

Hmong Resettlement in French Guiana

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Abstract

Within the Hmong refugee diaspora, the Hmong of French Guiana are fairly unique in that many have achieved economic autonomy through market farming while also residing in rural, ethnically homogeneous villages that help to preserve cultural and linguistic traditions. This article explores some observations made over a three-month period in 2001 in French Guiana regarding the adjustment of Hmong villagers since first being resettled in 1977. Results from formal questionnaires conducted with local villagers (n = 180) revealed that more Hmong in French Guiana had lower rates of high blood pressure, were more satisfied with where they lived, and had less desire to return to Laos compared to a sample of Hmong in the United States (n = 108).

Introduction

Following the formal cessation of the Secret War in Laos in 1975, the Hmong diaspora, once exclusive to Asia (China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam), was extended to Australia, Europe (France and Germany), North America (Canada and the United States) and South America (Argentina and French Guiana) (Conoir, 1984; Martin, 1992; Cooper, 1998; Tou Yang, 2003; Kou Yang, 2003). While the majority of Hmong outside of Asia have their roots in Laos and reside in the U.S., other communities may demonstrate the wide array of experiences that exist within the Hmong diaspora. French Guiana, in particular, provides an interesting contrast to Hmong life in the United States. It has been described as one of the more unlikely places that Hmong refugees might resettle (Martin, 1992), and indeed, many Hmong in the United States are unaware of the fact there are Hmong in tropical South America.¹ The resettlement conditions and disparities between the Hmong experiences in rural, agricultural villages in tropical French Guiana and urban settings in the U.S. is the primary focus of this article.

¹ Southeast Asian refugees have resettled in other unlikely places, albeit in small numbers, including the Ivory Coast, Martinique, New Caledonia, Bangladesh, Argentina, Iceland, Luxembourg, Senegal, and Iran (Robinson, 1998, p. 127).

Methods

The current study was part of a project designed to explore whether Hmong life in French Guiana is less stressful than in the United States. Accompanied by a research assistant/ interpreter, Ms. KaLy Yang, we resided in Hmong villages in French Guiana from April to June of 2001, interviewing and talking to various people in the villages of Cacao, Javouhey, and Regina. We recruited 180 adult volunteers aged 22-44 to participate in this study, all of whom were given an oral questionnaire and measured for blood pressure with an Omron automatic monitor (model: HEM-711). Questionnaires pertained to where the person was born, how long they lived in France, the U.S., and/or French Guiana, whether they wished to return to Laos to live, and whether they were happy where they currently lived. In 2002, with the help of Mr. Sing Yang, the same procedure was applied to 108 adult volunteers aged 18-51 from Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Minnesota to serve as a comparison.

The current article describes the historical context of how Hmong came to live in French Guiana, followed by a description of individual Hmong villages and adaptations to living there. Interspersed are the results of the current study, including how long people have lived there, where people were born, the results of the life satisfaction and blood pressure data, as well as individuals' comments, which will be kept anonymous in order to protect identities. Statistical analyses were conducted with SPSS 11.0, and included Chi-square and t-tests to determine if there were significant differences between Hmong in the U.S. and French Guiana. Prior to conducting the research for this study, approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Research Review Committee at the State University of New York at Binghamton.

French Guiana

French Guiana (or "Guyane" to French speakers) is located on the northeast coast of South America and is bordered by Suriname to the west, across the Maroni river, and by Brazil to the south and east, across the Oyapock river. Since 1946, its political status, like Guadeloupe and Martinique, has been an Overseas Department of France (*département d'outre-mer*), essentially a legal extension of mainland France (South American Handbook, 2000). However, a sizeable segment of the local population has

expressed a desire for greater autonomy, leading to pro-independence demonstrations and rioting in the streets of the capital city, Cayenne (population 60,000) in 1996-7 and late 2000.

Historically, French attempts to economically exploit French Guiana were relatively unsuccessful since the territory was colonized in the early seventeenth century. This was due to various reasons, including the priority given to the Caribbean islands, the relatively low number of imported African slaves, the poor trade winds and currents, the lack of a viable harbor, and the prevalence of malarial mosquitoes (Redfield, 2000: 31-2).² Consequently, the population of French Guiana remained small, with only 29,506 people in 1946 in a territory roughly the size of Maine (Redfield, 2000: 36).

After a series of experiments in French Guiana, including the penal colonies on the *Iles du Salut* (Islands of Salvation) and St. Laurent du Maroni from 1852 to 1946, the population has increased since then, with a successful reduction of infectious diseases, construction of the *Centre Spatial Guyanais* (Guiana Space Center) at Kourou in the mid-1960s, and an influx of large numbers of economic migrants from Haiti, Brazil, and Europe, and refugees from Suriname. Today, most of French Guiana's population of 175,000 live along a flat 15- 40 kilometer strip of land along the coast, while the hilly, tropical rainforest interior remains sparsely populated. The ethnic composition of the population is comprised, roughly, of Créoles (36%), Haitians (26%), Europeans (10%, mostly French), Brazilians (8%), Surinamese (4%), Amerindians (4%, Galibis, Wayampis-Oyampis, Wayanas, Palikours, Arawak, and Emerillons), Hong Kong Chinese (3%), British Guyanese (2.5%), Hmong and Laotian refugees (1.5%), and "bush Negroes" (1%) (South American Handbook, 2000). The majority of Europeans, known as "Metropolitans," live in Cayenne and Kourou, and most are fairly recent migrants, with few descended from the European settlers of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries (Redfield, 2000: 43).

Economically, French Guiana remains dependent on commercial imports, as well as annual subsidies from France for social services and infrastructure totaling \$1.2 billion (South American Handbook, 2000). The focal point of French and European investment is the Space Center, with over

² In fact, the *Iles du Salut*, just off the coast from the modern city of Kourou, got their names from French colonists fleeing epidemics on the mainland (Redfield, 2000: 33).

20,000 European employees, and it is from here that half of the world's commercial satellites have been launched (South American Handbook, 2000). The Space Center is also the biggest lure for tourists in French Guiana, with other attractions being ecotourism, the *Iles du Salut*, and Hmong villages (Géraud, 2002). However, tourism is not a major part of the economy, as the outflow from the rivers of the rain forest muddy the oceans near the coast, deterring European beach-goers. Other important parts of the economy include exporting agriculture (sugar cane, rice, maize, and bananas), fishing (shrimp), and timber, though none of these are very prolific industries (South American Handbook, 2000).

