# The Texas Two-Step, Hmong Style: A Delicate Dance Between Culture and Ethnicity

## By

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## Abstract

Over the last thirty years since relocation, individual Hmong refugee communities in America have evolved with varying needs and outcomes adding to their complexity and diversity in the United States. There is a noted lack of research that examines these factors calling for further study to help understand the role of locality in the adjustment and diversity of refugees. This research begins a discussion on the unique Hmong adaptation in Texas. Unique and sometimes contradictory local factors deriving from the socio-political environment of Texas have helped to shape a relatively small, but distinctively cosmopolitan community. This paper argues that Texan economic, environmental, and political differences have forged uncharacteristic understandings and challenge conventional conceptions of what it means to be Hmong.

## Introduction

*"Being a Texan requires a certain attitude about life.  If you have the right attitude, then being a Texan is only a matter of style."*

***Michael Hicks on the Texas Perspective**.*

It's a warm spring day and 300 people are crowded into a north Texas community recreation center rented for a graduation party. Several graduates from high school and one college graduate are being honored by the crowd. Brightly colored balloons and banquet tables decorate the gymnasium; to one side is a buffet featuring Subway sandwiches, chips, and soda.  Flashing lights and a disco ball begin whirling as the DJ pumps out Billy Ray Cyrus' "Achy Breaky Heart." Up they spring from their seats, laughing and clapping.  Mothers with freshly cut and dyed hair, successful business men, grandparents and children, all make their way to the dance floor for a round of country line dancing. Not such an unusual sight?  It is for the Hmong of Texas, who have learned to dance a unique two-step between a new culture and an enduring ethnic identity.

According to 2000 U.S. Census data, more than 186,000 Hmong men, women, and children live in the United States.  While Hmong live throughout the country, the majority are clustered in five mega-communities located in Minnesota, California, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Michigan (Ranard 2004:29). Since Hmong refugees began entering the United States in 1975, much of the research, based on communities in California and the Mid-west, has concentrated on cultural consensus, high rates of unemployment, and the low

rates of economic self-sufficiency that the group has experienced (Scott 1986; Fink 1986; Fass 1986; Viviano 1986; The Economist 1984).

Yet in the last thirty years since relocation in the U.S. began, individual Hmong communities in America have evolved with varying needs and outcomes, increasing the complexity and diversity of the Hmong community in the United States. The extent of this diversity among a people long characterized as being held together with a well-documented record of common history and culture is a topic of emerging interest. Mark Pfeifer (2002), Director of the Hmong Resource Center and editor of the Hmong Studies Journal, noted the lack of research that examines the growing complexity and diversity of the American Hmong and calls for further study to help understand the role of locality in the adjustment and diversity of refugee communities.  In response to Pfeifer's concern, it is hoped that the present research will stimulate a discussion of the unique Hmong adaptation in Texas. Unique and sometimes contradictory local factors deriving from the socio-political environment of Texas have helped to shape a relatively small, but distinctively cosmopolitan community that is different from other larger Hmong enclaves found elsewhere in the U.S. Social environmental differences have forged "uncharacteristic" understandings of individualism and collectivism, which is resulting in new understandings of what it means to be Hmong. What has emerged is an anomalous community of Hmong who not only thrive economically and educationally, but whose cultural repertoire is so vastly different from other Hmong communities that it challenges conventional

conceptions, both within and outside Hmong communities, about what it means to be Hmong.

## Historical/Political Background

The earliest written accounts of the Hmong or *Miao*, as the Hmong are called in China, are found in Chinese annals dating to the third century BCE (Ranard et al. 2004). Fleeing Chinese rule, the Hmong began a 200 year Indochina migration experience that led some to small mountain villages in Vietnam and Laos. During the Vietnam War, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Royal Lao Army recruited Hmong from the province of Xieng Khouang, Laos, adjacent to the border of North Vietnam, for what has become known as the "Secret War." When the war ended and Communists gained control of Laos, enemy reprisals destroyed Hmong lands. Tens of thousands of Hmong began a long and dangerous trek across mountains and through jungle, working their way toward the Mekong River, and eventually into makeshift refugee camps in Northern Thailand (Knoll 1982).

The United States began accepting Hmong refugees shortly after their arrival in Thailand. Approximately 100,000 Hmong were forced to give up on ever returning to their villages in Laos. Reduced infant mortality rates resulting from improved medical care, better nutrition, and relatively high fertility rates have led to increases in the Hmong population in the U.S. The 2000 Census recorded more than 186,000 Hmong Americans in the United States. Hmong community leaders believe those population numbers to be closer to 250,000 (Ranard et al. 2004:1).

