

Review and Guide to *Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music. Essays, Images, and Film* by Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 19(2)(2018): 1-15.

Review and Guide to *Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music. Essays, Images, and Film* by Victoria Vorreiter.

Book: Thailand: Resonance Press, September 2016. 281 pages, over 350 color photographs. Lyrics in Hmong (RPA) and English. ISBN (Book): 978-0-9981239-0-5.

Ethnographic Video: Thailand: Resonance Press, September 2016. 75-minute DVD. Hmong or English titles. ISBN (Film) 978-0-9981239-1-2

Website: <https://www.tribalmusicasia.com/hmong-book.php>

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Abstract

This article consists of a book-and-DVD review and viewer's guide to *Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music*, a paired ethnographic publication on music and shamanism of Hmong villagers in Northern Laos and Thailand. The video-monograph is based on original field research conducted between 2005 and 2016, informed by recent English language scholarship.

Keywords: Hmong. Laos. Thailand. Music. Shamanism. Sung poetry. *qeej*. *ncas*. *kwv txhiaj*.

At a time when the persecution of Hmong people in Laos continues,¹ it is encouraging to witness glimpses of peaceful niches where Hmong culture remains pristine and undisturbed in 21st century Laos. This beautiful book and DVD pair allows both beginner and expert to experience the resilience and uniqueness of Hmong ways. At first introductory, both book and DVD culminate in deeper insights into the Hmong belief system. Book and DVD complement each other, with the DVD offering empathic scenes of Hmong musicking in natural surroundings, and the book providing more expansive information on the roles played by musical sounds in the Hmong world. Reflexivity plays a role in the book, as when the author alludes to her warm relationships with her Hmong colleagues, and is embedded in the visual materials, which demonstrate a friendly and relaxed style of interaction. The book and DVD succinctly distill a vast amount of knowledge, acquired through many years of original fieldwork, as well as

¹ See van der Made 2017; "Timeline: Hmong" 2018.

through published academic and popular writings cited in the “References” (p. 266). It is up to the reader/viewer to decide whether to begin by watching one or both of the two videos, or by reading some or all of the book, because each expands upon the other. Ideally the process should be circular, with repeated and alternating viewings, listenings, and readings, dipping in and out of parallel sections from one medium to the other.

The author, Victoria Vorreiter, is a formidably talented professional photographer, ethnographic filmmaker, musician, writer, and curator of tribal music and rituals of Morocco, Laos, Thailand, Burma, and China. This is her most recent publication, and serves partly as an expanded sequel to a chapter in one of her earlier books: *Songs of Memory: Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle: Essays and Images* (Resonance Press: 2009), which offers a “brief overview of the music, ceremonies, and culture of six major groups in this area, including the Hmong.” A revised version of this earlier book will soon be published, with additional photographs and texts, and Hmong words updated to the standard RPA system. An audio CD of field recordings of six tribal groups will also accompany the volume.²

In the front matter of the book *Hmong Songs of Memory*, the “Author’s Note” specifies her adoption of the RPA (Roman Popular Alphabet) system for Hmong words, along with approximated English pronunciations for non-RPA readers.³ Vorreiter is to be commended for adopting the RPA in this volume, as it makes the work more accessible to Hmong readers and academicians, and also initiates newcomers into the RPA, through simultaneous comparison with Vorreiter’s approximated pronunciation system, which does not include linguistic tone markers.

THE BOOK. Vorreiter’s book is coherently structured to carry the reader through her research experiences and perceptive understandings, with artistic sensitivity and intellectual rigor. The “Table of Contents” gives a detailed overview of the book’s two sections: “**PART I, Secular Music**” (pp. 23-75), and the more substantial “**PART II, Sacred Music**” (pp. 76-260). Each part contains its own glossary, and each section is preceded by a beautiful full-page color photograph or map, and a pithy Hmong quotation, duly credited to its speaker or singer.