The Hmong of French Guiana

In 1975, Father Yves Bertrais, a French missionary who had contact with the Hmong in Laos since 1948, suggested that Hmong in Thai refugee camps be allowed to settle in French Guiana (Martin, 1992). To the Hmong, the idea made sense because they were struggling in the camps, and they had received word that those who resettled in France and the United States were having difficulty adjusting to urban life there. In French Guiana, life would be more similar to conditions in Laos, with the potential for self-sufficiency and an opportunity to farm. The French government agreed to Father Bertrais' suggestion, giving the Hmong two years to achieve self-sufficiency (Martin, 1992).

In that time, the *Comité Nationale d'Entraide* (Committee of National Mutual Aid) provided finances to cover installation of water, gas, and electricity infrastructure for the Hmong in Cacao (Géraud, 1997). Cacao was operated as a metropolitan rescue center, with daily compensation of 40 francs per person. The Hmong pooled these resources together to buy agricultural equipment in the hopes of one day achieving self-sufficiency and independence. The approximately 2,100 Hmong of French Guiana now live in rural, farming communities where they reside largely among themselves in villages that are 90-100% Hmong. Javouhey (1,100 residents) is the largest of the Hmong villages, followed by Cacao (900), Regina (80), Saül (40),

and Iracabou (40) (**Figure 1**). The majority of families participate in market farming, selling their produce in the cities of Cayenne, St. Laurent du Maroni, and Kourou. Although there is large-scale rice agriculture in French Guiana, fruits and vegetables are more difficult to grow, and are grown more for domestic



consumption, rather than for export. While they are just a fraction of the population, the Hmong of French Guiana produce an estimated 50 to 60% of the fruits and vegetables in the country (Géraud, 1997), though some claim the figure is closer to 90%.

As in the United States, Hmong settled in French Guiana in waves, with the earliest settlers coming directly from Thailand, and later ones coming via France. However, the political status of French Guiana as an Overseas Department facilitates easy access to France and creates complex migration patterns, with Hmong

often leaving for and returning from the “*Metropole*” for schooling or permanent residency. This has added another dimension of social space for the Hmong diaspora, and the community in French Guiana is at least partially aware of current events in the French (and American) Hmong community.³ Most Hmong

³Ties between Hmong in the U.S. and French Guiana are strong, with relatives visiting each other or communicating by phone. Guianese Hmong are aware of New Year celebrations, beauty pageants, and politics in the U.S. Some

adults have resided in French Guiana for two decades or more, with fewer people immigrating as time has passed (**Figure 2**). On the other hand, a number of adults have immigrated from France and Thailand within the last 15, 10, or even 5 years.

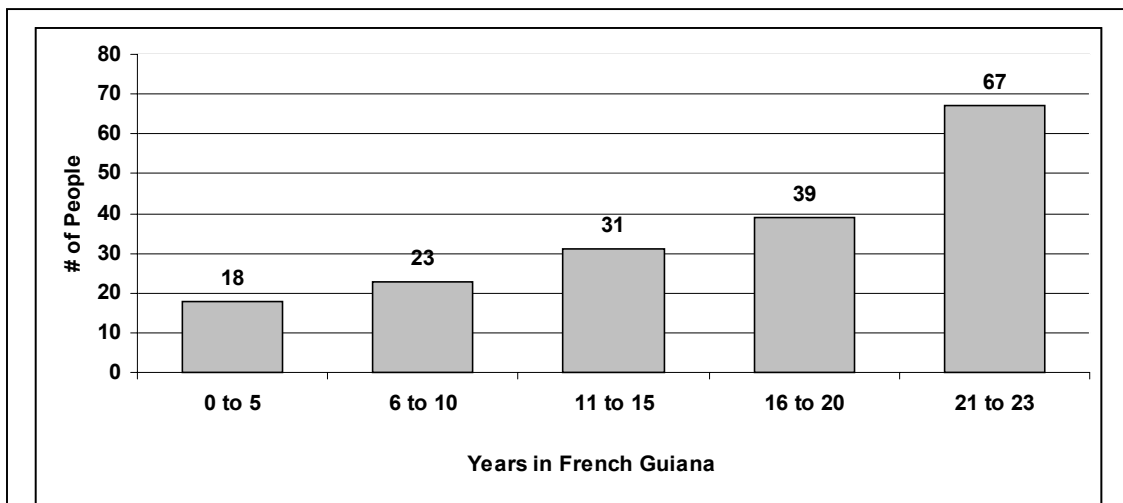


Figure 2 Frequency of number of years Hmong adults have lived in French Guiana.

Unlike the Hmong in the U.S., who tend to come from Xieng Khouang province, those in French Guiana have their origins in many different parts of Laos including Luang Prabang, Nam Tha, Sayaboury,

Table 1. Distribution of birthplaces in Laos and Thailand for French Guiana Hmong.

Province	Count	%
Luang Prabang	47	26.1%
Nam Tha	3	1.7%
Sam Neua	3	1.7%
Sayaboury	40	22.2%
Vientiane	16	8.9%
Xieng Khouang	60	33.3%
Thailand†	11	6.1%
Total	180	100.0%

† Includes 3 people born in Thai villages, not refugee camps

and Vientiane, (**Table 1**). In fact, two separate people referred to the Hmong in the United States as “Vang Pao Hmong,” indicating that they were aware of the fact that most Hmong-Americans have roots in the northeastern part of Laos.

Cacao

In November of 1977, the first group of 45 Hmong arrived directly from Thai refugee camps at Rochambeau-Cayenne airport, and in the middle of the night were escorted two hours south to the site of Cacao in army trucks (Martin, 1992; BBC News, 2004). Originally a small mining outpost, the French government resettled 506 Hmong volunteers in Cacao by the end of the year,

