hmong lost their homeland thousands of years ago, they have tried to find a place to live in peace.... in China, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, Thailand, and now, since 1975, in France, Australia, South America, and the United States. Throughout these 40 centuries, the Hmong have remained indentifiable as Hmong, because they have maintained their own language, customs, beliefs, costume, and ways of life, while also adopting the ways of the country in which they live.

For the Hmong who are in the United States, the young people are quickly becoming American, and are busy with school, an opportunity which most minority groups did not have in Laos. The young are no longer learning the oral history from their elders, and as the old people die, the knowledge of the Hmong also dies. Also quickly disappearing are the needlework and silverwork skills of the Hmong, as the young people don't have time to learn and practice the arts.

ETHNIC MAKE-UP

Hmong are not Chinese, Thai, or Lao. Their beginnings are not known for sure, but anthropologists believe that the Hmong and the Mien had common ancestors in the long ago past, and those two groups are not closely related to any other ethnic group in Southeast Asia.

RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION

About 10% of the Hmong have been converted to Christianity by missionaries, but the rest are animists. The beliefs in spirits transcend all aspects of life—location and structure of the village site and the individual houses, location of the fields, growing of crops, sickness and healing, location of burial sites, marriage, childbirth, and death.

If one gets sick, it is possibly because his spirit has been scared away, or has been stolen from the body by evil spirits. If the crops don't grow well, it might be that the farmer didn't appeal to the field spirits and crop spirits enough. If an epidemic happens in the village, it may be that the protective spirits are unhappy. The livestock (chicken, pigs, cattle) are important for sacrifice to the spirits on various occasions.

A shaman can communicate with the spirit world, and is important in diagnosing and curing illness. Herbalists possess special knowledge of herbs that can heal sickness. Since there are no birth certificates and family geneology records, the specific details of the various spirit rituals are one way for relatives to identify one another as having a common ancestor several generations ago. The songs and chants of the shaman contain much of the oral history and aesthetic language of the past generations.

LANGUAGE

The Hmong language is probably related most closely to the Mien language, both in the same branch of the Chinese-Tibetan family of languages. Hmong may have had a written form centuries ago, but no one knows for sure. It has been an oral language, maintained as a distinct language, for at least 4,000 years. There are two main dialect groups, White Hmong and Hmong Leng, which are mutually understandable. Missionaries in Laos in the mid-1950's developed a way to write Hmong, using the Roman alphabet (A-B-C's), so that they could write a Hmong Bible. Hmong in Laos were not allowed to learn the written Hmong language in school; those few who had the chance to go to school learned to read and write Lao, the national language. After escaping to Thailand in 1975, Hmong began to learn to read and write the language they speak.

There is an alphabet devised by an unschooled Hmong villager, Shong Lue Yang, in the early 1960's, called 'Pahawh Hmong' (*Paj Hauj*). A messianic religious movement has grown up around this man and his writing system, which he said was given to him by God as proof that he was the messiah. Despite the controversy that surrounds Shong Lue Yang, he is the only known non-literate villager who devised a credible and useful way to encode his language without outside influence. Not only that, he devised a writing system for the Khmu as well, his mother's ethnic group. Linguists in the United States are now working with his students to learn more about the alphabet and the life of this unusual man. He was killed in the 1970's by other Hmong who suspected that he was a Communist sympathizer.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LANGUAGE

The Hmong language has lexical tones, which give similar sounding words different meanings. There are eight tones, which differ from each other in pitch (high-low), length (short-long), and contour (falling, rising, level, breathy, abrupt end). The words begin with one of 56 different consonant sounds, some of which are very very similar, as close in sound as the 't' in 'top' and the 't' in 'stop'. After the consonant beginning comes a vowel sound; there are 13 different vowels. The word is pronounced on its tone, and changing the tone changes the meaning. In English, we say that we don't use tones to differ the meaning of words, but consider the following:

Now.	meaning	(At this time.)
Now?	meaning	(Right this minute?)
Now!	meaning	(Don't delay any longer!)