An “Appendix” consists of “Archives: Hmong Musical Instruments,” a gallery of superb photographs of musical instruments, and “Tonal Preludes,” a new contribution to scholarship on Hmong music (pp. 266-267). Here Vorreiter presents RPA transcriptions of the lyrics rendered instrumentally before a “thought-song” is played, as performed by the musicians in the DVD, alongside their portraits, while playing string or wind instruments.⁴

² Vorreiter e-mail communication 1 August 2018.

³ The basis for the RPA was ingeniously devised for the (perhaps) formerly unwritten Hmong language by Shong Lue Yang, a 20th century Hmong man living in Laos. The RPA system was modified and transliterated to English (“Roman”) letters in 1951-1953 by American linguist William A. Smalley and his Hmong collaborator, Chia Koua Vang, who was a disciple of Shong Lue, along with G. Linwood Barney and Yves Bertrais. (Smalley, Vang, and Yang, 1990)

⁴ For analysis of the conversion process from a “thought-song” to a played melody, see Catlin (1997a).

The “Table of Contents” concludes with one page each of “References” and “Film Notes.” Several new sources have been added to her previous book’s “References”, but since sources are not credited in the text, it is sometimes difficult to surmise the origin of information in the book. The “Film Notes” however give detailed credits to each performer, transcriber, translator, consultant, and film location in the ethnographic DVD.⁵

The “Acknowledgements” describe the roles played by Vorreiter’s myriad collaborators: White Hmong of Ban Nam La and neighboring Ban Sayua village, in Luang Nam Tha Province, Laos; Striped Hmong of Ban Ta village, Phongsali Province, Laos; and Blue Hmong and White Hmong villagers of Chiangmai and Chiangrai, Thailand. The author graciously thanks her Hmong guides, transcribers, interpreters and others in Laos, Thailand, and the United States, as well as many mentors, advisors, and fiscal supporters for both book and DVD. Said “Acknowledgements” conclude with “This has truly been a project of many hands and hearts,” which is evident in the finely detailed, perceptive, and aesthetically stunning book and DVD.

Vorreiter’s “Introduction” (pp 1-11) describes intrepid journeys to the remote Hmong world of Northern Laos, on a quest to deepen her musical and cultural understandings, and to search for life cycle rituals that use music in pre-literate settings. She formed a relationship with a White Hmong family in 2005, who had just summoned a respected female shaman to try to save their infant son’s life. After video-recording and photographing the entire ritual, she returned to the village, where the boy was soon fully healed and thriving. These materials, both the actual healing ritual (Part 2 of the DVD, 45 minutes) and demonstrations of music and song (Part 1 of the DVD, 30 minutes) are edited and subtitled in Hmong and English.

In the “Introduction” the author expresses regret that traditions are vanishing due to inevitable adaptations to modernity, but also voices the hope that the publication will serve as an archive to inspire the Hmong, and all humanity (p. 4). “Hmong Origins and Culture” (p. 6-11) interprets the opening of the video. Exquisitely crafted explanations are illustrated by superb full-color images, whose corresponding video sequences and natural sounds take the reader through the transitional stages of life and living, praying and creating, performing “thought songs” on instruments, and singing memorized poetry for lovers, members of their extended family, and other Hmong in the village and beyond during the festivals.

One of the most remarkable accomplishments of this dual publication is the interrelationship of the DVD with the written explanatory texts, the RPA transcriptions of sung or chanted lyrics, and their English translations. These all culminate in a complete shaman’s healing ritual, as seen in the second video on the DVD.

The introductory material is followed by “**Part I: Secular Music**” (pp. 12-75), with five sections on different song genres and musical instruments, and a glossary of secular music terms.

⁵ Among the new works referenced is Nicholas Tapp’s superb article “Hmong Religion” (1989), but his name is misspelled as Trapp.

