

Changes, Conflict, and Culture: The Status of Social-Cultural, Environmental, and Legal Challenges for Hmong Cultural Practices in Contemporary California by Danny Vincent DeSantiago, Hmong Studies Journal, 22(2020): 1-41.

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by

Danny Vincent DeSantiago

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Abstract

Refugee resettlement is often a long and traumatic experience that can take years to fully overcome. The Hmong are an ethnic group that struggled to accustom to western society during their initial arrivals in the 1970s onward. Although they have made immense progress, many practices and perspectives still come at odds with those in the west. Many refugee interventions have failed to acknowledge the deep socio-cultural conflicts and challenges that arise within the host country. The Hmong's adaptation in America is still an evolving situation where many are still learning to navigate their culture through the novel environment. Through an ethnographic study using narrative and comparative analysis between the Hmong in California and Thailand, this study explored the challenges and conflicts that continue from socio-cultural, environmental, and legal obstacles for cultural practices in contemporary California. Through the Hmong's own personal narratives, the essay reveals that the Hmong still regularly encounter conflicts and challenges in funeral, spiritual, geomantic, and agriculture practices. Socio-cultural and legal barriers pose the greatest challenge from non-Hmong residents and state authorities who still do not recognize the Hmong traditions. Revealing continuing challenges may further support future initiatives to continue developing culturally relevant solutions for the Hmong and other refugee resettlements.

Keywords: Hmong, traditions, cultural practices, conflict, legal-conflict, refugee resettlement, socio-cultural, adaptation, narratives

Introduction

Refugees often experience culture shock and significant physical and psychological trauma when resettling in a foreign country. Conflicts are usually inevitable outcomes because differences in social, cultural, and legal perspectives often impede practices that were once acceptable in the refugee's homeland. Cultural activities that were once commonplace may be unfeasible in the host country. Losing access to traditional resources and the dissonance caused

from language barriers further exacerbates the struggle. This was the reality for the Hmong, a minority ethnic group from China and Southeast Asia who were brought by the tens of thousands to America as refugees during the 1970's-90s (Hamilton-Merritt 1993). The 2000 census data from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) states California boasts the largest number of refugees in the country with Southeast Asians making up the majority (Singer & Wilson 2006). More current data from the 2010 census and 2017 American Community Survey estimates show that the Hmong population continues to grow considerably with one of the most significant proportions still being in California (Pfeifer et al. 2012; U.S. Census Bureau 2017).

The Hmong's struggle gained publicity in America most famously from Anne Fadiman's (2002) narrative, "The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down," which exposed the unfortunate consequences of refugee displacement and cultural misunderstanding. The disastrous outcomes of frustration, fear, and even death are well documented by both scholars and the media (see e.g., Bliatout 1982; Johnson 2002; Mote 2004) due to the immense culture shock they experienced. In addition, cultural misunderstandings often brought the Hmong into regular conflict with the law since many practices that were once permissible in their homeland were considered criminal in the west (Bishop 1988; Ly 2001). Although the Hmong have come a long way, they are still a young enclave in America and are arguably amidst one of the most significant phases of their refugee transition. Most of the elders who first arrived as refugees are still present while many of the first-generation Hmong are engaged in a balancing between traditions and assimilating to the modern western environment around them.

Many refugee interventions have historically failed to consider stressors related to socio-cultural conflicts in the host country (Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998; Lavik, Hauff, Skrondal, & Solberg, 1996; Pernice & Brook, 1996; Rumbaut, 1991a; Silove, Sinnerbrink, Field,

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Manicavasagar, & Steel, 1997; Sinnerbrink, Silove, Field, Steel, & Manicavasagar,1997).

Therefore, exploring the contemporary status of one of the largest refugee enclaves in California will be a valuable resource for understanding how the Hmong continue to transition and how future refugee situations can progress. Out of this situation, I investigated the question: do socio-cultural, legal, and environmental obstacles continue to impede the Hmong from performing their cultural practices in urban California compared to rural Asia? Cultural practices were narrowed down to the following dimensions: funeral ceremonies, environmental geomancy, geomancy in the home, agricultural traditions, and animal sacrifice.

This essay discloses the intimate narratives of conflict and challenges the Hmong face at present and how these permeate through their lives socially, culturally, spiritually, and in some cases, economically. Studies of the Hmong culture conflicts in the west have always focused on the most controversial topics, such as opium and animal sacrifices. However, this essay also considers other cultural challenges that are more subtle yet still impede the Hmong from continuing valued traditional practices. Mountains represent a profound cultural space for many of the Hmong yet abiding to these beliefs are far more challenging than they are in rural Asia. Numerous other geomantic beliefs about space and the home remain significant for many Hmong, however many of them are conflicted by having to choose between following tradition and making practical economical decisions. Agriculture has been a fundamental aspect of Hmong heritage for centuries with many traditional methods and beliefs taking place in practice. On the contrary to other cultural practices, many of the Hmong have adapted well to farming in the novel valley landscapes of California. However, farming remains one of the most challenging endeavors as the Hmong still struggle to navigate through the restricting legal system. Legalities restrict not only agricultural practices, but also sacred procedures, such as funeral ceremonies

and religious processes. Animal sacrifices that the Hmong perform during certain ceremonies are still frowned upon by non-Hmong residents who do not understand the Hmong's exotic spirituality which causes many followers to feel the need to practice in secrecy. The Hmong are amidst an interesting phase of two dimensions: strict tradition held on by the elders who still have a strong prominence in the community and the next generation who must balance tradition with modernity.

Refugee Experience

Refugee resettlement has long been recognized as a traumatic predicament. The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention defines refugees as people who have fled their homeland because of fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political opinion (Singer & Wilson 2006; 3). Many have been displaced by force from disastrous situations and have been subjected to mentally and physically traumatic conditions that make adaptation more difficult (Goodkind 2006). Southeast Asian refugees, particularly highland peoples, such as the Hmong (Kinzie et al. 1990; Ying & Akutsu 1997), have been known to have a greater risk for deteriorated mental health (Hirayama, Hirayama & Cetingok 1993; Rumbuat 1991b). The lack of many resettlement programs to attend to the social and cultural conflicts experienced in the host country makes the objective of this paper of prime significance because it provides a glimpse into how these post-resettlement challenges are evolving with one of the largest refugee enclaves.