## Hmong Adaptation and Settlement Patterns in the United States

Initial placements of the refugees were controlled by voluntary resettlement agencies, private, non-profit organizations funded largely by the U.S. State Department. Relying heavily upon the benevolence of church organizations willing to assist in the resettlement process, the earliest arrivals to the United States had little to say about their geographic placement. By the early 1980s, the traditionally clan-oriented Hmong had been widely dispersed across many locations. As the "first wave" of refugees began taking responsibility for sponsoring new incoming Hmong refugees, especially fellow clan members, the result was a major secondary migration and consolidation of Hmong refugees from elsewhere in the nation to the five Hmong mega-populations (Bulk 1996). Originally 200 families with no specific relationship to each other were sent to Texas. Lost in a strange world and disjointed by the breakup of their clans, by 1980, over 150 families had joined the secondary migration to be reunited with family members in the five more populous Hmong communities. The 45 families who chose to remain in Texas had little if any education from Laos. The Hmong refugees that remained in Texas did not possess the educational backgrounds and skill levels that eventually enabled them to move into white-collar positions. According to Thoa Phia (personal conversation November 2, 2006), the Director of the Hmong American Planning and Development Center, these Hmong were mostly uneducated, with an exceptional few who possessed the equivalent of a third-grade education. This education, however, did not prepare them to move into technically skilled, administrative, or entrepreneurial positions immediately.

Like most immigrants from lesser-developed countries, their first jobs were in the less-competitive service sector: namely, housekeeping, dishwashing, and laundry positions. As sufficient language skills and an automobile were obtained the men moved on to higher paying machinist jobs. By 1981, the small Hmong community in Texas had largely done what others around the country found to be very difficult to rapidly accomplish: reach economic self-sufficiency.

## Challenging Conventional Hmongness

The popular uniformist view of culture sees societies as bounded entities containing members who share a common set of concepts (Lucke 1995:3). This paper chooses to approach culture through its cognitive concepts rather than the more uniform behavioral patterns that typically result from those ideas. Few theorists espousing the uniformist view would assert that each member of a society shares an identical and complete set of concepts with every other member. However, many anthropologists, especially those working with relatively isolated small scale societies, tend to write as though all members of the same gender and age groups share core concepts through which they conceptualize and define the groups "cultural repertoire" (Hein 1998:12). While there is agreement that all ethnic groups have a cultural repertoire, to what extent members of a group can engage in practices outside of the shared value system before it challenges the content of the repertoire itself is still unclear.

Nevertheless, assumptions of homogeneity were an important and sometimes misleading element in earlier anthropological theories of culture change and persistence. Pelto and Pelto (1975) suggested that students of "exotic"

cultures were often so intent on comparing the "Other" to Western societies that variation within a community was often overlooked. They also point to one source of this conceptual shortcoming, citing Murdock's (1971) assertion that in order to distinguish the field of anthropology from psychology early anthropologists downplayed intrasocietal variation as a way of authenticating the existence and importance of the "supra-individual realm of Phenomena"(Lucke 1995:6). Another aspect favorable to production of monolithic generalizations came from the popularity of linguistic models of culture in anthropological theory. Goodenough's (1970:99) influential definition of culture as "a set of standards for perceiving, evaluation, communicating and acting" committed ethnographers to identifying a set of shared standards.

While the conceptual paradigms of culture in anthropology are debated, Hmong culture in America continues to be treated as a unitary phenomenon. Works examining intracultural variation of the Hmong community in the United States are few; for example, in the existing literature related to local Hmong communities, there is only one ethnographic description of variability among Hmong in Georgia (Duchon 1997:89). Thus a study of the Hmong in Texas is a necessary addition to understanding the Hmong diaspora and to move the dialogue regarding Hmong adaptation, change, and identity beyond a popular and academic discourse limited by older theoretical models emphasizing the "Otherness" and homogeneity of "Hmong" culture.

In light of these challenges, this study looked at the Hmong in Texas asking whether there could be a threshold of agreement below which certain

cultural traits would not be considered a part of the cultural repertoire, despite their presence among some members of the community. And if so, can the Texas Hmong be described as ascribing to "their" culture in the absence of such traits? A primary goal of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of how Hmong in Texas define themselves as a community, and how elements of Texas Hmong identity are similar or different from the picture of Hmong communities produced by existing scholarship. How do Hmong in Texas reconcile the cultural contradictions that differences in social values create? Finally, what are the social implications of negotiating contradictions between the local culture and a larger "Hmong" ethnicity as they are experienced by individuals who interact with the institutions and social expectations of yet another cultural system, that of their adopted homeland?

## Methodology

This research was done over a five month period of time and in cooperation with the University of Texas at Arlington's Anthropology Department and McNair Research Program. A qualitative approach was used in the context of observing naturally occurring behavior, specifically participant observation and structured interviews. I conducted over twenty-five structured interviews within the community at all levels of its social stratification, and thirty-nine site visits as a guest in homes and at community events. Key informants included community leaders, religious specialists, men, women, and youth. Respondents included first wave refugees (those who had been originally settled in Texas), second wave refugees (those who had migrated form elsewhere),

community leaders, as well as Hmong from larger communities outside of Texas. Interviews took one to three hours each, using an interpreter when subjects were not English speakers. The interpreter was a young college student who was a second generation Hmong, and a transplant to the Texas community herself. Participant observation occurred in the context of formal gatherings (weddings), leisure activities (parties), private, and individual settings (home, shopping, and eating). The observations and interviews were supplemented with research using existing English-language academic publications about the Hmong, as well as government and agency documents relating to Hmong resettlement and social services.