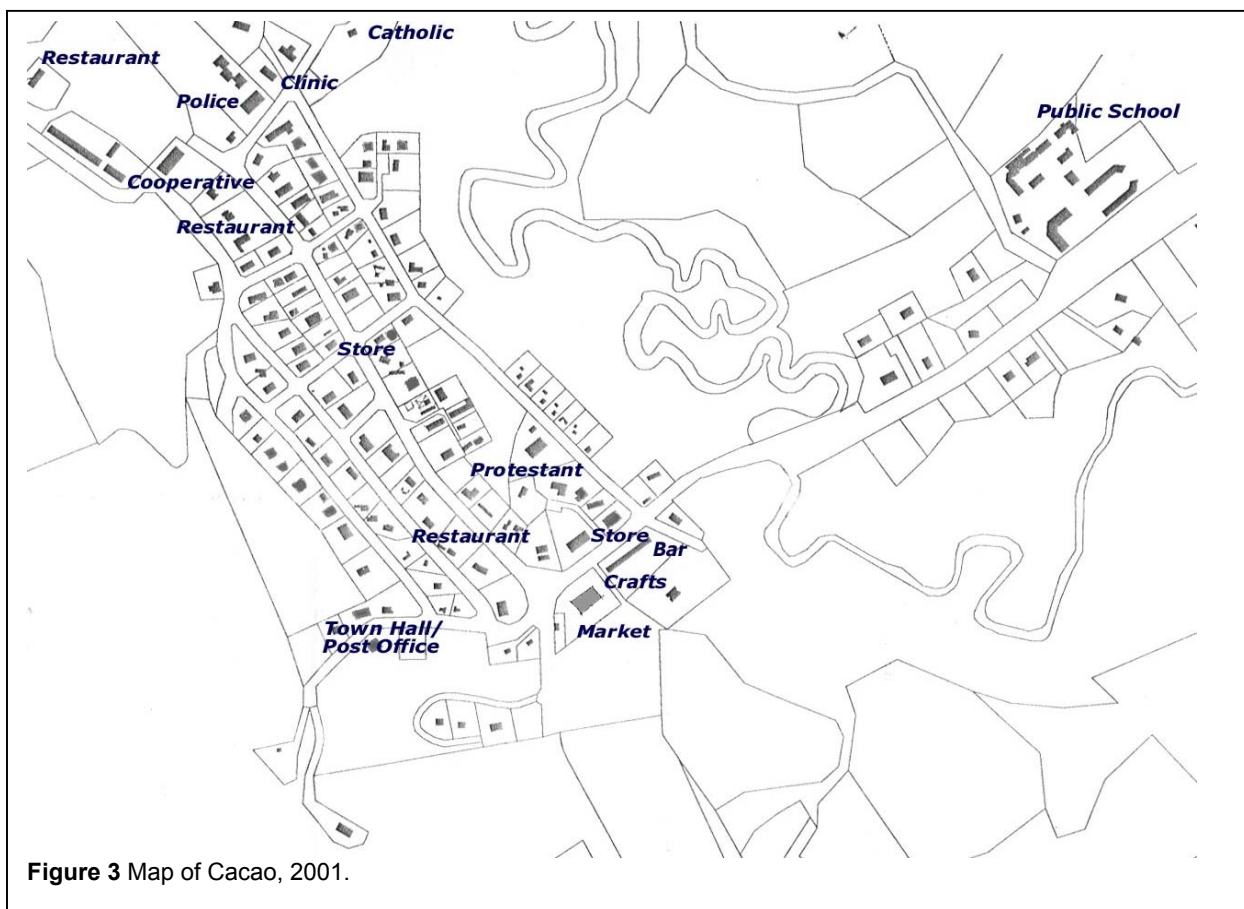
stated a desire for Vang Pao to buy the country from France to create an all-Hmong nation, though it is safe to say that this sentiment is not at all realistic.

where they worked for a month to clear land in order to build 100 houses, thus creating the first Hmong village in French Guiana (Martin, 1992; Géraud, 1997). Today, after more than two decades of population fluctuation, with many Hmong migrating to and from France, the population has stabilized at nearly double its original size, with approximately 900 Hmong residents and 50 other residents (Brazilians, French, Lao, and Chinese, although no Créoles). The village itself is situated in hilly rain forest, located 70 km south of Cayenne (about a 1.5 hour drive). The road diverging from Route 2 to Cacao was paved in 1990, easing access to the village, although flooding occasionally isolates the town. During the rainy season of 2000, the Comté river overflowed, wiping out the bridge to the village, leading Legionnaires to bring supplies to the villagers. A new bridge was being built in 2001.

The infrastructure of Cacao is fairly well-developed. Roads are made of packed earth, but are subject to wear from the rain, making potholes common. A village generator provides electricity to homes and public streetlights. Home cooking usually entails the use of propane gas tanks bought at one of two general stores (the older one owned by a Hmong family, and the newer owned by a Chinese family). In addition to the general stores, there are three restaurants serving Lao-style food, a small bar/ video rental store, and a crafts store that sells imports from Thailand (see **Figure 3**). Another restaurant owned by a Hmong family is found on the road to Cacao, overlooking the rain forest. The Sunday morning market, located in a large open-aired, roofed structure, is the main attraction in the village to French tourists. Many families supplement their income at the Sunday market, by selling crafts such as embroidered tapestries (*paj ntaub*) and mounted butterflies, as well as fruit and prepared foods (egg rolls, samosas, Laotian soup, etc.). A lesser tourist attraction is a small museum owned by a French family, dedicated to the insects of the rainforest and the region's history.

Cacao also has a bakery, open daily from 6:30 to 8:30 AM, which sells baguettes and croissants for breakfast. The post office doubles as a bank, handling money wiring services, while the town office shares the same building. A large warehouse-like structure, formerly used as a cooperative building in the early days of Cacao, is today used for community functions such as town meetings, weddings, and the New Year celebration. Cacao also has two churches, one Protestant and one Catholic, representing two of

the three major religious factions- the other being animists, who are numerous but have no single place of worship. Health services are provided at a small clinic staffed by one or two French nurses, though more serious health problems are taken to Cayenne. Education is provided by two schools, one a private, Catholic school (built in 1977), and one a public school (built in 1991). A small library exists by the *dégrad* (boat launch area), while education in Cacao is available only up to age 15 or 16 years, after which children can pursue their studies in Cayenne or France.



Other communal services are found as well. Cacao has a volunteer fire department and a sanitation service that employs four men who remove waste to a dump site north of the village. The local *gendarmerie* (police barracks) employs an armed force of 20 French men to keep the peace in the village. However, given the size of the barracks, another role appears to be to protect the Hmong, as they may be resented by other ethnic groups for what is perceived to be preferential treatment by the government.

Prior to the Hmong arrival in 1977, the local population held demonstrations protesting their resettlement, for fear of losing jobs (BBC News, 2004).

Individual homes are closely spaced together, with little land surrounding each piece of property. Instead, family fields, gardens, and fish ponds are found outside of town, thus preserving a sense of community, with neighboring houses 10 feet away from each other. Each house has running water and electricity, paid for by Department of Infrastructure subsidies (65%) and Hmong residents (35%) (Géraud, 1997). Older houses, built in the late 1970s, are made of plywood and sheet metal, resting on stilts. Newer homes are more secure, with two stories, screened or glass windows, and concrete floors.