Refugee theory identifies the Hmong resettlement as resulting from some of the most difficult and unideal situations¹. Most of the Hmong can be identified as *acute*, *new*, and *majority-identified* refugees. *Acute* refers to those who had to leave their homelands immediately by force without preparation (Kunz 1981). *New* refugees refer to those that are vastly different

from their host country culturally and ethnically and from a less-developed country (Paludan 1974). *Majority-identified* refugees refers to those who oppose social/political events in the home country (Kunz 1981). These labels can be validated from their involvement in the Secret CIA War of Laos where the Hmong were seen as traitors to the communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese government and targeted for genocide (Quincy 1995; Lee & Pfeifer 2006; Hamilton-Merit 1993). During that time, the Hmong were forced to flee for their lives and eventually relocate to places drastically different from the one where they originated.

The Hmong are one of the largest recent refugee groups in the United States. Their home countries ranked second and fourth on the list of largest refugee-sending countries from 1983-2004 (Singer & Wilson 2006; 7). The U.S. Census Bureau data for 2014 states the current population at 301,286, compared to the 1990 U.S. Census data of 94,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). Data on the Hmong is especially of concern to California because it has one of the largest populations of any state at 91,224 (U.S. Census Bureau 2014).

Traditions & Beliefs

The traditional Hmong follow two spiritual practices; animism and shamanism. While these two spiritual traditions are often identified separately, they are fundamentally part of the same spiritual worldview and are not religions in of themselves. Defining animism is a long-contested topic in the fields of anthropology and religious studies², however a sufficient definition for this essay's purpose describes animism as a composite relationship between non-human persons, or spirits, which encompass beings and things in the world, as opposed to the transcendence view commonly found in theistic religions (Swancutt 2019: 2). The Hmong spirituality is based on maintaining a mutual and respectful relationship with the spirits to maintain harmony in the world. A shaman (*Txiv neeb*³) is one who has the power to

communicate between the spirit and Earth realm (Conquergood 1989: 6). They serve as a direct intermediary for the Hmong to communicate with the spirit world when necessary for physical and mental health (Gerdner 2012: 4).

Animal sacrifice is a fundamental part of many of the Hmong spiritual practices. It is done during various occasions, such as shamanic, funeral, and New Year ceremonies. The purposes might involve making offerings to spirits, honoring the deceased (Lor, Lee, & Yang 2013) or guiding the shaman in the spirit realm (Gerdner & Xiong 2015; 177-181). For example, *Ua Neeb Khu* is a ceremony in which a shaman sacrifices a live animal to spirits in exchange for a person's health (Fadiman 2002). Traditionally, standard farm animals are used, such as chickens, pigs, and cows. Previous research has shown that even the Hmong in California significantly value animal sacrifices as a vital component of their spiritual, physical, and mental well-being (Pinson-Perez, Moua, & Perez 2004).

A notable literature exists that describes the diverse spirits that make up the Hmong spirituality (Chindarsi, 1976; Leepreecha 2004; Her 2005; Lee 2005; Lor, Lee, & Yang 2013; Gerdner 2015; Tapp 1989). However, the spirits of most interest to this essay are household spirits (*Dab nyeg*). Literature has identified different spirits associated with home dwellings, such as the ancestor spirit of the main pillar (*Dab ncej cuab*), spirit of the cooking hearth (*Dab qhov cub*), spirit of the oven for ceremonial purposes (*Dab qhov txos*), front door spirit (*Dab txhiaj meej*), and spirit of the bedrooms (*Dab roog*). The *Dab xwm kab*, is a household shamanic spirit which is a requirement of all traditional Hmong homes. This spirit altar requires particular placement immediately opposite the front door in order to ensure protection (Herr 2005; Lee & Tapp 2010; 35-38; Tapp 1989; 63). Subtleties of spiritual spatiality focused on how to address

environmental and home geomancy are challenged in the contemporary urban environment of California.

The Hmong have a rich tradition of geomancy (*Saib chaw nyob*⁴). Geomancy is defined as a system of “conceptualizing the physical environment which regulates human ecology” by selecting auspicious environments (Yoon 1980: 341). The Hmong hold strong geomantic beliefs, as Tomforde (2006) has highlighted in a term she calls *Cultural Spatiality*, which describes the Hmong socio-cultural and cosmological identity to a landscape that she argues exists in both the physical and mental space. The Hmong identify the quality of space by how strong is its *Looj mem*. This is a geomantic measurement of the value of a given space (Lee & Tapp 2010; 33; Tomforde 2006). It is expected that many elder Hmong find their customs challenged in environments that lack mountains and other key geographic figures that dictate the sacred order of Hmong society. It is important to mention that understanding how conflicts and challenges arise from geomantic traditions entail a basic acknowledgment of the Hmong’s connection to landscapes, and this is why I took the time hear and observe narratives about mountains, which are invaluable factors in the Hmong worldview (Her 2005; Tomforde 2006).

Traditional Funerals

One of the most complicated practices of the traditional Hmong culture is the funeral process⁵. *Tus Txheej Txheem Kab Kev Pam Tuag* (Funeral procedures) require entire family participation, animal sacrifice, and lengthy rituals and songs. It can last up to twelve days long (Lor, Lee, & Yang. 2013; Tapp 1989; 83). The Hmong view death as a journey that the deceased must take back to the homeland and then back to the ancestors in the afterlife (Lor, Lee, & Yang. 2013). An elder’s ceremony takes considerably longer. Elders and fathers require gunshots at the ceremony to frighten unwanted spirits away who may take advantage of the situation (Tapp

1989; 81). At the moment of death, Hmong would traditionally fire three gunshots also to alert others to come pay their respects (Lee & Tapp 2010; 31-32). Animal sacrifice is an important part of the process. According to tradition, two cows are used, however, that number may depend on the status of the deceased. The sacrificed animal is then dismembered, cooked, and specific parts are distributed accordingly to certain participants in a ceremony known as *Hauv Qhua*⁶ (Lor, Lee, & Yang. 2013; 13-15). Traditional funeral services take place at the home and require many activities associated with the house. Throughout the service, the cadaver is symbolically offered food before the living eat at each meal and after ritual songs are completed, the cadaver is elevated against the wall of an alter where it remains until burial (Tapp 1989; 84).

Traditional Burial sites are chosen following the Hmong geomantic beliefs (*Looj mem*). Proper burial grounds determine both the health and success of relatives deceased, living, and not yet born. Alternatively, poorly chosen burial sites (especially of an elder) can result in great misfortunes for the deceased and their family (Her 2005). Many procedures in burial also require activities to take place at the home. For example, the cadaver should be carried out a specific door while being careful to not raise the cadaver over other houses. Death attracts evil spirits, so a traditional procession would make various stops and reverse directions on the way to the burial site to confuse spirits. Orientation of the cadaver in burial may be important as well, which might also follow geomantic beliefs according to mountain, river, and valley locations (Lee & Tapp 2010; Tapp 1989; 86-89).