“**Part II: Sacred Music**” (pp. 76-248) is the most original part of the book, centered on the life and work of a highly respected female shaman, Rhiav Lis (RPA for “Tria Lee”). The role of shaman was thrust upon Tria through illnesses, dreams, and numerous trance states, as is the usual path for such practitioners. This bears comparison with Dwight Conquergood’s 1989 ethnographic autobiography of a Hmong-American shaman, and its companion video, *Between Two Worlds* (1985).

A section on “**Hmong Shamanism**” (pp. 86-121) elucidates aspects of Hmong spirituality and cosmology. Hmong shamans are intermediaries who are fully conscious when they diagnose, prevent, and cure illnesses by retrieving a patient’s souls, which have wandered from the human body to the spirit world. These traits are similar to Siberian and Mongolian shamanic customs, leading scholars to postulate Hmong origin in these regions. It is not clear whether such statements are entirely based on interviews with Hmong individuals, listed among the primary sources (“**References**” p. 266), but they are largely consistent with published sources on White Hmong shamanism.

Sections on “**The Pantheon of Spirits**” (pp. 122-131), “**Souls and Shadows**” (pp. 132-147), “**Hmong Cosmology**” (pp. 148-157), “**The Sacred in the Human World**” (pp. 158-167) and “**Healing Ceremony of Cas Koos**” (pp. 168-185) prepare the reader to understand the contexts and ramifications of the video content, and vice-versa.

Vorreiter provides deeply informed written interpretations of the shaman’s actions in the healing ritual video (“Healing Ceremony of Cas Khoos” p. 168-185). Her explanations reference consecutively by number many of the 591 verses of Shaman Rhia’s verbal chant (“**Hu Plig and Ua Neeg Lyrics - Hmong/English**,” pp. 186-247). Her thrilling descriptions depict the dramatic horseback ride illustrated with the shaman’s neighing sounds “*prbbb*” as the shaman chases spirits throughout the heavens, rallying cavalry troops of “9 and 8” batallions. Thus, the shaman’s healing ritual revives and relives ancient memories from Hmong historical times in the far northern regions of Asia.

A portrait of each participant clarifies the “*dramatis personae*” and a list of all “**Spirits, Souls, and Humans**” is noted according to verse numbers (p. 171). By presenting the visual actions and oral texts as a unified experience from an informed outsider’s viewpoint, Vorreiter uses an ethnographic methodology that successfully communicates the inner cultural meanings and dramatic thrust of the shaman’s work.

After the shaman reads the chicken’s divination bones (p. 184), the author describes a “**Consultation**” in which the shaman advises the young parents to avoid arguments and scolding the child, which had caused the distressed baby boy’s souls to wander.

The book includes complete RPA transcriptions of the song performances and the shaman’s ritual, with English translations and insightful commentary on the performances and ritual, as well as superb color photographs, meticulously identified in the captions. The book and DVD are closely related, but since the DVD has no cue points or chapter markers, it is difficult to cue scenes in the DVD. It would be helpful to provide these features in a later edition of the DVD, so

that book excerpts can be illustrated precisely in the DVD, and vice-versa. Meanwhile, I am providing cue points here to make connecting spots easier to locate.

THE DVD. The Menu Page of the eponymous DVD, *Hmong Songs of Memory*, shows a smiling Hmong man standing in a corn and squash garden, holding a *qeej/geng* curving bamboo mouth organ, with his son in a baby-carrier peeping over his shoulder. (Their names and location are provided in the book, p. 57.) Indigenous Lao birds are heard chirping while the Menu is displayed. The viewer is given the choices of “**Film -Yees Duab, English or Hmoob**” and “**Ballad – Kwv Txhiaj, English or Hmoob.**” The term “Yees Duab” is not included in the book’s glossary, but is a neologism meaning “camera,” “image” or “video” and refers to the second part of the DVD, a shamanic healing ritual, edited with subtitles to 78 minutes.⁶

“**Ballad – Kwv Txhiaj**” (“sung poetry, 31 minutes) refers to the first video on the DVD, and includes instrumental renditions of sung poetry. Thus, the titles on the Index Page (aka Menu page) are reversed, as the “**Film Yees Duab**” actually comes second on the DVD, while the “**Ballad – Kwv Txhiaj**” comes first. This could be confusing to viewers and could be changed in a later edition. Also, by having chapter markers, the viewer could cue directly to the Shaman’s ritual, rather than scanning forward until 31:00 is reached.

