

Revamping Beliefs, Reforming Rituals, and Performing Hmongness? A Case Study of

Temple of Hmongism

by

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Abstract

Temple of Hmongism is a membership-based non-profit, new religious organization first launched in 2012 from St Paul, Minnesota, to promote Hmongism, a simplified version of traditional religion “*Dab Qhuas Hmoob*,” in Hmong immigrant communities around the US. This is a group of Hmong men and women who, through research and deliberation, strive to consolidate and institutionalize the indigenous Hmong beliefs taken with them from Asia, while at the same time, reform various religious rituals and practices in all areas, including Shamanism, weddings, and funerals, in the hope of making them “much simpler, less costly, and more friendly” and “full of Hmong identity and pride” in their newly adopted land. How does Temple of Hmongism revamp a system of traditional religious beliefs? What does it mean to a transnational Hmong community? Does it signify a continuous traditionalist or culturalist move, a move to search for Hmong identity, and a cultural resistance to the encircle and encroachment of traditional Hmong society by contesting and combating a dominant mainstream power from outside? In what way does Temple of Hmongism redefine Hmongness, the meaning of being Hmong? And how is it performed in religious rituals and everyday lives? Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with members of this religious organization, as well as participant observation at different religious practices, this study strives to understand this growing new religious movement in the transnational Hmong community, and see how religious faith, cultural heritage, and ethnic identity intersect and interact with each other.

Keywords: Temple of Hmongism, Beliefs, Rituals, Hmongness

Introduction

The Hmong, a relative latecomer in the American ethnic and cultural mosaic, have been going through many challenges and obstacles unimaginable to other immigrant groups in the US,

in such a short period of transition time, ever since being uprooted from their traditional society in Southeast Asia and migrating to the U.S. and other Western societies, at the end of the Vietnam War and the Secret War in Laos in mid-1970s.

The post-war transnational diasporic experience that the Hmong have gone through includes “forced dispersion to at least two foreign countries, struggling to maintain a collective memory of their homeland, and maintaining a Hmong ethnic consciousness” (Yang, 2003). As a result, Australian Hmong scholar Gary Yia Lee (2005b) argues that the Hmong experienced a “multi-pronged, transnational revival of their cultural heritage in response to urgent cultural needs after their post-war relocation in foreign cultures.”

In the last few decades, we have witnessed a dynamic change in the Hmong diaspora communities, especially in the United States. One of the important aspects of this change is that, with the emergence of new religious movements continuing to flourish, the *religious landscape* is undergoing a dramatic transformation that is reshaping the transnational Hmong community.

In regards to religion, one of the important institutions of humankind, Durkheim (1915) argues that, “in reality, then, there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence” (p. 3). It is a complex system of parts, including rites (determined modes of action) and beliefs (collective representations), “the totality of these beliefs and their corresponding rites constitutes a religion” (Durkheim, 1915, p. 41). Sociologist of religion, Berger (1967) argues that, faced with the uncertain and unstable nature of the social world, every society is engaged in building a significant world and that religion plays a pivotal role in the business of constructing meaning. Religion “has a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building” (p. 28).

New religious movements are on the rise, and are a “global phenomenon” (Clarke, 2006, p. xiii), as a response to the crises of identity, moral meaning, and profound cultural upheaval brought about by rapid social change and globalization, among other things in modern society. In his study of new religious dynamics in the Hmong diaspora, Hickman (n.d.) identifies two messianic religious groups, *Kev Cai Is Npis Mis Nus* and *Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv*. He argues that, some large-scale reorganizations of religious thought and practice in Hmong communities, such as ritual outsourcing, conversion to Christianity, and creating or joining a millenarian movement, “constitute responses to the challenges that migration, refugee resettlement, and transnationalism present in the contemporary diaspora” (pp. 3-4).