Several characteristics of traditional funerals are of primary interest for this research objective. First is that the nature of many procedures requires the deceased and the sacrificial animal to be present together. Second, is that many of these procedures are done in a distinct order with the deceased present⁷. Third, is that following traditional geomantic beliefs would

require a ceremony to take place at the residence along with specific geographical requirements in burial. Lastly, is the highly communal nature of the entire ceremony. Numerous participants are needed to conduct the ceremony in a traditional manner. People are designated for slaughtering the animals, cooking, preparing the rice, lighting, playing the ritual songs to guide the spirit, and various other duties (Lee & Tapp 2010; Lor, Lee, & Yang 2013). As one can imagine in the United States, many modifications have been made to make it feasible in the new environment. Many funerals no longer take place in the home and are performed at designated Hmong funeral homes lasting from Friday until Monday (Lor, Lee, & Yang 2013). Federal health and safety regulations prohibit many of these traditions. In areas with large Hmong populations, the Hmong have sometimes bought entire slaughterhouses and funeral homes to alleviate some of the challenges (Lee & Tapp 2010; 33-37).

These complexities intrigued me to reveal the personal narratives of how the Hmong continue to cope with these traditions. Are the Hmong in villages in Southeast Asia continuing to follow traditions as described in the literature? What additional, if any, challenges do the Hmong feel impede the practice? This was where I found personal narratives along with observations in comparative analysis to be a valuable resource. It was interesting to witness many of the old traditions still in use at the village sites with few if any obstacles, while on the contrary, hearing the narratives of struggle continue from the Hmong in California.

Agricultural Traditions & Marginalization

The Hmong have a rich agricultural history that is a significant part of their cultural heritage. The Hmong society and traditions, such as New Year celebrations and funerals, have historically been dictated by agricultural cycles (Lee 2005). The legacy of agriculture has remained strong for both Hmong in Asia and abroad even until today. For these reasons, I found

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it significant to consider agricultural practices as a valuable aspect of Hmong culture. The Hmong have a diverse repertoire of agricultural techniques that have evolved from the numerous ethnic groups they have encountered throughout history. Although they are known to practice many techniques, such as irrigation and terraced farming, swidden is their most recognized agricultural tradition (Cooper 1984; Delang 2002; Lee 2005; 2-6). Swidden is the process of burning vegetation on a field for further cultivation, but it can also refer to the nomadic movement of subsistence farming for many traditional communities (Rahman 2017) as did the Hmong.

The Hmong have a long history of marginalization that continues until today where agricultural traditions have often been significantly affected. In ancient times, many agricultural techniques were thought to have been swayed by the Chinese who pressured many minorities to assimilate (Lee 2005). More recently, conflicts between state authorities in Southeast Asia have also pressured the Hmong and placed restrictions that have changed their agricultural practices (Cooper 1984; Delang 2002; Renard 1994; Tomforde 2006). These conflicts have also spilled over into the United States where many state authorities create obstacles for the Hmong trying to adapt. For example, the California Division of Worker's Compensation (DWC) forbids many traditional farming methods. Traditionally, entire Hmong families would partake in farm work. However, in 2004, many of the Hmong farmers in Fresno, CA started receiving government citations with fines of 1500 dollars per person for many of those family workers because they were unreported. Furthermore, it is difficult for many farmers to acquire workers' compensation insurance for family members while working under or below minimum wage salaries. The California Division of Labor Standards Enforcement (DLSE) regularly patrols fields and gives citations when they see many people on the field. Since most of the Hmong farmers are doing a

combination of growing foods for market and subsistence, they can end up getting fined for just doing subsistence farming, which is technically legal to have family members assist (The Refugee Farmer Project 2015). The Hmong have continuously had to adapt and redefine their agricultural methods to cope with various ethnic and state authorities throughout their diaspora. Geopolitical conflicts have historically challenged and changed the Hmong culture of agriculture frequently. For this reason, I felt it necessary to investigate the status of agriculture and explore how legal conflicts continue to evolve and persist as they have created some of the direst conflicts for Hmong.

Culture-Law Conflicts

As touched on in the last section, conflicts between culture and the law have been a serious issue throughout the Hmong's history and refugee resettlement. However, issues with the law have permeated beyond agriculture as well. Exotic practices, such as medical use of opium and animal sacrifice has regularly brought the Hmong into legal conflict (Bishop 1988). These 'culturally motivated crimes' have long been controversial and heavily debated as to whether "cultural evidence" should be considered (Ly, 2001; 471-472). The Hmong have been involved in opium farming and use for centuries (Lee 2005; 3-9). Furthermore, it is known to be a powerful ethnobotanical that many elders value (Johnson 2002; Ly 2001; 471). However, the importation, cultivation, and use of it is heavily restricted in the United States. Many Hmong have been prosecuted and suffered serious litigations in courts for trying to continue its use as they historically have (Bishop 1988; Ly 2001). Many health and safety codes have banned the slaughter of animals within cities (Ly 2001). Regardless of positioning with standard American law or cultural background, the important point to be made here is that acknowledging cultural

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practices is undeniably a vital aspect of a group's successful integration that must not be overlooked. After the past few decades, how are these challenges continuing or evolving?

Methods

Conceptual Framework & Positionality

This research is primarily based on narrative inquiry and ethnographic work in Thailand and California (October 2015-July 2016) using unstructured interviews, in-depth interviews, and participant observation with a total of thirty-six participants. Comparative analysis was conducted between traditional settings in villages in Thailand to the contemporary environment of California. This was valuable because it allowed me to concretely experience how change and conflict can arise for the Hmong in California's drastically different environment. In this regard, participant observation was pivotal. Narrative inquiry (Patton 2014) allowed me to reveal the vivid lived experiences of participants. Due to this focus, much of the interviews were open-ended and allowed participants to freely share their challenges and stories without restriction. Reflexive practice (Paulus, Lester, & Dempster 2013) was done in analytical memos to be mindful of potential bias. For example, analytical notes were taken after correspondences and transcriptions to distinguish what was seen in the data, what was not seen, and my interpretations. This allowed me to avoid subconscious assumptions of participant responses based on literature and pre-conceived notions.