### The Hmong in Texas

By early 1982, as an economic recession in America deepened, extreme competition for entry-level jobs characterized the labor market. Nationally, Hmong competing with experienced Americans for the jobs tended to lose the struggle. Often their only choice was to be unemployed in already overpopulated areas as unskilled labor. Duchon (1997) discussing the destitute state of the U.S. Hmong, notes:

> In San Diego, for instance, 95% of the adults were on welfare; 77% were unemployed (Scott 1986). In all of California, where, by some accounts, the world's largest peace-time Hmong population now resides (Finck 1986), 80% to 90% were still unemployed years after the first refugees arrived (Viviano 1986; The Economist 1984). Minneapolis St. Paul, Minnesota, which has many services available to Southeast Asian refugees, a 40% rate of unemployment persisted as recently as 1991. [Duchon 1997:74]

These circumstances propelled the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to make quick decisions to address the deepening unemployment and mass migration issues among the Hmong refugees.

By early 1982, the ORR sought $20 million from the government for new, targeted assistance grants that would bypass the states and provide funds directly to Mutual Assistance Agencies (MAA) and refugee self-help associations helping to move the Hmong to employment and economic self-sufficiency. An ORR study found that the Hmong in Texas, although a relatively small community (about 45 families) were all working and self-sufficient.  In 1985, they recruited Thao Phia Xaykao, a Hmong refugee "success" story working at the University of Houston in their Small Business Development Center to come to Fort Worth.  He would head up one of the ORR's resettlement operations intended to recruit and relocate Hmong refugees from the high public assistance states of California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to what was emerging as a region with a growing economy with a relatively low cost of living: the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex.  Xaykao, in a letter to the author (July 22, 2005) states that each year the new Hmong American Planning and Development Corporation (MAPDC) successfully resettled an average of 25 families in Texas, slowly building the community to over 250 Hmong families over the next 10 years.   The program was perceived by government officials as a success. After an average of two months, 95 percent of the employable adults were off of public assistance and working full-time jobs with fringe benefits. Within five years, 60 percent of the families had purchased their own homes.

The MAPDC still heads up economic development in Texas and continue to recruit families through planned secondary resettlement. Consequently, the once small Texas Hmong micro-community has grown to over 1000 people and reached a level of self-sufficiency where only one family is on SSI and one other on food stamps. The children are generally driven to excel educationally with unusually high levels of graduation and college attendance. This environment, in which economic success and self-sufficiency are becoming the norm, is also the context in which "uncharacteristic" ideas of individualism and collectivism thrive.

### The Texas Socio-Political Environment

Although the Texas economy is now growing faster than the national average and is relatively stable, it is also known for the levels of state funding it puts into education and social-welfare programs. Household incomes are below average with 18 percent of Texans below the poverty line (as compared with 14 percent for the nation), and education levels and SAT scores consistently rank among the lowest in the country. Texas is a fiscally conservative state that has a history of low social spending ranking substantially lower than in the United States as a whole in almost all areas except food stamps. For example, Texas has the fourth-lowest level of TANF benefits in the nation, no statewide General Assistance (GA), and few county GA programs. Partly because of these low benefit levels, Texans typically stay on AFDC for shorter-than-average periods (only 17 percent of the caseload has been on AFDC for four years or more, compared with the national average of 27 percent). Texas also has one of the

largest uninsured populations, with 24 percent of the non-elderly lacking health insurance. (Pindus et al. 1998).

Social welfare in Texas is shaped by a belief in individual responsibility, distrust of "big government," and fiscal conservatism. Consistent with this philosophy, an overarching goal of welfare reform is to make sure that all Texans who are able to work do so. The direction of state public policy regarding assistance and entitlement is influenced by a number of variables, including local electoral politics and ideology, the socioeconomic class of policy makers, the court system, a restrictive tax system, the relative strength of interest groups and the impact of national social policies and federal funding.

The initial forty-five Hmong families who remained in Texas during the secondary migration period reached economic self-sufficiency in this unique economic and political environment and eventually adopted its philosophies and rationale as their own. Proud of their economic success, Xaykao, Director of the Texas Hmong American Planning and Development Center said "We [the Hmong community] begin to socialize the Hmong who arrive here, almost instantly, in this philosophy. We tell them self-sufficiency is obtainable here, but they must get it by doing what Texas calls 'pulling yourself up by your bootstrap.' Nothing is going to be handed to them here.  They must work hard, and work right away. Those who succeed in Texas are willing to do as we say.  They see the success of the other Hmong here, and do it."  One by one, arriving families are exposed to this cluster of social expectations. This has lead to construction of an alternative

norm of economic self-sufficiency and a higher standard of living for the Hmong in Texas, which is different from other larger Hmong communities elsewhere.