In an exploration of the impact of refugee migration and American refugee resettlement policies on the religious lives of Hmong refugees who resettled in the United States, Borja (2014) finds that not only refugee resettlement imposed pressures on the practice of indigenous Hmong religion and facilitated Hmong adoption of Christianity, but also, Hmong people adapted and reinvented their indigenous beliefs and practices, as well as institutions and identifications, in order to preserve their indigenous religious traditions. Borja (2014) points out that

...in the face of these challenges, Hmong Americans cleverly manufactured their indigenous religion as both religion and culture and have been quite savvy in capitalizing on this ambiguity. They have strategically claimed and disclaimed religion, deploying the flexible categories of religion and culture to preserve their traditions and to ensure accommodation of their beliefs and practices (p. 266).

She notes that “some Hmong Americans have even taken the step of establishing an animist church, shifting their practices to congregation-like sites, and creating official organizations

complete with 501(c)3 status” (p. 270). One of them is *Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv*, one of the new religious groups.

This paper focuses on a newly established Hmong religious organization, Temple of Hmongism. It contextualizes its rise, investigates the institution’s organization, structure, as well as rituals and practices. Through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions with members of this religious organization, and participant observation, this research is intended to answer the following research questions: How do we understand the rise and dynamics of this new Hmong religious movement, and the changing religious landscape in the Hmong diaspora? What are its impacts and implications for the transnational Hmong community? How does this (re)define Hmongness, the meaning of being Hmong?

Beliefs, Rituals, and Hmong Religion

To understand the rise and dynamics of this new Hmong religious movement, it is imperative to understand the cosmology, spirituality, as well as beliefs and rituals of the Hmong people. The religious system of the Hmong, according to Dr. Yang Dao (1993), is in fact, a total view of how the world operates—it is their (therapeutic) science, mythology, genealogy, history, and penal code. If they lose their knowledge of these systems of belief and explanation, the Hmong would lose an important source of information about themselves and their place in history and in the world. Tomforde (2006) holds a similar view on the connection between the Hmong religious belief system and Hmong culture, “religion - as one of the core aspects of Hmong culture - provides the Hmong with a total view of how the world operates and of their place in history and the cosmos.”

Discussing the Hmong beliefs and rituals, Lee (1996, 2010) points out that, traditionally, the Hmong are known to practice ancestor worship and spirit rituals. It is an assemblage of many

beliefs, based on ancestor worship and the practice of animism. Cooper (1997) concurs that, “the Hmong believe in a variety of natural, ancestral, and supernatural spirituals, which live in and animate all things” (p. 103). While speaking of Hmong cosmology, Rice (2000) also argues that the Hmong are animistic and practice ancestral worship (p. 13). Nicholas Tapp (1989) takes a step further and claims that, “Hmong are pantheists, believing in a variety of natural and supernatural spiritual forces living in and animating all things” (p. 59). However, in response, Her (2005) argues that, “the term pantheism, as a system of belief, is undeniably Eurocentric in origin, development and influence” (p. 2). He acknowledges that “Hmong Americans (as well as those outside of the U.S.) do not have an official name for their religion, yet it is not entirely clear if that concern is a pressing one in the eyes of many people” (p. 2).

However, what constitutes a true Hmong religion? This is not an easy question, because of the fusion of different *beliefs*, which is known as “*syncretism*”, though van der Veer once argued that “this can be seen as such a broad process that indeed every religion is syncretistic, since it constantly draws upon heterogeneous elements to the extent that it is often impossible for historians to unravel what comes from where” (van der Veer, 1994, p. 208). Symonds (2004) argues that “Hmong cosmology defines what it is to be Hmong” (p. 35); however, “Hmong cosmology is interwoven with that of the lowland groups with whom they have lived, particularly the Chinese, as well as with other neighboring hill dwellers in Thailand” (p. 11). This is also true of the Hmong living elsewhere. Yang’s (2006) study of the cult of Lady Kaying also offers a syncretic view of the origin of the Hmong system of beliefs. So, an essentialist view of traditional Hmong religious beliefs is problematic.