Participants & Field sites

Field sites were in California and Thailand. Thailand sites (N=23) were in the Chiang Mai province at two villages: Doi Pui and Kun Chang Khian. Doi Pui is frequently visited by tourists while the latter is more remote in the nearby mountain where few, if any tourists find their way. Farming both cash crops and subsistence is the primary occupation of almost everyone

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in the sites, while many locals at Doi Pui also heavily subsist on souvenir sales. Participants in California (N=13) were recruited from the following organizations and events: Hmong New Year Festival (Sacramento & Stockton, CA), Hmong Story 40 Event (Fresno, CA), National Hmong American Farmers (Fresno, CA), Temple of Hmongism (St. Paul, MN), Hmong Student Association of Berkeley (Berkeley, CA), and two Berkeley farmer markets (Berkeley, CA).

Participant demographics were heterogenous because this work intended to describe the contemporary Hmong experience as a whole. Previous studies have shown that spiritual practices are commonplace regardless of age, sex, or degree of acculturation (Plotnikoff et al. 2002). For this reason, I concluded specific age and gender demographics were not of significance to the objectives. I obtained a diverse sample of participants in age (18- 70) and status (college students, working adults, farmers, herbal healers, and shamans). All participants in America were either first generation of immigrant parents, or immigrants from Laos or Thailand themselves. Nonrandom sampling was done to ensure there were participants with in-depth knowledge and experience of the spiritual epistemology (e.g. shamans) as well as those who are particularly adapted to contemporary living styles (e.g. first-generation college students). It is important to mention that most of the cultural practices discussed in this essay refer to traditionalist⁸ spirituality. However, many of the Christian Hmong, a few of which were participants, also continue to hold animistic and other traditionalist worldviews. For the purpose of this essay's objective, I concluded religious affiliation would not misrepresent the narratives.

Data Collection & Analysis

Various procedures were taken to ensure comprehensive data was collected. In-depth interviews were audio recorded and lasted from forty minutes to two hours. Many of these participants were followed up with unstructured interviews as further questions evolved.

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Conversational unstructured interviews were made with additional community members.

Participant observation in the villages allowed me to observe cultural practices in an environment that more closely represented how they would happen traditionally. It also allowed me to talk with participants during the time activities were unfolding. Research integrity was taken to the fullest extent to ensure participants were provided with adequate informed consent. Village clan leaders granted permission to access village sites in Thailand prior to fieldwork. This study was approved by an International Review Board (IRB).

Many steps were taken to ensure data validity. The majority of data was collected from fluent English-speaking Hmong. Therefore, translation concerns were minimal at most. However, in Thailand, almost all interviews were conducted in the Thai language, so proper steps were taken to ensure validity. The project was assisted by a translator in the field who is fluently bilingual. The interviews in California were all done in English.⁹ After interviews, I engaged in member-checking through follow-up unstructured interviews and brief summaries with participants. Interviews were later transcribed verbatim for further analysis and clarification. Thai language interviews were transcribed by fluent bilingual Thai-English speakers first in Thai and then in English. One potential setback was the possibility that information from interviews in Thai language was lost in translation since they were not in the Hmong language. I tried to attend to this in several ways. First, proper pronunciation of the Hmong language concepts were clarified by native Hmong speakers beforehand. Second, interview questions were simplified enough to avoid errors when translated from English to Thai. Finally, I had fluent bilingual Thai-English speakers translate interview questions and these were discussed with the translator to clarify meanings and to avoid biases, such as leading questions.

Raw narratives and anecdotes from the participants make up the bulk of data. I have found the narratives and anecdotes of direct personal experience to be most revealing and effective in answering this essay's objective. Questions were asked under the key themes of funeral ceremonies, environmental geomancy, geomancy of the home, agricultural traditions, and animal sacrifice. In each of these themes, I began by asking participants simple open-ended questions about ever encountering or hearing of conflicts and challenges arising from the practices. In areas that have a history of conflict, such as the legal issues previously discussed about farming, I asked more specific questions about particular situations and authorities to reveal if they are continuing issues and how the Hmong personally feel they are affected. From their responses, I identified which conflicts and challenges fall under the categories of socio-cultural, environmental, and legal. Overall, I wanted the conversations to be guided by the participants, which I hoped would allow them to genuinely express their knowledge and experience. A second method I used to collect information on geomantic practices was by asking directly about specific spirits in the home previously documented in literature. This helped me suggest how practices are changing over time and compare the differences between those in the village and those in California.

Results

Hmong people have just went with whatever helped them survive, so this often means accepting living situations that traditionally would have been avoided back in Asia.
- California Hmong Student, personal communication

What Land Means to the Hmong

Geomancy and the spiritual significance of mountains were found to still be a prominent aspect of the Hmong worldview. In the villages, mountains not only serve aesthetic purposes, but also ensure the health and prosperity of the entire village. This narrative appeared in both

interviews and observations in Thailand and California. I briefly visited the Hmong TV Network headquarters in Fresno, CA for an interview in the main office where I noticed a large mural depicting a traditional scene of Hmong villages scattered throughout a mountainous landscape. Countless photographs and traditional Hmong quilts (*Paj ntaub*) depicted mountain scenes at the Hmong Story 40¹⁰ event in Fresno, CA.



Figure 1. Kun Chang Khian Traditional Burial Site. A grave and site such as this would be near impossible to acquire for most Hmong in urban California. Photo by Author.

Numerous participants described how mountains need to “hug” around a village for its health and prosperity (Fieldnotes, 2015-

16). Several participants claimed shamans often utilize the geomantic powers of mountains as well. A farmer in Fresno, CA reported of a “master shaman” who purposely bought a home surrounded by mountains for spiritual health. He said the shaman can ask spirits to identify ideal positions to create positive energy (Fresno Farmer, personal communications, 2015). Geomancy and the significance of mountains is a prominent aspect of various socio-cultural traditions.

Funeral Ceremonies in California

All participants proclaimed that funeral ceremonies are still one of the most important Hmong traditions. With this in mind, I was interested to investigate how much the geomantic aspect still persists in urban California and what barriers still present challenges. Various anecdotes exemplified the significance of mountains to this ceremony as described in literature

(e.g. Her 2005). The relation to mountains was exemplified elegantly from a local Hmong farmer:

It [Burial site] has to have a lot of mountains, just like people, they respect you and bow to you, mountains are like people, if you see a lot of curve coming down it is like they are bowing to you, so if you put a person right there, future generations will have many people bow to that family.¹¹

Another Hmong participant commented similarly:

“Having hills or mountains and the positioning of where the gravesite is so important super important, when you are living it is not that important but when you die it is so important.”¹²

However, finding a traditional mountain burial site (See *Figure 1.*) in California as many of the participants described is extremely difficult since burial is restricted to designated memorial parks. Many participants have knowledge of and continue to hold beliefs in mountain geomancy with burial grounds, yet it is a challenge to maintain that practice in California.