Each pronunciation of the word 'now' is slightly different, and English speakers understand the implicit differences in meaning. This is especially true of words used in a sarcastic manner: 'oh great!' or 'really nice'. In this same way, Hmong words that differ only in tone have different meanings, and the differences are as great as between any two words in English. For example:

pab	('pah', short, level, high)	<i>help</i>
paj	('pah', longer, falling, high to middle)	<i>flower</i>
pav	('pah', longer, rising, middle to high)	<i>tie</i>
pa	('pah', long, level, high middle)	<i>breath</i>
pas	('pah', short, level, low)	<i>stick</i>
pam	('pah', longer, low, falling, abrupt end)	<i>blanket</i>
pad	('pah', longer, low, rising and falling)	—
pag	('pah', longer, low, falling, breathy end)	<i>melon</i>

The Hmong language contains words borrowed from Chinese, Thai, Lao, French, and now, English, much like English borrows words from French (*rendezvous*), Spanish (*rodeo*), and other languages.

The written form of Hmong looks like this:

hmoob ntsuab

hm= 'm' (with air through the nose)

oo= 'ong' (the 'o' is halfway between a short 'o' (*cot*) and a long 'o' (*boat*))

b= tone marker: high pitch, short duration, level contour (the 'b' does not make a sound)

=Hmong

nts= 'nj' (as in *inj*ure)

ua= 'oo-ah' (as in *pursu*able)

b= tone marker (is not pronounced; high, short, level)

=Njua

Together it is **Hmong Njua**, or Green Hmong.

DIALECT GROUPS

There are two main sub-groups of Hmong, White Hmong (*Hmoob Dawb*) and Hmong Leng (*Hmoob Leeg*, often called *Hmong Njua* —*Green* or *Blue Hmong*), but there are several other sub-groups. Local contributors of the Hmong Leng group say that long ago there was only one kind of Hmong, but that because the Han Chinese tried to subjugate them, they became divided up, and gradually developed different dress style and different dialects. Those who adopted white skirts became known as 'White Hmong', those with striped sleeves became 'Striped Hmong', and the original group, who wore indigo-blue batiked skirts with long strips of applique and embroidery, were named 'Hmong Leng' or 'Hmong Njua' by the others. They call themselves simply "Hmong" (*Moob*). White Hmong usually speak only their dialect, while Hmong Leng speak both.

The system used for writing Hmong, the Romanized Popular Alphabet, was developed in a White Hmong village. Most printed materials are written in White Hmong, and speeches are given to mixed groups in White Hmong. However, the only dictionary produced in the United States is Hmong Leng.³

HANDICRAFTS

The Hmong are perhaps best known for their elaborate clothing. The Hmong Leng women know the technique of batik, with intricate patterns that form the base for the baby-carriers and skirts. The White Hmong women are well-known for their reverse

³Xyooj et al., 1983.

applique, with sections of fabric cut in intricate patterns, tucked under, and stitched to a base cloth. The Hmong Leng skirts are covered with appliqued bands, squares, and triangles, all in complex patterns learned from mothers and mothers-in-law. The skirts are pleated in hundreds of tiny pleats.

The traditional forms of needlework are changing in the United States, as women sew square pieces using elements of traditional design in new colors and combinations. In addition, the people living in the Thai refugee camps are producing scenic panels, which show the history and the past life with embroidered pictures. These are like history books, written by people who don't know a written language. After Charles Johnson produced a series of illustrated bilingual folktales, the stories began showing up on scenic panels. The words are copied stick by stick, as English-speakers might copy a Chinese character. The illustrations have become more and more elaborate, and as time goes by, more original folktales appear on panels. Starting in the late 1980's *paj ntaub* began to arrive in the U.S. from Laos.

DRESS

Hmong dress has dialect group differences and regional differences. It is possible to look at a person and tell which group she belongs to, and where she came from. The White Hmong women wear black pants or white pleated skirts, with embroidered aprons, and highly decorated shirts. Hmong Leng women wear colorful appliqued batik pleated skirts, with long black aprons, and black shirts. Each group wears an intricately decorated collar piece in the back, the White Hmong with the decoration showing, the Hmong Leng with the decorated side facing down. The costume is covered with silver necklaces, coin belts, and coin bags. The regional differences are mainly in the type of headdress worn. The men wear black pants (the Hmong Leng men's pants are baggy and short, with a long crotch), black shirts, some with intricately embroidered edges, with long sashes around the waist, and silver necklaces, coin belts, and sashes. The headdress for the men is a Chinese-style black cap, decorated with embroidery.

Traditionally, each girl of marriageable age spent about a year making a beautiful new costume, to be worn for the first time at the new year. The costume was testimony to her skill, creativity, and willingness to work hard.