### Felt Needs

In a study of problems of community development among Hmong Americans by Yang (2003:1), the researcher defined felt needs as "perceived by individuals experiencing the problems, may be equated with want and are phenomenological in character." His paper discussed the problems and needs of the "Hmong American community" as identified by key members, who live in the community, and are well informed of the acute issues experienced by their "fellow co-ethnics."

Yang identified seven major categories of felt needs and problems among the Hmong: family conflicts, youth delinquency, generation gap, poverty, health and mental health, education, lack of know-how, and accessibility to information and resources. Issues mentioned most frequently were family conflicts, delinquent youth, health and mental health (Yang 2003). When I shared these findings with community leaders and Hmong community members in Texas, they scoffed at the list. As one prominent member of the community said, "That is one of the things we are so proud of here in Texas. We have almost no problems here. Our people live in peace with each other. We have no inter-clan conflicts, our youth are well behaved and not involved in delinquency, and I have not heard of any marriage problems in years. Yes. People don't realize it, but things remain very stable here."

Specifically, I had met one youth who was sent here to live with his aunt from California. He told me he had gotten in "a lot of trouble" up there "running with gangs and stuff." A Texas aunt told his parents about how well behaved the youth in Texas were and about the absence of gang activity, so they arranged for him to move to Texas. When I asked how he was faring in Texas he replied, "I like it. I haven't gotten into any trouble here. There isn't any trouble to get into – no one's into that stuff here. So, you just stop. It's not that I really liked doing it [trouble], it's just what everyone did up there; you know: pressure." When I questioned a community leader about it, his eyes turned serious: "Yes, yes, we don't have that kind of trouble down here and we want it to stay that way. When a youth or someone with youth is thinking of moving here, we [the community] tell them, 'You can't do that kind of thing down here. We have earned a good reputation with our hosts and we aren't going to ruin it, so you must live right if you come down here." Thus, just as some of his peers in one Hmong environment may socialize young people into delinquency, they are just as easily socialized into different behavioral patterns by the Texan environment. This suggests that even in the absence of traditional means of social control and in an alien environment, the group is still able to exert a certain amount of influence over its community members.

Poverty is another thing notably absent from the Texas community. To date, there are only two families on any kind of public assistance. The Texas Metroplex, in the early 1980s, was rich in low-paying manufacturing jobs that required no specific language skills. But unlike the larger consolidated Hmong

communities, the Texas families were thrown into an environment of English immersion due to being dispersed throughout the community. They and their children were forced learn and use English to survive. With language acquisition came the ability to move up to higher paying jobs and educational opportunities. With better language skills and an increased level of contact, the non-Hmong community played an important role in economic self-sufficiency. Soon the Hmong began exploring entrepreneurial ventures; more than half of the Hmong in the Metroplex are small business owners. For example, among my informants included the owner of a donut shop, a restaurateur, and proprietors of a dry cleaning business, a tax consulting firm, and an apartment complex. "It's inspiring," I was told by a Hmong who had recently migrated here from Kansas. "It puts you in a whole different mind set. We don't have to settle for a life of poverty. We can really make something here." She plans to attend college next year.

With increased language skills, higher education, and financial success, has come increased economic clout and access to information. The community in general is well-informed on modern life in America and how to access resources needed for success. When I asked who one would go to for business help, the answer was any of their many successful community members. Xaykao, the Director of their Hmong American Planning and Development Center, was often mentioned as a resource for information about political or government resources.

The Texas community differs from other urban Hmong in the perception that the community experiences relatively few problems with generation gap

issues. Perhaps it is because the youth, who aspire to know and associate with their fellow classmates, see their parents interacting and befriending their American colleagues and neighbors. It may also be that their parents are also educated, employed, home owners, or successful businesspeople who know and understand the issues facing Hmong in the U.S. The younger generation sees their parents in terms of the worldly successes that their new country and friends value. Whatever the reasons, the mutual respect and love between grandparents, parents, teens, and small children were often evident to me. To sum up, the Texas community did not seem to identify with the all of the felt needs and concerns of Hmong settled elsewhere in the U.S. as identified in existing research.

### Clan Structure/Role

The Hmong are traditionally organized by segmentary unilineal descent. The patrilineal clan system has dominated Hmong social organization for centuries and serves as a primary integrator for Hmong culture as a whole (Duffy 2005). Nine of the twenty clans are represented within the small Dallas/Ft. Worth community. Changes in clan structure are one way environmental influences effect cultural adaptation. Litwak (1970) hypothesized that the classical extended family would need to modify itself to some degree in order to offset certain liabilities in America. The Hmong in Texas exemplify such an adaptation.

Community authority has traditionally fallen under the leadership of its clan elders. In the more populous American Hmong communities, geographical cohesiveness is the general rule, which reinforces this hierarchical power structure (Weinstein 1978:77). Few in number and not dominated by any particular clan,

the Texas Hmong are dispersed geographically and live in no particular area in relation to each other. This has resulted in a much looser social organization that leaves authority and decision making essentially to individual household heads. For instance, important social or religious gatherings such as weddings and parties rarely occur along clan lines; rather they involve the whole Hmong community. Such events traditionally focused on the household and lineage and served to reinforce or renew lineage ties. While the Texas Hmong still consider family and clan their basic and most important social unit, geographical isolation has caused their micro community to function in ways traditionally oriented around the clan, such as becoming the unit of production, consumption, social control, and mutual assistance.