The first video, “Ballad – Kwv Txhiaj” (@0:00) contains much more than vocal ballads, but rightfully includes courtship songs and various instrumental genres of *kwv txhiaj*, which are typically melodic representations of *kwv txhiaj* sung poetry. The English version of the DVD has English intertitles. This review concerns only the English version.

At the beginning of the DVD, a black screen appears, under which we hear the distinctive bird sounds of Laos again, and over which emerges an intertitle expressing a legendary Hmong belief in the supernatural powers of music:

“Hmong legends imply that music is a miracle,
capable of making a waterfall dry, birds numb,
and quenching a deer’s thirst.”

A man’s singing voice is then layered over the bird sounds, suggesting unity with nature. Into the black screen emerges the singing man’s image as he stands in a bamboo grove, singing poetry to an aloof woman beside him, both wearing distinctive traditional White Hmong clothing. He sings a traditional love song, *kwv txhiaj plees*, to his partner, who does not look at him. In both Hmong and English versions, there are no subtitles for the lyrics, causing us all to be mystified, as even Hmong listeners have trouble understanding this ancient poetry, especially as poetry is sung in melodies that do not match word tones. Our curiosities are soon satisfied @1:57, after the man continues to sing untranslated words under the audio-visual historical introduction.

⁶Older published Hmong dictionaries do not include the word, but “*yees duab*” can be found at <https://www.wordhippo.com/what-is/the-meaning-of/hmong-word-c0123e5374aa9034c0498d56152fdcf4f6a33804.html>. Accessed 27 September 2018.

The visuals gently change to sunset over vast landscapes of Lao mountains and clouds, above a pristine valley of terraced rice paddies and a meandering river. Subtitles inform us that

“Age-old songs and stories reveal that Hmong ancestors
once lived in a land of icy terrain and harsh winters.
Over the millennia, they moved southwards
along the mountains and great rivers of Asia,
settling in northeast China.”

As a woman feeds a pen of hogs outside a thatched home, subtitles recount the Hmong people’s centuries of migrations: from far north of China in Siberia and Mongolia along the Yellow River into central China, they were gradually forced further south by Han Chinese to Guizhou, Szechuan, and Yunnan, and eventually across the borders into Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. A beautifully hand-painted topographical map of China, mainland Southeast Asia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and eastern India, as well as the surrounding seas, shows the rivers and mountain ranges that define the region, and illustrates the geographical spread of Hmong migrations.

After zooming in closer to Laos on the map, the picture cuts to the interior of a Lao Hmong home, where a family tends a fire to light incense for an altar, as a ritual is about to begin.

The singing Hmong man and his silent partner then reappear in the bamboo grove. He completes singing the verse he had begun at the start of the *Ballad-Kwv Txhiaj* video, smiles at the camera, and then speaks a few words a bit awkwardly to his blushing partner, as English subtitles translate his Hmong spoken words @ 1:57:

“So very happy today to meet you over here, eh.”

His partner looks away demurely, as he resumes speaking:

“Let’s sing *kwv txhiaj*.
Very pleased we will love each other
Even more in the future, dearest one, eh.”

He smiles at her, and then grins broadly at the camera, as the woman smiles shyly, with lips closed and eyes lowered, and he laughs at the camera. Except for this one enactment of the intimacy and playfulness of courtship singing, the entire DVD is quite natural, without self-consciousness or embarrassment.

By perusing the book’s “*Kwv Txhiaj – Ballad*” chapter, we find a production shot that identifies the singer: Naw Tseng Lee (Nom Txheej Lis) and his silent partner Tseu Xiong (Tswb Xyooj), White Hmong villagers recorded in Ban Ka Lae, Chiengrai, (p. 22), but his *kwv txhiaj* song lyrics do not seem to be included in the book.