EDUCATION

In the late-1950's there were only about thirty Hmong attending college, all in foreign countries. While living in villages, there was little opportunity to attend school,

and even if there was a school, the family had to be able to spare the labor, and have silver saved up, to send a child away to live with someone else and attend school. When families left the mountains for the lowlands, there were more opportunities for school and less requirement for field work if the fathers were employed as soldiers. Thus, more children attended school, even a few of the girls. The schools taught Lao, the national language, so children had to learn in Lao. Overall, about 95% of the Hmong now in the U.S. had no school at all, and of those who went to school, most went for three years or less. The more fortunate children had six years of school, and read and write Lao.

Those who have been in the refugee camps for years have attended classes taught in Thai or Hmong, and may have learned some English.

CULTURAL/SOCIAL

WHAT IS IT TO BE HMONG ?

To be Hmong means that you speak the language, observe the customs and roles, live in patrilineal groups, and identify yourself as Hmong. If you were born in a different ethnic group, and adopted by a Hmong family, you would be Hmong if you speak Hmong, act like a Hmong, and call yourself Hmong. You could marry outside the Hmong group, and your children would be Hmong, if you are male. For a female who marries outside the Hmong group, the children are not Hmong— their ethnic/cultural group is the same as the father's.

PLACE IN SOCIETY

The group is always more important than an individual. It is the reputation of the group that is important, and people govern their actions by knowing that bringing shame to the clan or the lineage group will affect the group's ability to form good marriages in the future. Leadership is important, whether in the family, the village, the clan, or the region. Leaders have special qualities, knowledge of customs and law, and have demonstrated that they make decisions that are fair and good for the society. Individuals in the society consult their leaders about decisions, and turn to them for counsel, advice, and settlement of disputes.

CLANS

Hmong society is divided into about 18 or 19 clans, shown by the "last name". The clan name is preceded with 'Hmong': Hmong Vang, Hmong Vue, Hmong Cha,

Hmong Xiong, Hmong Lee, Hmong Mua, Hmong Kha, Hmong Yang, Hmong Her, Hmong Lo, Hmong Thao, Hmong Pha, Hmong Chue, Hmong Cheng, Hmong Kong, Hmong Hang, and Hmong Kue.

A person has responsibilities to clan brothers and sisters, and in turn can count on them for support and help. A person cannot marry someone with the same clan name, even if they are of different lineages from different areas. Even a Hmong Vang from Thailand cannot marry a Hmong Vang from California. However, two clans may prefer to strengthen their clan alliances by having many marriages to tie two clans together. A preferred marriage arrangement is to maternal “first cousins”.

FAMILY

To Hmong, ‘family’ means much more than “father-mother-children”. Marriages are based on personal choice, but the choice of a mate is often from an allied clan, and the marriage is not just a union of two people, but a union of two clans. Divorce is rare, and the family responsibilities are divided with well-defined roles. The husband has responsibility to know the traditions, the customs, the oral history, the lineage, the details of the groups rituals, to interact with others, to make the major decisions about the future of the family. The wife takes care of the money, raises the children, and in Laos, did much of the daily work, including field work, making clothes, cooking, and tending livestock. The older children have responsibility for the younger children, and children are given their share of work at an early age. By the age of 13 or 14, Hmong are able to carry on the actual work of supporting the family, but are still learning the ways of the culture, and even if married, are part of the parent’s household for a number of years to come. In Laos, a good future was dependent on the number of children one had, particularly sons, as they would have responsibility for caring for elderly parents, and providing an appropriate funeral. As the elders are respected for their knowledge, the grandfather retains his family leadership role for as long as he lives, but once his son takes over the position of family head, he acts as an advisor. When married, a girl becomes part of her husband’s family, although she does not change her last name. Traditionally, girls hope to marry at 13 to 15 years of age, and the responsibility for raising the children properly is shared by the parents and the grandparents, as well as other household members. Families live together in extended family groups, with the house enlarged as the sons marry, bring home wives, and begin their families.

VALUES

The major values held by Hmong society are:

1. ensuring the family's welfare and reputation;
2. respecting others;
3. knowing Hmong customs and appropriate behavior;
4. using one's talents and abilities; being skillful;
5. knowing the family's specific ways of worshipping the home spirits;
6. fulfilling one's proper role in society;
7. fulfilling obligations to clansmen and in-laws;
8. being practical and handling money well;
9. being independent of non-Hmong groups;
10. being self-reliant (supporting your family throughout the year);
11. not lying, misbehaving, committing crimes, or otherwise bringing shame to your group;
12. working hard;
13. producing visible signs of hard work—livestock, silver, gold;
14. tolerating others, and avoiding conflict with others.