In like fashion, the role of community elder has also evolved. The Hmong have been traditionally self-governed through their tradition or respect for the authority of village elders. Community problems and disputes are negotiated through them, as they serve as judge, jury, and as an important means of social control. As a consequence of the blended social patterns and the relative absence of problems in the Texas Hmong, the position of elder has been relegated to a more symbolic role. Community members still maintain a sense of collectivity, yet they have grown somewhat less dependent, more individualistic, more self-reliant, and more self-assertive than Hmong counterparts elsewhere.

None of these cultural adaptations were ever intended to be "anti-Hmong," but evolved as constructive and logical responses to the circumstances and resources available in the Texas environment. What have emerged are new

patterns of kinship, both in how kin are reckoned as well as variation in the choice to activate traditional kin ties as a resource or not.

## Religion

Traditionally, the Hmong belief system is based on beliefs in spirits and ancestor veneration. A growing number of Hmong have converted to Christianity since the 1950's; by some estimates, fully one half of the Hmong in the United States are now Christians (Duffy et al. 2005). Traditional spirit worship serves to bind the community and clan together, as members share in religious responsibilities, partake in family rituals, and help one another in the practical tasks related to ritual performances. Religious specialists such as shamans are needed to intercede from one world to the other.

In addition to undermining confidence in traditional specialists, conversion to Christianity causes structural problems for a kinship system strongly associated with ancestor worship and funeral rites. Indeed, it is reported as one of the more divisive issues in larger Hmong communities. One informant recounted her experience:

> When my father became a Christian he was excommunicated from his family. His own family would not talk to him. The church had to become his entire life, but that was hard because the Hmong community is so interconnected. We had to move to get away from feeling all the time like outcasts. So we moved to Texas.

Not all Hmong in Texas are Christians, in fact, depending on who one asks, the actual number or "believers" ranges anywhere from 10 to 80 percent of

the community.  What may be somewhat different in the Texas community is that

Christianity is more tolerated. As on informant said,

> We have all just learned to get along down here.  I mean, at one time there
> was so few of us that we really couldn't afford to hold grudges. We all
> needed each other, so we learned to modify our behavior around each
> other not to offend.

For example, everyone in the community I spoke with told me that the

Christians don't eat meat or blood used in a sacrifice. Since animal sacrifices,

especially chickens, are such an intrinsic part of their life, such meat is commonly

served in Hmong meals and at parties.  "At parties and gatherings we always

serve two different meats so we don't offend the Christians." When asked if this

was a bother, one person replied, "We are used to it now. It's really not an issue."

I witnessed an interesting blend of these two styles of worship at a Hmong

wedding (traditionally steeped in ritual and sacrifice) I attended between a

Christian bride and her pantheist husband.  The formalities alternated between

prayers to the Christian pastor offering thanks to the Christian God and an animist

offering prayers to the bride's supernatural entities, the waving of chicken feet by

the animist followed by the sign of the cross.  Food was offered that had been

offered as a sacrifice and food that had not. The "strong drink," usually hard

liquor that is drunk by the groom and the negotiators throughout the ceremony,

was toned down to light beer "for the sake of the Christians."

Despite the tolerance for Christianity, it was unusual to see converts across

family lines.  One Hmong pastor recounting how they go about proselytizing in

their community said:

> First you must approach the oldest male of the family as all decisions are made through him. I would explain the case for Christianity then wait. You cannot push, you just have to wait until he gets back to you, and it may be some time. When he returns to you he may say 'no' or may invite me to speak to their family. In this case the oldest male will call all family members together for my presentation, after they would openly debate its merits among them. The authority figure listens to all sides and then decides for the family. Either they all come, or they all don't. The influence of the family is strong. Rarely will one cross it.

When I asked what he would say to try to persuade them he said, "We tell them that there are no religious specialists down here in Texas, and when they die they will not be able to be buried in the traditional way that will join them with their ancestors." Specifically, the Christian burial process is quicker, cheaper, and easier to execute in the "Bible belt." By contrast, traditional Hmong funerals involve not only extensive time but expense; a cultural specialist must be contracted and sent from a larger community, and as many as 10 oxen and pigs may be slaughtered for the departed to take to the other world as company and as an asset in time of need (Duffy et al. 2005). This argument is a viable adaptation in an economically driven community without access to resources. In a community where independence and image consciousness mixes with "Bible-belt" euphemisms such as "God helps those who help themselves," it is easy to see why some Hmong consider "America's religion" a more comfortable fit for their life in Texas.