After this two-minute series of rich visual and aural impressions, connected via minimal subtitles and solo singing, the scenes change to glimpses of daily and seasonal chores in a Hmong household, many with natural sounds and traditional Hmong music. Poetic couplets borrowed from Hmong sung poetry and wise proverbs are discreetly subtitled over brief rustic scenes, highlighting the importance of parallel symmetry in Hmong aesthetics, poetry and thought:

“Raise children to fill the house.
Raise animals to fill the stable.”

The scenes are not explained with words, which maintains the viewer’s experience of wonder. Women bend to pluck leaves in a bounteous garden, feed and call chickens while carrying a grandchild on the back, feed and call hogs, and saw through hard gourds to create vessels. A man shoots a crossbow in the forest. Women pull dried hemp threads from a revolving frame to wind into skeins, spin threads from the skeins with a foot-treadle spinning wheel, weave it with the unique Hmong shuttle-cum-beater in a backstrap-and-treadle loom (book pp. 140-141), and create fine cotton appliqué textiles in large spiral patterns characteristic of Hmong design. A man works over an open fire in a home, as he pumps a log-bellows to forge a tubular punch knife, using an iron hammer to incise paper money offerings to the spirits, as subtitles advise

“Don’t be troubled, don’t be worried.
Don’t envy others in the village or the country.” (4:08-4:29).

A young man performs spiral martial arts movements while brandishing two daggers, in front of a home altar decorated with gold leaf, incised paper money, and other offerings to the spirits.

The picture fades to black, with the sound of the plaintive *raj nplaim* (free reed pipe), and a sunset or sunrise emerges above mountains, cross-fading into a full moon, with subtitles telling us

“One generation passes to the next generation.”

Just as the sun and moon pass like generations in a community, the visuals and proverb signal that we have passed into another phase of the film.

The full moon then crossfades into the round face of a Hmong baby, over mysterious melodies of a buzzing *raj nplaim* free-reed pipe, and the chirping of birds. The camera then zooms out from close-up to reveal the child in its proud father’s arms, representing the next phase of the community, as the subtitle proclaims the process of transmission of knowledge across generations:

“One community leads the next community.”

As if in response, we see little boys giggle outside the house, and cut to the smiling face of a beautiful teenage Hmong girl wearing a gorgeous beaded and embroidered headdress, and holding a parasol as she tosses the courtship ball. A younger Striped Hmong girl embroiders outdoors, perhaps for her own courtship ball game, and smiles shyly at the camera. We continue to transit through the generations to a middle-aged couple smiling with contentment at the

camera, followed by an elderly couple in front of three altars, smiling and laughing at the camera. The man speaks in Hmong to the camera, as translated in the subtitles:

“Very grateful that you came to take photographs,
and it’s so wonderful.”

Next, a wizened grandmotherly face gazes directly into the camera lens. The series concludes with an elderly shaman who peers provocatively at the camera through his circular rattles -- the shaman’s divination “scissors” (*txhiab neej*)-- as if to ask, “What is coming in the future?” These artful editing techniques draw our minds more deeply into the subject of the film: cross-generational transmission of Hmong expressive culture.

After this evocative audio-visual and conceptual prelude, a series of scenes of vocal and instrumental music follows (@6:22). The first performance is sung by a man, the scene titled as **“Cycles-of-life instruments speak to Hmong men and women. Kwv Txhiaj Ballads”** @6:45.

By beginning with a solo vocal performance, the author implicitly recognizes the fact that virtually all Hmong instrumental music “speaks” poetic lyrics or verbal thoughts (Catlin 1986). This is one of very few examples where song lyrics do not appear onscreen, or in the book. The singer’s portrait is identified in the volume as “Ntxhw Zeb Haam, a Blue Hmong shaman... [who] sings many styles of *kwv txhiaj*” (p. 10).