Javouhey

Javouhey is the largest of the Hmong villages in French Guiana, with 1,100 people. In late 1979, four hundred inhabitants were settled here because the soil quality, vegetation density, and rainfall were all believed to better facilitate the growth of fruit crops than in Cacao (Géraud, 1997). Javouhey lies in the northwest corner of the country, within the flat strip of land along the coast, about 250 km from Cayenne and 35 km from the city of St. Laurent. The closest settlement is that of Acarouany (2 km), where a number of Surinamese refugees are housed. The population of Javouhey is nearly exclusively Hmong, although Surinamese from Acarouany are frequently found in town, as the men often work for the Hmong in the fields, and women often sell goods imported from Suriname. A few French also live in town, such as school teachers, but most teachers commute from another city, such as St. Laurent or Mana.

The layout of the village is similar in concept to that of Cacao, where the fields are located outside the community, allowing neighbors to socialize more frequently. There are three general stores in the village, each owned by a Hmong family, as well as a single gasoline pump, post office, health clinic, two churches (Protestant and Catholic), a bakery, grade school, town hall, marketplace, two restaurants (both open one day a week), soccer field, and basketball, volleyball and tennis courts. The village has running water and electricity, with streetlights at night. Unlike Cacao, there are no fish-ponds in Javouhey and houses are numbered and streets have names, which often describe a prominent feature such as *Rue*

du Couchant (sunset street), *Rue du Ravin* (ravine street) *Rue Du L'eglise* (church street), *Rue du Nord* (north street), and *Rue du Marché* (market street).

Most houses are made of wood and are on stilts; few windows have screens or glass. The northwest section of town contains newer homes made of pre-fabricated materials purchased cheaply from the government that have screen-less windows that are kept closed at night to keep out mosquitoes.

Regina

The Hmong settlement in Regina is actually not in Regina proper, but rather lies outside the French town. As the most recent Hmong settlement, it has a smaller population than Cacao or Javouhey (about 80 residents), and many of its residents have come recently from France, as opposed to being migrants from within French Guiana. Unlike Cacao and Javouhey, there is little sense of village life; there is no store, town hall, or gathering place. Instead, families live on homesteads, with houses surrounded by farmland and neighbors being hundreds of feet away. There is no running water; rather Hmong catch and utilize water from the rains and from streams, which is treated with an industrial filter. There is electricity, but no public lighting or streetlights.

Hmong Village Life in French Guiana

Farming is the backbone of Hmong society in French Guiana. Nearly every adult farms at least part of the time, enduring long and arduous labor. Even most of the local teachers and restaurant owners have a small plot of land to grow fruits and vegetables to sell or for their own consumption. A few families have chickens, cattle, and pigs, though the latter two are not common. The importance of farming can even be seen in the local school calendar. In Cacao, schools are closed on Wednesdays so children can help their parents prepare for the market, with classroom time made up on Saturday mornings.

Education, while valued by Hmong parents, nonetheless must compete with the demands of farming. Teens and young adults from Cacao often attend school in Cayenne or France, but in Javouhey they often remain in their village to help their families to farm. In general, it can be said that the Hmong in Cacao are more accepting of change than are those in Javouhey. In fact, the relative isolation of Javouhey and the opportunity to live solely with other Hmong was part of the appeal for many who

moved there. For example, one woman from Javouhey stated that she preferred the town to Cacao because of its relative remoteness and because fewer French people resided there.

Regardless of village, nearly all Hmong agree that the primary benefit of life in French Guiana is the freedom that comes with farm ownership. Through communication with relatives in France or the United States, villagers are aware of Hmong life in other parts of the world, and they are not fond of the concept of wage labor. In fact, "I am my own boss" is a common description of why life in French Guiana is considered superior, and Hmong migrants from France have come for that reason. This is important for a culture that revolved around farming in Laos, which then lost its autonomy as refugees. The ethnic homogeneity in French Guiana may also provide the greatest opportunity to retain cultural traditions within the Hmong refugee diaspora.

The emphasis on tradition is readily apparent in the villages. Older Hmong men are dressed in the traditional style, with baggy black pants and long sleeved black shirts. Women wear Lao style sarongs in town, though long pants and rubber boots are necessary in the fields to protect against bites from fire ants and poisonous snakes. Younger Hmong men usually wear Western style clothing, but on special occasions (weddings, political events, and the New Year), traditional Hmong clothing is worn. Some traditional marriage practices are still performed, such as getting married at an early age, polygyny, and the custom of bridewealth (*nqi tshoob*). In some cases, marriages are performed as early as 12 for girls and 13-14 for boys, though most marriages occur at later ages. Also, the potential legal complications associated with polygyny have reduced its attractiveness to those men who can afford more than one wife. However, the bridewealth has remained a component of nearly every marriage, although some time ago the community in French Guiana decided to set the bridewealth at a fixed amount to avoid the conflicts that often came with its negotiation. The money offered to the family of the bride is considered compensation because their daughter and her children will be considered a member of the groom's family and clan after marriage (Cooper, 1998). The bridewealth also helps preserve the integrity of the family and the goodwill between families and clans, by pressuring the groom to remain respectful to his father (who pays the bridewealth) and to his wife (who has the option to return to her family with the entire

bridewealth). Weddings are large events, with the entire village being invited, and people from other villages are often invited as well.

Traditional religious beliefs, with an emphasis on shamanism (*ua neeb*) and animism, have also been retained in French Guiana. Even many Hmong who have converted to Christianity still practice some traditional customs by requesting shamans to restore health by strengthening the soul (*hu plig*). This often requires the sacrifice of a pig or chicken and a fee for the shaman, followed by a gathering of relatives and a small banquet. Homes occasionally have a cross-hatch design made of bamboo nailed to their front doors, to indicate that a shaman was inside.

In spite of these traditions, it is obvious that life in French Guiana is very different from Laos. In Laos, families practiced subsistence, swidden agriculture, living in small villages of 100-200 people for 10 to 15 years before soil exhaustion forced them to relocate to another village. In French Guiana, settlement is permanent, and subsistence farming is not an option because cash is necessary to pay for electricity, taxes, gasoline, cars, phones, water, rice, meat, etc. Instead, market farming has translated into prosperity. Families grow a wide array of crops for their own consumption, but also sell them at the markets in Cayenne, Kourou, and St. Laurent, or, to a lesser extent, to tourists at the local Sunday morning markets in Javouhey and Cacao.