Another religious variation in Texas is the extent to which the Hmong freely vacillate between traditional spirit worship and Christianity. One community informant explains:

> We have Hmong who are having a hard time and are convinced by the Christians that it is because they need to trust in their God. So they say, 'OK, I pray to your god.' And they get what they ask for, so they become Christian. The next time they have trouble they pray, and maybe they don't get what they want, so they say 'Oh, it's because I've made my ancestors angry!' And they go back to their old way, until the next thing happens. This sort of flip-flopping happens all the time.

In Texas, family units have greater freedom to explore and choose their own spiritual destinies, which in some cases has caused them to reinforce, rather than abandon, traditional beliefs. In fact, evidence points to Hmong Christians retaining considerable faith in their traditions as decisions are made in typical familiar matters and are based on afterlife values.

## Value Orientations

My findings suggest that many of the values and adaptive mechanisms of the Hmong, while branded to resemble the Texan perception of "economic success," are still closely associated with traditional Hmong values. As John Connor (1976) notes, "Perhaps the conflict between two opposing views of acculturation or retention may be resolved in part by the understanding that acculturation is not necessarily a unitary process of which all of the meanings or values of one group are completely replaced by those of another." Following the concept of "psychological lag" as formulate by George De Vos (1973:13-60), individuals in the larger Hmong communities may express a desire for more autonomous relationship from community elders, such as the desire to move away from family to relocate to another area. It is psychologically easier for them to stay where they are told because of internal sanctions. There is, therefore, a lag between expressed desire and actual behavior. Likewise, where a tighter clan

structure and interdependence might have been a desired trait for the Texas Hmong, it wasn't an available resource. New strategies had to be developed and adopted in order to survive. America social service agencies were quick to serve up their recipe of success through a good education and hard work on one's own merit. These new strategies brought the Hmong their desired success. As a consequential by-product, the community earned a reputation as "good" citizens who share the same values as their host state. Good citizenship, education, and economic success might have started out as adaptive mechanisms and success strategies, but have over time, become *their* dominant values, thereby essentially Hmong in nature.

In contrast, more populous Hmong resettlements around the United States, by sheer numbers, were unable to achieve those same goals. The by-product of high unemployment and massive presence earned them a less favorable reputation among their hosts. Their traditional means of coping with an adverse situation is to "circle the wagons" around the familiar. In the absence of self-sufficiency, cultural preservation may have been a comfortable and tangible way to create meaning out of their situation.

De Vos (1973) theory would suggest that both sets of values grew out of coping mechanisms and success strategies from within the framework of who the Hmong were as a people. And that, while expressively different, they both remain essentially Hmong in nature.

## Cultural Identity and Tradition

No matter where one travels, the Hmong have a very clear image of themselves as distinct from the non-Hmong. What identifies them as Hmong in America is becoming more provisionally defined. When Hmong cultural leaders in St. Paul, Minnesota are asked what sets them apart as a distinct ethnic group, they point to their ritual practices. Where identity was tied to these practices, their preservation was of utmost importance. In contrast, when the same question was posed to the Texas Hmong, they responded that their identity as Hmong was secured by their unique social structure based on kinship ties and clan systems. "It's not our traditions that hold us together," I was repeatedly told, "but our strong clan structure." Both answers, although expressed differently, are rooted in the same value of family.[1] Understanding the role of locality will give insight into the forces that shape the different representations of family and therefore identity.

A Hmong person's final rite of passage, and arguably their most revered, is the funeral. Elaborate rituals include animal sacrifices, special meals, and playing the *qeej,* a musical instrument. In the case of traditional funerals, the *qeej* player traces the spirit of the dead person through its life from birth to guide the soul to join its ancestors in the Otherworld (Cooper 1997). The traditional funeral serves to reinforce its community social structure dominated by kinship ties.

According to one informant, the Hmong funeral must be performed to exact detail or the spirit will get offended and bring bad luck or catastrophe to a family. "I have seen this. Usually it returns to an elderly person or a teenager. It

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[1] Although some may argue that the answers appear to be saying the same thing, the fact that the discourse used by the two areas is markedly different merits distinction and analytical significance

let's them know 'The way you do the funeral services aren't right. That's not the

Hmong way. You must do me right" (Personal communication 2005). To this

end, a community organization in St. Paul, Minnesota, home of over 60,000

Hmong, offers after school lessons to the next generation on how to play the *qeej*,

and perform valued rituals.

In contrast, the small Hmong populations in Texas have always had to do

without such luxuries as cultural preservation grants, instruments, or religious

specialists. In the early days of resettlement, the elder Hmong feared that in the

absence of such traditions, their souls would not find its way to their ancestors

after death. By the early 1980s most of the elderly Texas Hmong had migrated to

the more populous areas of resettlement. As a consequence, the remaining

population was young, not very knowledgeable in traditional life-ways, and

lacked the resources to do much about it.