Beliefs and rituals are two important components of religion, as indicated by Durkheim (1915), who defines a religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred

things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (p. 47). He points out that religion is a more or less complex system of myth, dogmas, rites and ceremonies. Religious phenomena are naturally arranged in two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites. The first are states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are determined modes of action (p. 36).

Her (2005) explains the importance of ritual practice for the Hmong, “when Hmong Americans talk about religion, they generally tend to focus on what they do (practice), the ritual and ceremonial activities they hold in their homes” (p. 2). He states that “this suggests that they place as much emphasis on practice (ways of doing) as on beliefs, if not more so” (p. 2). The soul calling ritual is for sickness, shaman ritual for healing, soul releasing for reincarnation. Tomforde (2006) argues that, in Hmong culture, rituals are very important, many of them are performed on a regular basis, and are connected to many sorts of offerings. The Hmong rituals are thus extremely important, and without them it is impossible to maintain the cosmic order or to keep the ancestors and other spirits from harming the living. He emphasizes that religious beliefs and kinship structures are closely linked cultural domains that reproduce and reinforce one another through socio-cultural practices. They “continue to greatly influence daily life and constitute a central aspect of Hmong culture and identity.” In the same vein, Lee and Tapp (2010) argue that “Hmong kinship structure is really a ritual structure with religious rites and beliefs specific to each category of relationships such as the household, the lineage, the subclan, and the clan. Each category carries it with proper ritual prescriptions and social performances” (p. 23). Vang (2010) even argues that, “because animist traditions requires support from shamans

and extended family members, religion served as a pull factor prevalent in the secondary migration” (p. 79) of the Hmong in America.

The lack of uniformity in Hmong ritual practices, nevertheless, is another issue. Her points out, “What’s more, they accept these to be widely variable, different from region to region, community to community, and clan to clan” (p. 3). Cha (2003) further argues that, the lack of a hierachal, standardized structure of any type of religious belief or practice in Hmong society, reliance on oral tradition for learning such practices and beliefs, and the emergence of a transnational diaspora have undoubtedly led to geographical idiosyncrasies with regard to spiritual beliefs and healing practices (p. 136). However, Dunnigan (1986) points out that, although Hmong religious beliefs and practices are diverse, there is a strong tendency toward uniformity within the patrilineal kin group.

There are still debates as to whether Shamanism is part of Hmong traditional beliefs. Some see it as a traditional spiritual healing practice. Cooper (1997) argues that Shamanism is, in effect, a psychodrama of great subtlety and power. Its ultimate aim, however, is not so much religious as medical: to heal an afflicted person, whether that affliction be physical or mental, and to restore to the patient a damaged part of his or her own self (p. 134). So, he believes that it is compatible with other religions, “For this reason, it need not be seen as forming a threat to other religions which Hmong may adopt” (p. 134). Tapp (1989) also differentiates shamanism and other religious rituals,

Shamanism itself, as *ua neeb*, is sharply distinguished from the work of propitiating ancestors and household gods, which is referred to as *ua dab*. While only specialists, both men and women, may practice shamanism, any normal male household head should propitiate his ancestors and honor the household gods.

Nonetheless, Culas' (2004) study of the Hmong Messianism and Shamanism in southeast Asia found two forms of religious expressions among the Hmong in Laos, namely,

that Hmong Messianism draws an important part of its legitimacy and symbolic force from the mythological and ritual foundations of Hmong religion in a broad sense.

However, Shamanic rites and representations are the principal means of expression of traditional Hmong religion.

So, what is Hmong religion? Her (2005) suggests that, a definition of Hmong religion must include, as its central focus, the range of household activities which are aimed at achieving one or a combination of the following objectives: 1. Maintaining spiritual health and harmony within the individual and family; 2. Remembering the ancestors and deceased members of the family through various offerings; and 3. Ensuring continuity of the person and soul, from one generation to the next and from this life to the other.