A series of eight brief instrumental demonstrations follows @9:28, of which the most significant are the side-blown-flute *raj ntsaws* (# 4) and multiple free-reed pipes *qeej* (#8). While Hmong women don’t usually play musical instruments other than *ncas* and *nplooj*, they do sing *kwv txhiaj*, and their high-pitched, sweet falsetto speaking voices are sprinkled throughout the DVD’s soundscape.

1. *nkauj laus ncas*, “spike fiddle” (i.e. bowed lute) @7:02
2. *nplooj* “leaf” a banana leaf, played by a woman @7:27
3. *ncas* “mouth harp,” (i.e. guimbarde or jew’s harp) @7:58
4. *raj ntsaws* “side-blown flute” @8:34
5. *raj pum liv* “end-blown flute” fipple type @9:00
6. *raj lev les* “folk clarinet,” (i.e. single beating reed aerophone) @9:41
7. *raj nplaim* “free-reed pipe,” with a gourd resonator,
8. *raj qeej* “multiple free-reed pipes,” zooming in to a close-up of the fingers on the six pipes @10:42

The next DVD scene **“Ritual instruments speak to souls and spirits”** begins @11:05 with the pulsing click sounds of “Kuam divination horns” and a man’s voice chanting, as he holds a sacrificial chicken, and looks out the window at totem posts created to ward off evil spirits during New Year (page 158-159).

The elderly shamaness Tria Lee chants as she shakes the “Txhiab Neeb, Tswb Neeb: Shaman Scissors, Ring Rattles” while she is blindfolded to enable her vision of the spirit world @11:58.

The sound of a *nruas neeb* gong is heard while a woman is shown chanting a prayer before a candle-lit altar @12:10.

While facing a coffin, men stand and chant in unison, alongside a bronze gong being struck @12:30. They continue chanting as a drummer beats the funeral drum @12:42. A swaying *qeej* player weaves between the legs of the drum stand and under the drum, bowing and rising along with the *qeej*'s curved silvery pipes of aluminum, as the subtitles tell us

*Zaj Nkauj Su, Nruas Tuag, Kab Keej
Funeral Songs, Drum, Free-Reed Pipes.*

Cross-fading to black, a title informs us that the “**Secular Music**” scene is beginning, laid over a still photo of a man playing the *qeej* (identified in the book as shaman and singer Ntxhw Zeb Haam, p. 10) and the sound of the polyphonic *qeej* (@13:42). We do not know what words the solo *qeej* excerpt is “singing,” but presume from the titles it must be a secular verse for entertainment, such as at New Year, as explained in the book (p. 57-69), rather than a sacred item played by the *qeej* in the previous scene, during a funeral.

After fading out to black silence, the picture fades up to a still image of a face and embroidered headdress, titled with precision:

“Tria Lee, Singer, White Hmong, Ban Nam La,
Nam Tha District, Luang Nam Tha Province, Laos.
Film Location: White Hmong, Ban Samyua,
Nam Tha District, Luang Nam Tha Province, Laos.” (@13:50)

To the sounds of Hmong women and children talking and laughing, and jingling silver ornaments on their costumes, we are carried through a crossfade (@14:00) to Hmong girls in various colorful hand-embroidered costumes, in the village Ban Samyua, Laos. One girl adjusts another's costume, while Tria Lee's voice is heard singing *kvw txhiaj* recorded in her own village of Ban Nam La. Tria's tragic song is subtitled under the preening girls:

*Niam yai!
The pheasant has landed, appearing with long tailfeathers.*

In parallel with the girls, we cut to young men adjusting each other's brightly embroidered costumes, as the subtitles continue under Tria's song of longing:

*Niam yai!
The pheasant's feathers shine fully,
Have already become radiant.*

The boys walk through the forest to join the courtship ball game, where balls fly in both directions between joyful girls and boys, in contrast to the tragic poetry sung on the soundtrack:

*In this lifetime, I can't court this young man.
Niam yai!
I will miss you very much, young man,
From winter that extends to the third season, spring,
Young man.*