Adaptive measures soon began to take root in Texas. Without the means to

send for ritual specialists or pool money for the elaborate sacrifices (oxen and

pigs) required by the souls, the pragmatic economic sensibility of the Texans took

over. Adults began to construct "spiritual wills" outlining certain freedoms that

relatives could take in arranging their funeral. One Texan Hmong recounted this

story about his mother:

> When she was old and dying, she said to me "I know you don't have much
> money, and the expenses of a proper burial are beyond the family's means.
> Don't go into debt. That would make my spirit unhappy. It's OK. Just do
> the best you can. Don't kill any cows or buffalo for me. I can't bring them
> with me. Be practice. Use your meat resources wisely, use fish and spices.
> I'll [speaking of her afterlife state] understand." Families here realize we

don't have the resources to uphold traditional practices. So we have modified them. We are flexible that way.

Others, afraid their family would not be able to give them the "proper" burial, converted to Christianity where the issue would be skirted entirely. One informant stated: "The American Christian burial is a quicker and cheaper way to be reunited with your ancestors. It just makes more sense for us here." Where Christian conversions, and the loss of traditional funeral practices are seen as family dividing sacrileges in the larger Hmong communities, the young Texans had grown accustomed to cultural compromise and understood the Christian practice as a viable and economic alternative to being reunited with their ancestry. In this way neither practice nor value is any less Hmong than the other. Following the ideas of Clifford Geertz (1966), tradition has an intrinsic double aspect to it. It is at the same time reflexive as it is lived and thought about, as it is self-modifying. In the Texas Hmong, it is reinvented to fit the modern needs of the group and therefore, provisionally defined by its environment.

The Texas response to queries about what makes them Hmong points to the importance of kinship and clan organization. This response grew, in part, from the absence of such a culturally identifiable Hmong behavior as traditional rituals. Kin is a non-negotiable fact. Where traditions are fluid constructions, kin has an essence of timelessness to it. It is constant across generations as any Texas Hmong can still trace their descent, in male lines, to a common ancestor. To them, it is the non-negotiable social rights and obligations that are very strong between members worldwide that forever tether them to being Hmong. By

contrast, in the more populous Hmong communities, where knowledge is more likely to be known and shared, persons are judged on competence in cultural knowledge, and their claim to membership is validated based on the ability to play roles adequately. Both values of ascription look to the past for definition and are rooted in the fundamental and overpowering dominance of their kinship network. The selection of what constitutes tradition, however, is made in the present (Linnekin 1883:241).

## Women/Gender Roles

In the Hmong patriarchal system, the family is under the authority of the male head of the household. Sons inherit the family property and heirlooms and are generally the ones to receive an education, whenever the opportunity exists (Duffy et al. 2005). A married woman has limited rights and voice in her parents' household, and she will have to work hard to earn her place in her husband's household. Marriage partners are lifelong companions and, as such, are expected to meet the spouse's needs for companionship and sexual partnership as well as to succeed within the culturally determined gender roles of the community. Variations exist in those roles between the Texas Hmong and the more populated communities.

Recent research on gender construction such as that of Robert Connell (1995) suggests that ideal gender norms tend to be expressed in a hegemonic, successful, "culturally exalted" manner in society. Kobena Mercer (1990) uses the term "counter-hegemonic" to describe gender constructions outside that realm of ideal values that may force a re-centering process that changes the content of the

gender role norms. In the case of the Hmong in Texas, the research suggests the possibility that female behaviors have challenged and changed dominant normative values.

Normative appearances are most often expressed to fit into a specific social and cultural context. Female dress patterns are thus constructed to receive positive review from others. One woman who had recently moved to Texas from a larger Hmong community talks about her first impressions of the women:

> At first I thought 'What is going on here?' All the women have cut hairstyles and different colored [dyed] hair. In my old community, if women did that, others would see her and scorn her. In Texas, things are very different; they actually praise each other for that. Their husbands too, they like their wives like that. I am thinking of getting my hair done too. I always wanted to, but it would have been a shame to my family. Now, I guess it's OK.

She also noted other differences, such as women eating with men at large functions (as opposed to traditional patterns in which women ate after men), women smiling a lot, and being more gregarious. "It just seems like they are able to blend in more with the people of Texas without compromising who they are. I mean, the women don't have to wear long skirts or anything to know they are Hmong. They are secure in their identity and that's enough for them."

Hmong-American women also have to balance Hmong and American notions of success. Fecundity has traditionally been an integral value for Hmong women. To marry young and to have children, and thus be assured a valued role within the community, remains an important in the larger Hmong communities (Lynch 1999). The Hmong in Texas, however, have structured their social life more in tune with achieving success as measured on American economic terms.

For them, that has meant a solid educational footing. That value for education has superseded that of immediate childbirth. While women are still expected to marry and have children, putting that decision temporarily on hold in favor of a higher education is encouraged. For example, at the Hmong wedding I attended, the ceremony was held off for the week *after* they graduated High School. When I asked the eighteen-year-old bride what her immediate plans were, they included work and college. Both set of parents were pleased at this direction, as it would assure them a more economically prosperous future.