The “mayor” of Javouhey in 2001, Albert Xiong, estimated that 1% of the produce that is grown is actually consumed by the family, while 5-10% is discarded because it is of poor quality, and the rest is sold in the marketplace. A few families in Javouhey export limes and lemons through French middle-men to Martinique and Guadeloupe, because the importation of these crops from Suriname has created a glut in French Guiana. The fact that Javouhey lies on the flat coastal plain has allowed a few families to utilize tractors, but tractors are not capable of climbing the steep inclines of the hills of Cacao. All Hmong villages rely extensively on difficult manual labor for farming.

A typical day in the fields begins with a drive or walk to the fields at 7 AM, with families working until 11 AM. At that time, the family returns home, and the wife and daughters prepare lunch. After eating and a brief rest, the family returns to the fields to work perhaps until 6 PM, amounting to a 9

to 10-hour workday. If new fields are necessary, they are cleared in a slash-and-burn fashion, as was also custom in Laos. This is especially true in Cacao, where most fields are in the hills and removal of trees by tractor is impractical. The hills of Cacao also mandate that soil be tilled with garden tools or with a hand-operated, gasoline-powered tiller. Fruits such as pineapples or banana trees are planted in rows and collected in a traditional straw basket worn over the shoulders.

Other agricultural practices differ from those used in Laos. Chemical fertilizers are hand-scattered

Table 2 Crops grown by Hmong in Cacao and Javouhey

Crop	Cacao	Javouhey
Bananas	X	X
Cabbage	X	X
Cherries	X	X
Coconuts	X	X
Couboissou	X	
Cucumbers		X
Figs	X	
Garlic	X	X
Grapefruit		X
Green onions	X	
Guava		X
Jackfruit		X
Limes		X
Lemons		X
Lemon grass		X
Lettuce	X	
Mangoes		X
Melons		X
Mountain rice	X	
Oranges	X	X
Papaya	X	X
Parsley	X	
Passion fruits	X	X
Peppers	X	X
Pineapples	X	
Pomme d'amour		X
Rambutan	X	
Scallion	X	
Starfruit		X
Sugar cane	X	
Sweet potato		X
Taro	X	X
Watermelon		X

and pesticides are pump-sprayed from a plastic container worn like a backpack. Families also use irrigation for their fields, supplied by garden hoses or metal pipes, drawing water from a nearby aquifer. This is not necessary from November to July, when the heavy rains fall, but it provides insurance in the dry season. Crops include not only fruits and vegetables, but also mountain (not paddy) rice and tropical flowers (Table 2).

Because the population of French Guiana is small, the absolute demand for produce is low. Nonetheless, while the Hmong comprise approximately 1.5% of the population, they supply the country with the majority of its fruits and vegetables. Prior to the arrival of the Hmong there was little produce available, and most was imported from France or neighboring Suriname. Trade with neighboring

Brazil has been minimal, but in 2001 there was an on-going construction project to build a paved road to the Brazilian border. Some Hmong voiced concern that the road could have negative consequences for them, with the inevitable importation of cheaper Brazilian produce.

For now, families work hard in the fields and transport produce to market by truck. When Cacao was first settled, a single truck was shared among families, while in Javouhey one man rode a bicycle, packed with fruits and vegetables, the 35 km to the city of St. Laurent (Martin, 1992). The profits were used to buy scooters and eventually pickup trucks, which nearly every family owns today. On a good day, a single family can earn up to 4,000 to 7,000 French francs (US \$600-1,000) selling a truckload of produce in Cayenne.⁴ However, a family may go to market only one day per week, sometimes two, because the farmer's market in Cayenne is only open 4 days a week, and space is limited. In the current system, 3 to 4 families share a station at the market, alternating days when they can sell. It seems that this system has worked itself out well, and inter-family conflicts have been kept to a minimum. Families who wish to sell their produce in the cities must either purchase a permit from the police on the day they go to the market in St. Laurent, or pay a monthly fee to rent a space in Cayenne.

The markets in Saint Laurent and Kourou are not quite as large, and families from Javouhey will often make the 3-hour journey to Cayenne for the chance to earn greater profits. The markets open to the general public at 6 AM, but restaurant owners arrive earlier to buy wholesale. In order to arrive on time in Cayenne, families from Javouhey leave their homes at 11:00 PM the previous day to ensure there will be enough time to unload the truck and set up their station. Families from Cacao leave at 2 or 3 AM. Not all families have the same level of production. Larger families can grow more than smaller ones and those who arrived in 1977 tend to have more land than do newcomers, and are therefore able to grow and sell more, translating into higher profits.

Is It "Modern"?

In spite of the integration of trucks, motorized soil tillers, tractors, pesticides, and fertilizers into farming, Géraud (1997) emphasizes that there are many aspects of Hmong agriculture that prevent their economy from being classified as fully "modern."⁵ First, there is little conscious effort to maximize profit

⁴ As an Overseas Department, French Guiana is a part of the European Union, and was in the middle of making the monetary transition from the Franc to the Euro during our visit.

⁵ It is important to note that the concept of "modernity" has been challenged by many. For example, Appadurai (1996) noted that there is no single defining moment or transition between past and present or tradition and

by increasing production, as there is little incentive, given the small population and low absolute demand for produce in French Guiana. Instead, profits from farming are hoarded rather than invested into increasing crop yields, and while many families deposit money in banks in the cities, this is mostly for security rather than for accumulating interest. Second, there is little coordination among families to reduce costs associated with farming. Each family is an autonomous unit, taking their produce to market in their own truck, when it would be more efficient to use fewer trucks and share fuel costs. Third, there is overlap between what families sell in the market, increasing the likelihood of a market glut, thereby wasting food and labor. Part of the reason for this is that food is not only sold, but is also consumed by the family; therefore families grow what they want to eat and then sell the same crop in the markets. Fourth, there is no competition between families to sell foods at lower prices. In talking to people in Cacao and Javouhey, we were told that there is no deliberate collusion in order to raise prices, which are generally considered reasonable, but there is an effort to minimize competition between neighbors. In the beginning there were inter family conflicts, but a system has sorted itself out. Finally, Hmong refuse to hire other Hmong to work for them, preferring instead to hire Brazilians in Cacao or Surinamese in Javouhey. This is because Hmong view wage earning as less fulfilling than farming, and those few who are unable to start their own farm prefer to find another economic niche, usually working in the cities.