Performing the funeral ceremony in California is challenged by financial and social obstacles. One participant had much to say about this situation. Vast community dispersion across California makes it difficult to gather. Many family members now live far distances. As refugees, many of the Hmong did not have much autonomy in choosing their living locations. In addition, many families have to make choices based on what is in their budget regardless of location (See the opening epigraph). The participant further added, that the busy and fast-paced lifestyle of California adds more difficulties. Many of the Hmong struggle to find time in their schedules to organize events where everyone can participate (Hmong Farmer, personal communication, 2015). Having a traditional ceremony that last several days or more can make funeral costs skyrocket since it might entail reserving a funeral home for a long period. In total, the average expense of a traditional Hmong funeral in California can cost 40,000.00 to 50,000.00

USD. In its entirety, funerals still are one of the most difficult traditions to maintain in the United States (Temple of Hmongism President, personal communication, 2015).

Animal sacrifices are important components to the funeral ceremony. The sacrifices serve a spiritual purpose as the Hmong believe the deceased spirit requires the offering to ensure prosperity and guidance in the afterlife and a social purpose as it is used to prepare a large feast as well¹³ (See *Figure 5*). A respondent stated the Hmong usually use a cow for the sacrifice, especially when the funeral is for a respected elder or shaman. In a traditional setting, the sacrifice may take place at the home or wherever the funeral service is performed.

However, this process is often socially, legally, and financially difficult to perform in contemporary California. The participant stated in most situations he has encountered, it was illegal to slaughter a cow at the residential area or funeral home, so most of the Hmong must find a cattle farm, purchase and slaughter it there, and then bring it back to the funeral home (Hmong Farmer, personal communication, 2015). Another participant stated that, cattle prices often range from 500.00-2000.00 USD, and depending on the size of the event and who was passed, they may need more than one cow. Many Hmong families are extremely large, and one cow does not feed enough people. According to one respondent, the expenses from all these sacrifice procedures are the biggest burden for the Hmong currently. This leads some less fortunate families to have to forgo the process altogether. In rural Asia, many of the necessary resources to organize events like this are easily accessible to families since most of them live agricultural lifestyles and raise animals themselves. Therefore, space, money, nor law comes into conflict (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, March 2016).

Funeral Ceremonies in Kun Chang Khian

Village

To view how practices are continuing in traditional environments, I observed a funeral ceremony and other activities at the Kun Chang Khian village. Discussions and observations showed that they have few restrictions that inhibit them from organizing a traditional funeral. Social conflicts are almost entirely absent since everyone at the village is Hmong and is culturally aware of valued traditions and therefore prioritizes them. In the village sites, family members and friends are far less dispersed and have a strong sense of community, which several California participants expressed to be difficult to achieve. Most family members live in the same village, or nearby villages that are easily accessible. This was apparent during my participation at various celebrations and ceremonies. Many

community members only need to walk minutes away to adjacent houses to correspond with others. They interact on a daily basis to complete tasks. Activities are significantly easier to



Figure 2. Communal Events & Activities for Cultural Celebrations. (Above) Family and friends gather to prepare a traditional Hmong food. (Below) Community members gather to prepare food. Photos by author.

make communal. I witnessed this during my observations at the New Year and Funeral ceremonies where family and friends quickly gather where needed to assist in planning and preparing of foods and materials (See *Figure 2*). During the days and week of preparation, nearly everything was done communally. This was something the California participant expressed was becoming less common.

Villagers expressed the geomantic value of mountainous burial sites as did many of the California Hmong. One participant stressed how mountains are believed to be even more important in death than in life (Female Villager, personal communication, December 2015). Several villagers explained that suitable *Looj mem* is usually determined by elders who analyze the landscape for features primarily concerning how the site is situated around surrounding mountains and hills (Fieldnotes, 2015-16). *Looj mem* was not familiar to any participants in California. Although the term *Looj mem* was not familiar to all participants in Thailand, in the end, it inertly remained a fundamental practice to the entire community as shown with my participation in a traditional village funeral ceremony. The site was particularly chosen for its location in nearby mountains. To arrive there, all attendees drove about twenty minutes outside of the village in the nearby forest up narrow dirt roads (See *Figure 1*). The shaman and other knowledgeable elders selected this site for another deceased elder where they performed an elaborate ceremony to pay their respects (Elder Male Shaman, Shaman's Son, personal communication, January 2016). At the burial site, the Hmong lit many firecrackers during the ceremony, participants stated that this was to frighten away any unwanted harmful spirits. This activity took place throughout various New Year activities as well. After offerings were made and respects were paid, the shaman made communication with the spirits and they then

proceeded with a pig sacrifice (Fieldnotes, 2016). One can imagine these procedures difficult to perform at a residence or funeral home in California as literature has described.

Environmental Geomancy

The Hmong have various geomantic beliefs about the surrounding environment that are still common in California. Many of them try as much as possible to continue these beliefs in California. For example, some of the Hmong prefer not having homes that are at the end of intersections, or especially where there is a road situated directly towards the door. The young male participant stated it is because “having a door right in the direct path of the road is more likely to attract wondering harmful spirits” (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, 2016). This belief was reiterated from other participants. Another young female participant similarly stated how important this practice was to her father. When her family was searching for a home, the father disregarded many potential homes because he did not like the position of the door. She said, “the door in a specific position was more inviting to the spirits.” Despite this, many of the Hmong often abandon geomantic practices due to the complications they create when trying to make the most economical choices. She added, “we need to put survival first.” Her father eventually gave in and dealt with a poorly placed door (Young Female, personal communication, 2015).

Two intriguing accounts portrayed the significance of following proper procedures like those described previously. Appropriate locations can engender both psychological and spiritual prosperity. The young male participant stressed how meaningful it was to him when his family moved into a new home and had a shaman do a cleansing ritual. He stated, “It gave me a peace of mind that the place we were going to stay in was purified” (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, 2016). The effects of not considering the spiritual health of a locality was

exemplified in another interview. A Hmong woman shared an experience she had about a family member's new home. For a period of time, the family was having some unexplainable illnesses and "negative feelings" occur in the home. They eventually arranged a shaman to come visit the house. The participant stated when the shaman stepped on the property, he immediately felt the presence of innumerable restless souls that were "tormenting" him to help them. He had to spend the entire night doing rituals to release them. She claimed that following the rituals, the homeowners did research and found that the property was built on an old cemetery ground. The Hmong often attribute negative predicaments to not considering the spiritual health of a location (Hmong Woman, personal communication, 2016). A place considered geomantically poor, would likely be disregarded in the village. Places inhabited by unwanted spirits is something the Hmong take seriously, and it can bring more than just eerie feelings. Many of the Hmong wholeheartedly believe evil spirits have the power to kill and they have numerous accounts of other Hmong community members who have met their fate in this manner (personal communications, 2015-16).