At a Hmong-American woman's conference held in Wisconsin, women from the traditional communities expressed frustration that even the educated Hmong men in their communities prefer women similar to their mothers, women tied to the gender roles of the past (Lynch 1999). Consequently, Hmong - American women from these communities who attend college are expected to fall back into the gender roles with which they were raised. On the other hand, the young Hmong men in Texas are growing up with mothers who have internalized different gender roles, ones that include education, work outside the home, and success on American terms. It is not surprising that a less traditional and more cosmopolitan female construction has become the "culturally exalted" expectation of the Hmong men in Texas. This counter-hegemonic absence of reinforced traditional gender roles has challenged and changed dominating normative values. Thus, in the course of Texas' unique cultural interchange, the counter has become the mainstream and new standards of acceptable gender identity have emerged.

## Implications

What implications might the Texas variant of "Hmong" culture have for the future of the community? One possible repercussion is stratification.  In this traditionally egalitarian community, the Hmong do not considered themselves better than each other.  Recent observances at a national Hmong youth camp, however, showed distinct social cliques forming separating those with a higher SES, and those whose families were still "slumming it." One informant recalls:

> There was this prevailing opinion from the children of more successful parents that Hmong families from other areas of the United States should be fairing better by now.  The poorer Hmong kids were definitely looked down on by the others. That's something you don't notice here [Texas] because everyone in the environment is successful, it's the norm. But in that mixed arena . . . I really saw the attitudes" (Personal communication 2005).

As American definitions of success are fundamentally based on radical individualism, it is yet to be seen what these attitudes, a generation from now, will do for a social system in which individuals are interconnected and dependent on each other for support. Will social and family obligations between communities separated by geography erode in favor of teaching the rest of the nation to "pull themselves up by their boot straps?" Or will the generosity of a more prosperous community provide others the means to achieve success, Texas-style? Another challenge may arise in trying to reconcile traditional Hmong gender roles upheld in the more populous Hmong areas with the more "American" gender constructions taking place in Texas.  For instance, will realizing that the more traditional Hmong-American men are often hesitant to marry women with higher levels of education than their own cause Texas parents [also driven by economic and educational success], to encourage seeking a mate from Texas? And what

kinds of trouble will Texas Hmong women have in accommodating the traditional gender roles expected from a husband brought up in one of the more traditional environments?

And then, how will future resettlement patterns of the newly arriving Hmong refugees from the Wat Tham Krabok (in Thailand) be affected by the economic success in Texas as opposed to less favorable conditions in other Hmong communities? There is the potential that refugees who have lived in a more modern camp environment for the past twenty years have adapted patterns inconsistent with "traditional" expectations of earlier waves of refugees. Will they be "Hmong enough" to fulfill cultural expectations of their host communities? Will they be content to live with economic hardships, or will they opt for the more metropolitan setting of Texas where they may gain employment but have to lose revered cultural traditions in exchange?

Moreover, there is considerable speculation within the Texas Hmong community about the extent, or even desirability of further American acculturation. With the diminished role that elders (the traditional cultural gate-keepers) play, who will determine and at what point a cultural attribute is worthy of retention or extinction? The ways in which future cultural selection will be affected by growing economic success remain to be better understood.

And finally, what kinds of social pressures or social sanctions will each area put on the greater Hmong community to conform to each other's ideals of identity and Hmongness? This question returns us to that posed at the beginning of the paper: In the absence of an actual cultural consensus despite claims to a

uniform "Hmong" identity, is there a threshold of cultural agreement below which a community could not function, when it is no longer considered a part of "Hmong" culture?

## Conclusion

Economic and social policies have economic consequences for both groups and individuals. The same public opinion that shapes those policies also guide the development of individualism and collectivism by directing relationships with other humans in that environment. Analysis of the interaction among the historical, political, economic and cultural contexts of Texas helps explain the phenomenon that is the Texas Hmong.

The Hmong in Texas have negotiated their presence and identity in the Longhorn state with regard to perceived advantages and opportunities. This is balanced with respect to traditional values of the past. I argue that the current position of self-sufficiency is an outgrowth of an ongoing, fluid process of decision-making and interaction between Hmong and non-Hmong that may have roots in the cultural history of the Hmong in Laos, who found self-sufficiency as a group essential for their survival as a people. While ethnic groups may be defined as sharing a common history, values, attitudes, and beliefs, problems with this approach can be seen in analyzing the Texas Hmong community where cultural variation exists in relation to the Hmong as a whole. Deep in the heart of Texas, a unique correspondence between ethnic group boundaries and socio-political environment is forging uncharacteristic ideas of individualism and collectivism

for the Hmong. At the same time consequential successes are serving to both reinforce and distance this group from traditional notions of Hmongness.

Questions of identity raised in this paper reiterate the need to root future Hmong variation studies in a theory of locality. This paper only begins the dialogue. As the Texas Hmong learn the line dance required to survive this chapter in Hmong history, they provide an exciting opportunity to look into the relationships between locality, identity, ethnicity and culture. What remains to be seen is whether at the end of the night the Texas Hmong will be dancing alone, or will the greater American Hmong community eventually join in?

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