In sadness and longing, thus concludes the First Half (*Ib tsaws txwm I*) of the First Pair (*Ib txwm I*) of four pairs of verses, each couplet clearly numbered onscreen to correspond to the book's transcriptions of the two pairs of verses (p. 24-26). The *kvw txhiaj* video continues through the matching Pair II of verses, which refers to the *coucal* (cuckoo) and warblers as parallel to the earlier pheasant. The lyrics expand upon the painful emotion of lovers who are forbidden to marry in the present life, as the birds' songs become shouts in the poetry, to express the dismayed woman's feelings. She sings that it is wrong to break branches and flowers and leaves to sit on, and talk about their shared heartache and "aching livers", so they must part with their love unrequited, at least in this lifetime (p. 26-29). The scene ends @17:02, but the audio for the subsequent verse pairs II and IV is not accessible on any DVD available to this reviewer, although the book states "To hear the ballad in its entirety... select the "Kwv Txhiaj" audio track in the film's options menu." (p. 23). Perhaps this will be addressed in a future version of the DVD. In any case, it is appropriate to add the vocal track to the scene, as normally someone would be singing, whether one or more soloist among the ball players, or someone standing with them.

Tria Lee's portrait playing her *ncas*, with her full biographical information comes after cross-fading to black @17:02, with subtitles giving her full biographical information and "Ncas Mouth Harp." She plays more tragic *kvw txhiaj* poetry of a woman singing of impossible love to her young man that begins "Bae Au, Laub Laub, Oh this misshapen vagina!" Beautiful mountains and scenes of family life give visuals over the translated poetry. The lyrics again are numbered, and printed in both languages on pp. 37-39.

Next follows a three-minute demonstration of making and playing the *Raj Ntsaws*: Side-blown Flute by White Hmong Nyia Houa Lee (#4 @ 19:26-22:40). He counts and cuts finger-holes into a new bamboo *raj ntsaws* side-blown flute, at a home fire. He burns the holes' edges with a red-hot poker, tests the flute, and performs 20 verses of a *kvw txhiaj plees* love song, translated and numbered onscreen, heard appropriately over visuals of a community marriage proposal and wedding ritual.

A six-minute *qeej* demonstration (@24:18-30:52) shows thirteen different movements, by name and number. The English name and number for each movement is given in subtitles, so that RPA names can be consulted in the book (p. 69).

The movements while playing the *qeej* are very nicely demonstrated by men and boys on the edge of a cliff, as is the custom. The author refrains from musical analysis despite her strong background as a musician.⁷

These local White Hmong demonstrations use a single drone pipe and reed, and differ from the *qeej* practices of other Hmong communities, especially those for whom which the shortest pipe alternates between two notes, for which one reed sounds when the player inhales, and the other reed when he exhales.⁸

The 30-minute *kvv txhiaj* video ends on the note of lovers' discord due to the pain of prohibited love, but with the hope of union in a future life. It thus logically leads to the second video "Yees Duab", in which conjugal dissonance is found to be a contributing factor in a baby boy's illness.

The second video, "Yees Duab" ("video") (@ 30:56) is a beautifully shot ethnographic documentary of a shaman's healing ritual, expertly edited down from many hours to 43:00 minutes. When each new verse or spoken passage begins, a verse number appears along with translations, so that the verses can be found in the book.

The "Glossary Sacred Hmong Music" (p. 248-260) in the book functions as a convenient concordance to the shaman's oral text.

In the book, the video is divided into seven scenes ("Order of Events, noted by verse numbers" p. 172) which help to distinguish the scenes in the video, beginning with the

- I. Soul-Calling Ritual (@30:56)
- II. Instructing Sacrificial Chickens (@32:15)
- III. Offerings to Spirits (@35:28), and
- IV. Summoning Spirits, divination horns successfully point toward each other (@37:57).

After preparations with family members, shaman Tria's face is covered with a black cloth, to make the world of spirits and souls visible to her. She then mounts her bench and begins to bounce as if on horseback.