The primary purpose of these things seems to be to reduce tensions among villagers. This is not to say that tensions do not exist, but the fact is that most Hmong are content with the way things are; they have a comfortable living, their own land, neighbors they know and are friendly with, and (most importantly) the freedom to make their own decisions. There is little incentive to change things. A handful of Hmong try to “get ahead” by owning their own restaurants or exporting fruits, but farming is

modernity, while Haviland (2000) suggested that ‘modernization’ is comprised of at least four overlapping but independent processes which may arise in any order in a population, including: technological development, agricultural development, industrialization, and urbanization. Finally, the concept is also problematic in that it has been used as a Western standard of progress. For example, Fabian (1983) refers to the manner in which the West historically has been guilty of “denying coevalness” to other cultures by describing them in a manner which makes them seem trapped in the past, as opposed to living contemporarily with the person or society describing them. Here, Géraud uses the term simply to describe the degree to which Guianese Hmong agriculture is profit-oriented.

more than just a way to make a living; it is a way to maintain the autonomy of the family while retaining tradition and identity.

Is It Paradise?

In our interviews, we came across a married woman in Javouhey who was in her early 20's. When we asked her whether or not she enjoyed life in French Guiana, she replied, "Of course, look around you. This is paradise!" Certainly, it is fairly easy to get that impression, with Hmong families being self-sufficient, living in relative affluence in terms of food and, to some extent, material goods. Primary education is available. People know all their neighbors, the overwhelming majority of whom are Hmong. Crime is low, and youth is carefree. Infectious diseases are under relative control, all the while being surrounded by the beautiful scenery of the tropical rainforest. However, as is the case everywhere, there are problems with life in French Guiana.

Overall, life is comfortable for the Hmong in French Guiana. Materially, most Hmong are well-endowed, especially in comparison to the rest of French Guiana. This is not true of everyone, of course; some families and individuals do struggle financially and live quite modestly. Many homes have televisions, VCRs, telephones, refrigerators, and sideboard freezers. A small number of families even have satellite dishes for better television reception, computers with connections to the internet, and home video game systems. The automobile of choice is the pickup truck, the most popular model being the Toyota Dyna. Other common cars include Peugots, Citroëns, Renaults, Opels, and Audis.

Hmong health in French Guiana also appears to be good, though mosquito-borne illnesses have not been eradicated completely, and minor infections are common. Upon arriving in Cacao, some Hmong males in their 70s told us that when the Hmong first arrived in French Guiana, there were thirteen elders, nine of whom returned to France and had since passed away, while the four who remained behind were still alive and active. This, they said, proved how healthy life was in French Guiana. It is true that activity levels for adults and children are necessarily high due to farming, and this may help reduce some of the chronic diseases that accompany the sedentism and high calorie, high fat diets found in Western countries. A French physician at the clinic in Javouhey estimated that there were just a few cases each of

hypertension, gout, and diabetes in the village. He also mentioned that infection was rare, but included hepatitis B. Other infections include malaria, which is endemic in French Guiana with 100-300 cases/year, and dengue fever. In fact, in 2003 French Guiana had the highest incidence of dengue fever in the Western Hemisphere at 1,146.7 cases per 100,000 people (Pan American Health Organization, 2003). One fatal case of malaria occurred in Cacao in June 2001, while dengue is also found in Cacao. Tuppin et al. (1995) found that no Hmong in French Guiana (n = 64) in 1993 were seropositive for HTLV-I (a retrovirus spread primarily via sexual transmission), in contrast to 6.3% for the Haitian ethnic group. However, despite relatively low rates of serious infections, Hmong villages are fairly remote, and decent medical care is at least an hour and a half away in Cacao and a half hour away in Javouhey.

Given the diverse amount of foods grown by the Hmong in French Guiana, the diet is very healthy. Rice is not usually grown but purchased, and is the staple of every meal. At Cacao's inception, when the Hmong were supported financially by the Committee of National Mutual Aid, rice was grown locally, sent to the village cooperative, and distributed among the villagers. Between 1984 and 1986, the population of Cacao began to expand, primarily through a high birth rate, and Cacao's population decided to abandon the cooperative in favor of market farming at the family level (Géraud, 1997). At that point, rice production became unproductive and unprofitable because it required coordinated effort. Families emphasized growing fruits and vegetables because they could be sold more readily in the cities. Rice could be bought in the cities or at one of the local stores instead. Purchased meats (chicken, pork, beef) are also eaten frequently, though fresh meat is eaten at special occasions (weddings, funerals, *hu plig*, etc.). Vegetables and fruits are also frequently eaten, obviously, given their abundance.

In spite of a generally healthy and usually traditional diet, foods high in simple sugars and fat have become available through the local general stores in Cacao or Javouhey. Soda, ice cream, candy, potato chips, juices, ice tea, and alcohol are some of the foods found in the villages, though they are consumed more often by children than adults. Still, given the heavy rainfall in French Guiana, the fruits (and spicy papaya salad) are high quality and provide stiff competition for sweets in the diet, even for children. Adults also consume soda and alcohol, but mostly during special occasions. Baguettes and

croissants are commonly eaten for breakfast, often accompanied by coffee. Vegetable oils are used for cooking, occasionally for deep-fried foods, such as *frites* (French fried potatoes), fried taro, and fried bananas. Water for drinking and cooking comes from both the tap and from purchased bottled water, although the latter is more common.

Social life primarily revolves around interacting with neighbors and relatives through visits and telephone conversations, though social activities are most dynamic on Sundays. Many Hmong attend church services on Sundays, either Protestant or Catholic, but the primary sites for socializing are the Sunday markets in Cacao and Javouhey, where people eat, talk, and conduct business with tourists. Although both towns have a church of each denomination, it appears that Catholicism takes a slightly more privileged role in the life of Guianese Hmong, which is to be expected given its predominance in French society and the role that Father Bertrais played in the resettlement of Hmong in French Guiana. For example, Javouhey itself is named after Anne-Marie Javouhey, a Catholic nun and missionary who was instrumental in promoting the emancipation of slaves in French Guiana in the 1800s. In addition, the Catholic churches themselves are physically larger than the Protestant ones, and, symbolically, in Cacao, the Catholic church in Cacao occupies a prominent place on a hill overlooking the rest of the town, while the Protestant church rests in the valley, among other houses.⁶ Religion does play a role in identity and socialization, as people from the same denomination may cluster among themselves a bit more, but this is not exclusive, and people from all religious beliefs interact and intermarry.

Other leisure activities for adults and children alike include television, renting videos, camping, riding in boats on the nearby rivers (the Comté in Cacao, Acarouany in Javouhey), playing sports and games (volleyball, soccer, basketball, bocce, and tops [*tub lub*]), and keeping exotic pets, such as monkeys and parrots.⁷ By far, the most common pet is the picolet songbird (lesser seedfinch), and many men train these birds to sing and compete in contests held in Créole towns where it is possible to win money. Because of this, men guard their birds closely, particularly in Javouhey, and some women joke

⁶ Further, the Catholic churches had permanent French clergy in both villages, while the Protestant community had to share one pastor, an American Hmong who, as of 2001, had resided in French Guiana for three years.