One local at the Kun Chang Khian village shared an interesting anecdote that showcased the mindfulness many of the Hmong traditionally take behind choosing a living location. He claims, a building site for a new home is determined through a ritual with rice. Holes are dug in the prospective location and then seven to nine grains of rice are put in them. The holes are then covered until the next morning. They will check the holes and if the rice grain dried up with no contamination, it implies that the location is a suitable choice for the home (Homestay Owner, personal communication, 2015). In this manner, I found that the locations and structure to an entire village may potentially be dictated by precise geomantic decisions. No activities of this nature were reported by any participants in California, which would be extremely difficult.

Geomancy in the Home

In California, many of the Hmong are aware of geomantic procedures, but they are not always easily practicable. According to Tapp (1989), many traditional homes have an altar for a spirit called *dab xwb kab*: the spirits of wealth and richness who protect the entire home. Many younger participants in California were not familiar with the name. However, several were familiar with this altar in their home and described it as the most important altar with special requirements as consistent with literature. One participant stated it must be on the wall directly across from the door and be elevated high above the ground with no other objects above it. If not, it could potentially bring misfortune upon a family. The participant shared an incident when his cousin hung a picture above it which resulted in him becoming very ill. They had a shaman come perform a healing ritual to address the situation. Afterwards, the shaman stated this was the result of aggravated spirits who were offended by the picture hung over the altar. The participant also said many of the Hmong will only sleep in an orientation that is perpendicular to the altar in order to not mimic the same position a cadaver is placed during a funeral. During a funeral, the cadaver would be oriented parallel in front of the altar, so sleeping in that same fashion is considered disrespectful to the deceased (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, 2016). A diverse array of spirits related to the home have been identified in older literature (e.g., Lee & Tapp 2010; Tapp 1989). However, very few of these entities by name were familiar to any participants. Some said they were aware of them but know very little if anything about them. Participants in California reported their families have never done any rituals or ceremonies in relation to them.¹⁴ One participant at the Berkeley farmer's market stated that he only recognizes one spirit in the home (Fresno Farmer, personal communication, 2015). Nearly all participants only referred to the ancestor spirits as the presence in their home that they recognize. The diverse

array of spirits associated with the home as described in literature were mostly unrecognized. A female undergraduate student reported that over the years, her family has also done fewer rituals in general (Female Undergraduate, personal communication, 2015).

Interestingly, similar trends were found in the villages. Although this topic was less explored in Thailand as it was in California, many respondents were similarly not familiar with many of the particular spirit names as mentioned in literature or the particular associations and rituals. However, spirits in the home were acknowledged. Again, participants stated ancestor spirits are the most important and recognized spirits in the home.¹⁵ It appeared that individual spirits by name are not as commonplace as once described.

Agricultural Traditions

The Hmong have been able to readily adapt their agricultural traditions in the novel Californian terrain; however, the biggest challenges continue to lie in the abundance of legal restrictions that disrupt their practice and hinder them from prospering. My interview and conversations with the executive director of the National Hmong Farmers Association (NHFA) based in Fresno, CA, revealed that many hardships continue. He stated this was the primary reason why the NHFA was founded. Many of the older Hmong are handicapped by language barriers and illiteracy that restrict them from being able to comprehend the convoluted legalities behind all their agricultural activities. He mentioned the challenges consistent with the literature (The Refugee Farmers Project 2015) about the DWC fining field workers who do not have proper workers compensation and other conflicts. He further added that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is another agency that creates obstacles. Family members legally cannot participate unless they can abide to OSHA regulations and acquire worker's compensation insurance. Many of the Hmong struggle to follow food safety regulations and to

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acquire licenses for pesticide use. Finding land is also difficult, so many Hmong lease, however, that also has become a burden. “Few Hmong farmers own any land. 95% of Hmong lease land,” stated the director. “One year a Hmong farmer could have 10-20 acres, and the next he could lose the lease.” These conflicts pose serious threats for the economic security of the Hmong in California.



Figure 3. The Different Landscapes and Techniques in Thailand and California. (Left) Terraced farming at Kun Chang Khian Village. (Right) Flatland farming in the Central Valley. Photos by the author.

From a cultural aspect, he further stressed how many of the older Hmong take pride in their agricultural heritage as they see it as one of the few activities they can successfully manage in an unfamiliar country. It is an important part of their culture that they are able to carry on from their rural past, and it is a part of their identity. Yet even for those who want to continue that tradition and be a part of the agricultural legacy of California, it often is too troublesome. The director expressed that some of them quit farming altogether, which can put the family in

financial jeopardy along with driving some farmers to depression. The director commented, “If you can figure out how to farm in California, you can farm anywhere” (Executive Director, personal communication, 2015).

The different landscapes between Thailand and California has also led the Hmong to alter their traditional farming methods. Terrace farming and swidden techniques are never practiced in California according to several participants, which was expected since the Central Valley where most of the Hmong farm, is primarily flatlands. The participants interviewed have never had the opportunity to perform terrace farming while in California. It is illegal to set fires on agricultural grounds as many of them once did in Thailand and Laos due to fears of wildfires (Fieldnotes, 2016). Regardless of these drastic changes, the participants claimed they did not view environmental differences as a significant problem. The previously mentioned legal issues were more concerning. The NHFA director proudly stressed how throughout history, the Hmong have always had to adapt and be resilient. Figuring out how to farm a new environment is something the Hmong have been doing for centuries amidst their diaspora. In his perspective, this adaptation represents the strength and perseverance of the Hmong people (Executive Director, personal communication, 2015). In spite of all this, I found one participant who claimed her mother still used swidden techniques at her farm in Iowa. This was because the area she lived in was very rural and largely unregulated, so she periodically would burn the field (Graduate

Student, personal communication March 2015). It was interesting to see that when given the opportunity, some of the Hmong will use traditional techniques.

Several participants described the controversial use of an old traditional plant; opium. It is still known to be a potent medicinal plant with numerous health benefits in the Hmong community.

One participant stated that regardless of the legal issues, many elders still desire to use and grow it. The participant stated he still knows many elders who smoke it for both socio-cultural and health purposes. (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, 2016). An older Hmong male stated that his family had a plant in the past but on one occasion, they were confronted by the police to verify they were not harvesting it. The authorities told him a person is allowed to have it under the conditions of no farming and no cutting or harvesting any part of it in any way and a strict limit on the number of plants was enforced. Many elders still value the plant as a powerful medicinal (Older Male, personal communication, 2015).