- V. Soul-Retrieval Ceremony. This scene is further subdivided into four parts as she
 - 1) summons helper spirits (@38:05)
 - 2) searches for the boy's souls in the first level of the sky spirit world (@42:10),
 - 3) exchanges souls upon finding the boy's souls in a pigpen in the middle level of the sky spirit world (@48:29), and
 - 4) concludes Ua Neej in the human world, dismounting her steed (@1:04:02).

⁷ The music of the *qeej* is well-described by Falk as "a complex web of drones, melody, rhythm and polyphony" (2013).

⁸ Chia Cheu Kue, Blue Hmong-American *qeej* master, demonstrated how the short tube of his *qeej* plays two notes, changing pitch while inhaling and exhaling. This can be called an oscillating drone" as the "drone" oscillates between two pitches. See Catlin, *Hmong Musicians in America* DVD (1997b) @24:07.

VI. Soul-Calling Ritual @1:04:42

(n.b. Typo in text calls this IV rather than VI, p. 183.)

Shaman Tria implores spirits to return through the house entry door.

VII. Reading Chicken Bones and Consultation @1:04:42

The video ends as Shaman Tria examines the cooked chicken, especially the tongue bones and claws, speaking her understanding of the results of the ritual:

“Mother, father, you must not scold anymore...The spirits are still very sad, very upset.”

The boy’s mother confesses offscreen:

“It’s not about that money. The problem is with me....
It’s about the old problems that (my husband) caused.”

The video fades to black, followed by final titles @1:09:00

“Hmong Songs of Memory” and other stills with a man’s *kwv txhiaj* heard on the soundtrack.

(...)

Ten years later.

*Cas Khoos had grown into a thriving young boy –
Healthy, happy, and adored by all.*

*It remains to be seen if ancestor spirits
Will visit Cas Khoos Yaj in his dreams, calling him
To the life of shamanism in the footsteps of
His grandmother, Shaman Rhiav Lis,
And countless generations of shamans before her.*

A still image appears of smiling Rhiav Lis and her beaming grandson Cas Khoos Yang.

“Ban Nam La, Luang Nam Tha Province, Laos. December 2015”
(ten years after the ritual).

film credits over *kwv txhiaj* @1:10:42

End: 1:14:15

In “The Future of Hmong Traditions” (p. 185) The book concludes with the hope that

“...these archives of thought, sight, and sound...serve as a reminder...of the extraordinary cultural heritage the Hmong have developed and sustained since time immemorial.”

Collect and store in the center of the liver.

*Remember deeply in the center of the heart.
So Hmong roots of knowledge will not disappear.*

Yaj Ceeb Vaj (Yang Cheng Vang)

This publication provides meaningful and timely insight into the role of memory in maintaining cultural identity and traditional practices of the Hmong, in Laos and in the diaspora. The videos and book deserve multiple viewings and readings, but can also be used in sections for lectures or classroom teaching, with the cue points provided in this viewer's guide. Both videos are suitable for public presentations. This masterful opus will serve not only to evoke the sweet pain of nostalgia for Hmong people, but will validate Hmong identity and history, as well as instilling pride in the human spirit, for all humanity.

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Author Bio

Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy (B.A. Vassar College 1970; M.M. Yale University 1972; Ph.D. Brown University 1980), is a visiting faculty member in the Department of Ethnomusicology at UCLA, where she teaches courses on the classical and folk musics of South and Southeast Asians and Asian-Americans, field methodology, ethnographic film, music and the sacred, and applied and public sector ethnomusicology. Amy's research, writing, teaching, curating, and multi-media publications often have an applied focus aimed at community development of minority

Review and Guide to *Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music. Essays, Images, and Film* by Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 19(2)(2018): 1-15.

traditions, especially in diasporic settings. Her applied research includes projects with Cambodian-American and Hmong-American refugees, and with Sidi African-Indians of India.

Her video documentaries include

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