⁷ The most unusual pet observed was a beetle the size of a small mouse that a young boy had on a string leash!

that the men treat their birds better than their wives. For many adult males, hunting is an important activity, and they may spend the night in the rain forest to hunt, usually for tapir, or a small porcupine-like mammal called a *bak*. Meat from hunting is eaten, though the primary function of hunting appears to be for recreation. In fact, we were told that Hmong from the U.S. and France occasionally come to French Guiana in order to hunt.

To many Guianese Hmong, particularly the younger generation and those who have lived for significant amounts of time in France or the United States, opportunities for recreation seem to be in short supply. For teenagers and young adults, there are village-chaperoned parties in the communal buildings on Saturday evenings, replete with techno and pop music (American, French, and Hmong). However, one teenager from Javouhey mentioned that he felt that French Guiana was a nice place to visit, but that living there, farming every day and with little chance to escape from the routine, was difficult. A 25 year-old woman who had recently moved from France mentioned that she liked French Guiana, but regretted the dearth of things to do (“*pas cinéma, pas restaurants, pas civilisation!*”). Two other women responded that they preferred life in France. One source of dissatisfaction may be that because of the small Hmong population, people are forced to look for spouses in France or even in the United States. When young women who have lived in urban or suburban conditions for most of their lives return to French Guiana with their new husbands to farm, the transition may be difficult.

In addition, youth may be dissatisfied with their prospects as farmers, leading to intergenerational conflict. Large family sizes have led to an increase in the populations of Cacao and Javouhey, and the demand for produce in French Guiana simply is not great enough to allow the younger generation to have their own farms. Education can lead to alternative livelihoods, but children and young adults are required to work on their parents’ farms, which competes with schooling. Hmong children may also find themselves at a disadvantage in terms of language when they continue school in Cayenne or France. Though children are fluent in French, nearly every family speaks Hmong at home. The reality is that emigration to France or the United States has become necessary for some young adults in order to find jobs, as the underdeveloped economy and high unemployment rate in French Guiana makes finding

employment there difficult. Examples of some non-farming occupations currently held by Hmong in French Guiana include: school-teacher, restaurant/ business owner, auto mechanic, seamstress, maintenance worker, lumberjack, physician's interpreter, office worker, and agricultural engineer. However, most of these people own small plots of land and farm at least part-time.

Some families rely extensively on tourism for their livelihood, and many families sell foods and crafts to tourists to supplement their income. With about one to two hundred visitors per week, Cacao is the third most frequented tourist destination in French Guiana (following the Space Center in Kourou and the *Iles du Salut*). Most tourists come to Cacao on Sunday mornings to view the "exotic" Hmong, or to visit the market, where they can buy Hmong food or crafts. Javouhey receives fewer tourists, as it is 3.5 hours away by car from Cayenne and the international airport, while Cacao is just 1.5 hours away from Cayenne. The city of St. Laurent, which is only half an hour away from Javouhey, has about one-fifth the population of Cayenne, and is less developed economically. Thus, there are fewer potential tourists available for Javouhey, though a few do come to the Sunday market. In actuality, the market in Javouhey acts more as a social gathering for the village residents, where people take a respite from farming or selling produce. One family in Javouhey has created a tourism service that escorts people up the Acarouany river by *pirogue* (a long canoe powered by motor) to a small cabin and nature trail in the forest, even advertising their business with flyers posted in St. Laurent and Cayenne.

In contrast to the Hmong, the general population of French Guiana does not live quite as well. Social programs and welfare alleviate poverty, but the unemployment rate is high at 21% (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency Factbook, 2002). However, this figure probably understates the problem faced by the urban Créoles and Haitians and rural Brazilians, Surinamese, and Amerindians, since educated migrants from Europe are factored into the equation. The disparity between the relative material successes of the Hmong versus that of the general population, coupled by the fact that Hmong are still perceived as newcomers, has led to ethnic tension in the past. In 1988, a Hmong couple returning to Javouhey from the market in St. Laurent was robbed and killed by Surinamese on the road. The Hmong felt that the national reaction (especially from the Créole majority) lacked outrage, and clan leaders decided to withhold their

produce from the markets (Géraud, 1997). By that time, Hmong fruits and vegetables had become indispensable, especially to restaurants and hotels in Cayenne. The reaction to the strike was what the Hmong had hoped for: attention from Créole politicians and promises of more protection. We encountered other stories from people about Hmong who were attacked or stabbed in Cayenne. Fortunately, although violent attacks receive a lot of attention, they are rare.

However, a lack of trust still exists. One young man said that he practices martial arts because he fears he may be attacked as he sets up his station in the Cayenne market early in the morning. Assertions of distrust appear to be reserved not toward the “White French” (*Fabkis Dawb*), but rather toward the “Black French” (*Fabkis Dub*), though there are certainly many groups that fall under the latter category. In Javouhey, which has consistent contact with the Surinamese from Acarouany, has a small police force of only two officers (both Hmong), and homes seem less inviting on the exterior than Cacao, with more surrounded by fences than in Cacao.⁸ There are also a few “beware of dog” signs. One Hmong man in his early 30’s from Javouhey revealed that many Hmong view the Surinamese as a double-edged sword; they provide valuable and cheap labor for Hmong farmers, but, understandably, they may become frustrated and angry when there is no work for them. A few people in Javouhey also expressed fear of being burglarized by Surinamese, though it was unconfirmed whether this fear was rational or not.

Conversely, the Surinamese see things differently. While sitting outside one of the stores in Javouhey, a Surinamese man in his early 40s described his life in French Guiana, where he had lived for 20 years since fleeing the civil war in Suriname. During the conversation, he was yelled at by a 10 year-old Hmong girl for a minor infraction (sitting on a banister with his feet on a bench), which led him to state, in English, that “the people here- they don’t like black people. Hmong people, White people, they don’t like us.” Another Surinamese man in his early 20’s who was nearby echoed the sentiment, saying that “life is a struggle here.” It is difficult to avoid seeing the irony that both the Hmong and the Surinamese in French Guiana are refugees from separate wars that forced them to leave their homes, but

⁸ The police force in the nearby Créole town of Mana will occasionally intervene in Javouhey affairs, when necessary.