All of the farmers observed and interviewed in the Thailand villages practice terrace farming; however, many do not practice swidden techniques anymore due to government restrictions. The farmlands were primarily located on steep mountain sides that would be difficult to farm without terraces (See *Figure 3*). Several participants expressed that the local Thai government has become stricter in resource use and agriculture. One participant stated they



Figure 4. Hmong women preparing chickens after ceremonial sacrifice in Kun Chang Khian. During shamanic rituals for the New Year, most of the shamans used chickens as offerings. After the ceremony, their bones are further used spiritually, and the rest is prepared for food. Photo by author.

are not allowed to expand farmlands or leave boundaries which has thus stopped nomadic traditions (Young Female Farmer, personal communication, 2016). It appears that many of the Hmong in the village sites face similar political-legal restrictions that impede them from conducting agricultural activities as they would prefer. However, there exist no agencies restricting family members from working on the fields or much of the other smaller yet harassing barriers found in California.

Animal Sacrifice

Animal sacrifice is done during various ceremonies to make offerings to spirits and honor the deceased. Traditionally, standard farm animals are used, such as chickens, pigs, and cows. These animals are chosen for specific spiritual reasons based on the type of ceremony performed (See *Figure 5*). Chickens are one of the most commonly used animals (See *Figure 3*). A participant stated they are considered “a messenger that guides souls.”

However, many of the Hmong still find it challenging to practice these traditions in California because many of the non-Hmong residents are still not familiar with the Hmong culture and feel frightened about the ordeal and misunderstand what they are doing. In addition, many residents simply find it unacceptable. Due to this, many of the Hmong cautiously and secretly perform the rituals due to the fear that



Figure 5. Traditional feast after pig sacrifice in Kun Chang Khian. Participants cook their portions after the pig was sacrificed at a funeral ceremony. Photo by the author.

non-Hmong residents will complain and report them. The young male participant who has been raised his entire life with traditional beliefs attested to this struggle. He stated that the Hmong community is always careful about where and when they perform ceremonies so that they do not draw attention. They often try to hide the ceremonies by doing them in a garage or a tent. He described one ill-fated incident his family had with the law. They had a ceremony with a pig offering and after the pig was slaughtered while they were preparing the meat to be cooked, the police came to their door due to some neighbors who were worried that they were slaughtering dogs.

Acquiring the most spiritually appropriate animal for a given occasion is also an issue. The Hmong believe certain animals have different degrees of spiritual power and significance for particular situations. Due to the difficulty in acquiring certain animals, chickens are often substituted even though they are not spiritually suitable at times. For example, the young male participant described a frightening situation when his family was near a river and his brother almost drowned. This was believed to be the result of a dragon spirit that his brother offended at the lake.¹⁶ This ordeal required a shaman to performing a cleansing ritual to reconcile with the spirit and prevent any further consequences. He stated that normally they would use a goat in that situation, but they used a chicken because it was the only accessible animal. He further claimed that his brother became ill later because of the “unsatisfactory performance” (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, 2016). Many shamans in the United States will now often use a type of ritual paper called *Nyiaj* instead of animals because using an animal often becomes too troublesome altogether (Temple of Hmongism President, personal communication, 2015). Although the shamanic tradition still continues for the Hmong in California, significant changes and adaptations are in process to cope with the new environment. As expected, the

difficulties described by many of the California Hmong were virtually non-existent in the Thailand village sites. Villagers freely conducted sacrifices in their homes and at burial sites (Fieldnotes 2015-16).

Discussion

The primary objective of this paper was to reveal the status of post-resettlement challenges in cultural activities for the Hmong in California. Cultural practices of funeral ceremonies, environmental geomancy, geomancy of the home, agricultural traditions, and animal sacrifice were explored. Challenges were acknowledged in the categories of socio-cultural, legal, and environmental obstacles. To achieve this, I collected narratives and anecdotes from interview and observational data about the various challenges they faced and when appropriate, I compared it to the Hmong in traditional village environments of Thailand.

The narratives revealed that the Hmong continue to face conflicts in all three categories. Some changes appear to not concern the Hmong much, such as farming in the Central Valley as opposed to terraced farming on the mountainsides in Asia. As spoken from the words of the NHFA director, this is actually something that the Hmong take pride in; the Hmong are resilient and adaptable farmers who have a legacy of coping with changing agricultural conditions. Agriculture is arguably an integral part of traditional Hmong society and thus, holds a fundamental place in the Hmong culture. The director's strong statements exemplified this reality. Therefore, it was intriguing to see it still being a dynamic entity of their adaptation in California. It was also interesting to note the opium conflict still persists. Perhaps its usage still cryptically persists with many in the community.

Socio-cultural and legal challenges appeared to cause the greatest source of frustration and hardships. Various participants disclosed legal confrontations they have faced regarding

spiritual and agricultural activities. While the Hmong appear to be resilient to adapting their farming traditions environmentally, legally adapting to the complex state regulations seems to be far more challenging. Perhaps this aspect of Hmong culture will be less desirable to maintain for Hmong in California over the coming years. In addition, the findings showed that many of the Hmong have to focus on keeping shamanic performances hidden instead of focusing on the spiritual experience due to fear of persecution from the non-Hmong community. Funeral ceremonies touch on challenges from all categories. Consistent with literature (Lee & Tapp 2010), participants exemplified how difficult a traditional funeral is in the urban Californian environment. Not only are some funeral traditions unfeasible and illegal to perform in residential and funeral homes, but it is incredibly expensive. This was an aspect that the literature did not mention yet was arguably the most burdensome. Many of the Hmong are not able to afford following these traditions. It was interesting to hear how significant and symbolic mountain landscapes still are from various participants in California. It became clear from their exact words and my observations, that the role of the mountains Tomforde (2006) argues are still a fundamental Hmong geomantic principle yet this is likely to fade away in the generations to come as environmental change does not nurture these connections and as the next generations assimilate towards western views. Another deviation from literature was regarding the issue of community dispersion. Lee & Tapp (2010) regard long distances as not an issue due to the ease of transportation in modern cities. However, respondents reported it to be a problem. It is probable that the funeral tradition will continue to evolve to cope with these challenges for years to come.