they have such differential access to resources despite living so close together. Ultimately, many Hmong view their resettlement in French Guiana as a reward for loyalty to the French in Southeast Asia in the conflicts against the Japanese and the Viet Minh. The Créoles, on the other hand, see the Hmong as receiving preferential support from France in the form of subsidies for housing, farming supplies and farm land, while they suffer from unemployment. Of course, there is diversity of opinion within these communities, and the various ethnic groups have learned to adapt to one another.⁹

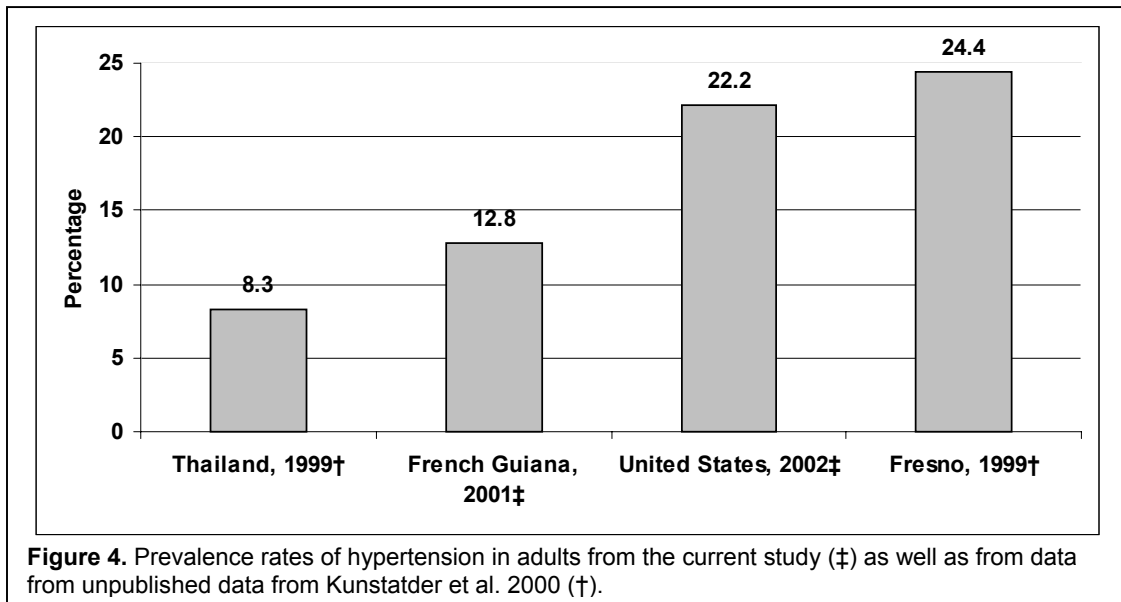
Despite the problems mentioned above, Hmong in French Guiana appear satisfied with life there. In the questionnaire, people were asked if they were happy where they now lived and, as a follow up, if they ever wished to return to Laos one day to live there permanently (**Table 3**). The same questions were given to adults in the U.S. From the responses, French Guiana Hmong were significantly less likely to be dissatisfied with where they currently lived (3.4% vs. 16.0%), and significantly less likely to wish to live in Laos in the future (12.9% vs. 44.8%).¹⁰

Similarly, the blood pressure results revealed that Guianese Hmong had lower rates of hypertension (defined as a systolic pressure over 140 mmHg or a diastolic pressure over 90 mmHg) than did American Hmong (**Figure 4**). For comparison, data from Kunstadter et al. (2000) collected in 1999 are presented as well, representing Hmong from Fresno (n = 86) and non-refugee Hmong from Thailand (n = 127) aged 19-51 years. It is clear that Hmong in the U.S. from both studies have higher rates of hypertension than in Thailand or in French Guiana.

Question (n = FG, US)	Response	French Guiana	United States	Total	Chi-square Test
Are you happy where you now live? (n = 179, 106)	No	3.4%	16.0%	8.1%	$\chi^2 = 14.4$; P < 0.01
Do you wish to return to Laos one day to live? (n = 178, 105)	Yes	12.9%	44.8%	24.7%	$\chi^2 = 36.0$; P < 0.01

⁹ On a ride from Cayenne back to Cacao with a Hmong family, we stopped for gas and the attendant, a Créole man, read the price (200 francs) to the driver in Hmong (“*ob pua franc*”), and politely said goodbye (“*sib ntsib dua*”).

¹⁰ Fadiman (1997: 205) cites a study conducted by the University of Minnesota in 1982 which found that 90% of Hmong in Minnesota *believed* (not *hoped*) they would return to Laos one day.



Conclusion

In her popular book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Anne Fadiman (1997) briefly describes French Guiana as a virtual experiment that was similar to a plan proposed by Vang Pao which called for the U.S. government to allow Hmong refugees “to be left alone to be Hmong: clustered in all-Hmong enclaves, protected from government interference, self-sufficient, and agrarian” (p. 183-4). In actuality, few of these things are completely true in French Guiana. While Hmong live in ethnically homogeneous villages, it is obvious that they are not isolated. There is frequent contact with Surinamese, Créoles, Brazilians, and French either in town or in the city marketplaces. The Hmong may also occasionally complain of the government, as well. One man in his late 40s said, “In Laos, if you wanted to build a house, you would just go and build a house. Here, you need permission from the government to get the land. It is not free like Laos.” They are not completely self-sufficient, either. Although almost all adults are self-employed farmers, this is not true of everyone, and even farmers grow food primarily for the marketplace rather than for subsistence. In short, French Guiana is not pre-war Laos.

Fadiman (1997) also wondered whether a similar arrangement to French Guiana, if carried out in the U.S., would have been more cost-efficient in terms of federal and state funding for Hmong

resettlement and welfare costs. From an economic perspective, the Hmong in French Guiana have been described as “the model horticultural minority” (Redfield, 2000: 39), given the vital role they play in the country’s economy by supplying the population with fruits and vegetables. In that sense, they have done as much for French Guiana (if not more so) as French Guiana has done for them. More importantly, resettling in French Guiana appears to have been beneficial for the mental and physiological health of the Hmong themselves. Hmong of Cacao, Javouhey, and Regina have less dissatisfaction with where they live, less desire to return to Laos, and lower rates of hypertension than American Hmong of a similar age range. These things possibly can be attributed to higher physical activity levels, better diet, and less psychosocial stress, which (among older persons) may be at least partially due to residence in ethnically homogeneous villages and greater retention of linguistic and cultural traditions (including farming). In this sense, the French Guiana experiment has been successful.

Limitations/Future Research

This study is limited in that it is cross-sectional and was based on an opportunistic, rather than random, sample. Future research should be conducted to see how other endpoints of the Hmong diaspora compare with regard to the questionnaire and blood pressure findings.

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