It was intriguing to see how many of the Hmong still hold firm beliefs in geomancy of lived spaces outside and inside the home. The findings revealed when it comes to specific

household spirits, the only ones recognizable to some participants were ancestor spirits (Not referred to by any name) and *Dab xwm kab*. The latter spirit and its altar remain important to the Hmong in California and in the Thailand villages. It is probable that this stems from the fact that living quarters in California are not designed to cater towards Hmong beliefs. Perhaps living in apartments or the design and orientation of a home's interior in California pose less than ideal geomantic situations compared to a family in the village who for example, might auspiciously choose a site based on the predictions of a rice ritual as explained by the villager in Kun Chang Khian. These occurrences matter because many of the Hmong believe some of these poor geomantic situations are the source of various physical and mental ailments as was demonstrated in the house filled with restless spirits anecdote.

Many of the practices observed and discussed in Thailand were in line with that found in literature. Comparative analysis revealed the villagers are able to choose the sites of their homes in accordance to geomantic beliefs. Proper burial grounds are chosen with respect to the surrounding mountains. Funeral ceremonies are able to take place following traditions without the enormous financial burden. What is significant here is that the Hmong in California still express the cultural importance of many of these practices even though they are not able to do them. Many of these challenges not only continue to confront the Hmong's ability to practice their beliefs and culture freely, but also have the potential to impact their financial and mental health as described from the words of the NHFA director and several others.

Much of the refugee resettlement disasters from the earlier years (e.g. Bliatout 1982; Johnson 2002; Mote 2004) have largely improved. However, this essay has arguably shown that the Hmong are still in the mist of integrating themselves in the western environment.

Furthermore, this paper has shown an aspect of cultural conflicts that are less discussed in the

literature, yet are culturally significant to the Hmong, such as the sacredness of mountains, geomantic beliefs, and agricultural practice. Initiatives such as the Refugee Well-Being Project (RWBP) that were designed to ensure a healthy resettlement process from an empowerment perspective would greatly benefit from the data presented in this essay. This research is in line with culturally relevant and mutual perspectives argued by Ager (1999); Goodkind (2006); Rappaport (1981); Trickett (1996). Successful refugee integration is more than supplying basic living necessities; it is based on mutual learning and acknowledgment from both the refugee and host participants. Indeed, much valuable progress has been made in culturally relevant solutions (Udesky 2006), however, a fuller understanding of what challenges remain can provide valuable awareness for community leaders and members alike to coexist and continue to develop culturally relevant initiatives. Programs and communities that integrate mutual perspectives may perhaps assist the Hmong in successfully integrating in society while also maintain their rich cultural heritage.

Limitations

The following limitations suggest generalizations should be taken with precaution. The Hmong are a diverse ethnic group that is divided into various subgroups. These distinctions could vary in their practices and depth of practices, which this study did not thoroughly take into account. Although I took measures to avoid translation errors and interviewed mainly with English speaking Hmong participants, the fact that participants in Thailand did not use the Hmong language could have potentially created some discrepancy in translation. The experience of the Hmong in California may be significantly different from communities in other states. I saw this from the participant's mother who still practices some swidden techniques in rural Iowa. Overall, this ethnography discloses a selection of narratives that is valuable in understanding

contemporary cultural challenges but is not comprehensive. Further research should be done to reveal the dynamic and evolving situation of Hmong cultural practices.

Conclusion

The goal in this research was to explore how socio-cultural, legal, and environmental obstacles continue to impede the Hmong from performing cultural practices in urban California compared to their traditional forms in Asia. Here I have offered a collection of personal narratives on how one of the largest refugee communities in California is continuing to adapt to their novel surroundings. I presented a deeper look into lesser investigated cultural practices, such as geomancy and agriculture. The Hmong continue to experience conflict and challenges in their ability to engage in these cultural practices. The anecdotes showed many of the Hmong certainly seek to follow funeral, geomantic, and other spiritual activities, yet they find themselves often having to disregard them since contemporary environments and social norms make these far too difficult to accomplish. Laws and regulations are one of the greatest impediments for cultural practices. These conflicts with funeral, spiritual, and agricultural practices. While the agricultural tradition is deeply challenged by complex laws, the novel terrain poses no problem for a group of people who have been adapting their methods to evolving situations for centuries. The Hmong culture and community are a strong close-knit group whose tradition and worldview has often been at odds with the western one they have resettled in. Refugee resettlement is a challenging process for not only the refugees, but also the host communities who must learn to understand the needs and cultures of their new community members. Perhaps the phenomenon at present represent a fundamental step in the transition of Hmong culture and society in the years to come. Identifying the conflicts and evolving situations in the Hmong community will support further successful progress for the Hmong and provide

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valuable information for constructing culturally appropriate solutions for future refugee situations.

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Notes

¹ This pertains to the most notable and largest Hmong resettlements. However, there were various Hmong migrations who came later that were more voluntary and prepared, and thus less traumatic, such as one of the participants interviewed.

² See Bird-David 1999 for a detailed overview of the evolution and debate on the concept of animism.

³ For the remainder of the essay, italicized words of particular terms are in the Hmong language, which is based on the RPA (Romanized Popular Alphabet) of Smalley, Bertrais and Barney, 1953.

⁴ Tomforde (2006; 161) identifies the Hmong concept of geomancy in the Hmong language as this term.

⁵ Traditional Hmong Funerals are complex ceremonies whose complete details go beyond the scope of this essay. Here I discuss the most significant aspects of the ceremony to this essay's objective. For a more thorough description, see Lor, Lee, & Yang (2013).

⁶ The *Nias Tsum* Ceremony is another sacrificial ceremony that uses a pig. (Lor, Lee, & Yang. 2013; 13-15).

⁷ Various additional processes are performed such as verbal testimonies and attaching items (Leaves and arrows) to a participant's body that symbolize communications with the deceased's spirit and other spirits at present.

⁸ I use traditionalist here to refer to followers of animism and shamanism. These are the Hmong that follow much of the cultural/spiritual practices of concern to this essay most strictly.

⁹ This was valid since all participants spoke fluent English or were accompanied by a Hmong who was bilingual in Hmong and English.

¹⁰ Hmong Story 40 is an exhibition to celebrate and showcase the history of the Hmong people in California and abroad (see hmongstory40.org).

¹¹ (Fresno Farmer, personal communication, July 2016)

¹² (Female Villager, personal communication, December 2015)

¹³ I further discuss the social conflicts that arise from this practice in a later section.

¹⁴ See literature for an example of spiritual activities Tapp (1989) mentions about home spirits.

¹⁵ Ancestor spirits in general are believed to be some of the most vital spirits in the Hmong culture. All participants state this and whenever referring to spirits in the home, they refer to the ancestors.

¹⁶ The Hmong believe large bodies of water are inhabited by power dragon spirits that can be benevolent or malevolent depending on the situation (personal communication, 2015-16).

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