Religion, Community, and Hmongness

From a functionalistic point of view, Durkheim (1915) and others see that religion plays an important social function in influencing the beliefs and practices of people in society. It serves to constantly bind the people together (social cohesion) in a community with common beliefs and values. Durkheim (1915) argues:

religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups (p. 10).

Durkheim further argues that religion never concerns only belief, but also encompasses regular rituals and ceremonies on the part of a group of believers, who then develop and strengthen a

sense of group solidarity. Rituals are necessary to bind together the members of a religious group, and they allow individuals to escape from the mundane aspects of daily life into higher realms of experience. Sacred rituals and ceremonies are especially important for marking occasions such as births, marriages, times of crisis, and deaths.

No concrete data is available regarding religious identification among the Hmong in the diaspora. Lee (2010) believes that the majority of those in Australia still follow their traditional beliefs in animism and ancestor worship. They believe that without these beliefs, there would be no Hmong culture and identity. However, according to Vang (2010), although no empirical study has been conducted to determine the distribution of Hmong American religious affiliation, it has been estimated that by the year of 2000, as many as 50 percent of Hmong Americans were Christian (p.86). Vang asserts that, “although differences in religious rituals have been an integral part of Hmong social organization, the conversion of Hmong to Christianity, both in Laos and in the United States, has affected cultural practices and kinship ties while further dividing the community” (p. 92).

Vang (2010) believes that Hmongness is frequently intimately associated with Hmong religion. Those who practice ancestral worship often see Christians as “selling out and no longer being authentic Hmong since they no longer value animist traditions” (p. 92). Dunnigan (1986) thus points out that, “religious belief and ritual observation, like language, has the potential both to reinforce and to dissolve Hmong social cohesion” (p. 47). Dunnigan (1986) explains that religious beliefs define relations between living members and their ancestors. Sacred rituals provide a means of memorializing these relationships and strengthening group bonds. For the non-Christian Hmong, knowledge of lineage ceremonies helps determine who qualifies as a member. It is not surprising that reconstituted refugee kin groups have

been known to reduce internal heterodoxy by pressuring members to switch their allegiance from Christian back to animism (p. 48).

Religious conversion, especially conversion to Christianity among Hmong, as indicated by Rice (2000), “has a great effect on beliefs and practices concerning health and illness as well as on the relationships between Christian and non-Christian Hmong” (p. 9). Lee (1996) points out that this conversion has driven a large wedge into Hmong society in America as the more fundamentalist converts refuse to interact with their non-Christian relatives, or to take part in the latter's ancestral feasts, seeing them as sinful pagan practices. The incursion into different religious practices has always divided the Hmong, and it is now a major cause of division, even among those following the same religious beliefs. Tomforde (2006) observes that,

when socially expected rituals are not held, rumors can spread quickly that the family is failing to observe religious norms and is behaving in a manner disrespectful to Hmong society. This deviant behavior can be ‘punished’ by the community, which can refuse to invite the family to rituals, or which can refuse to attend those rituals which the family does organize...Rituals such as shamanic healing rituals, marriages, mortuary rites and New Year celebrations are important events that maintain and renew the ties that bind individuals to their household, lineage and (sub-)clan group.

Unlike other religions, like Buddhism or messianic beliefs, Tapp (1989) argues that, the impact of Christianity on the Hmong has been dramatic, “Protestant missionaries such as the Presbyterians who worked in Thailand have generally adopted an approach that is much more culturally intolerant, often burning household altars and forbidding any kind of ancestral or funeral practice” (p. 40). The kinship-based clan or lineage is important in Hmong society at every level, and there is a customary need to perform ancestral and shamanic rituals at times of

life crisis and at particular points in the annual calendar to affirm and maintain that identity. However, once an individual or even a family or group of families converts to Christianity, it becomes virtually impossible for communal social activities, such as those at weddings, funerals, or even the New Year, to be performed together anymore (Tapp, 1989, p. 42). He believes that “the issue in the wider sense comes down to one of Hmong identity and how being Hmong is to be defined in the future” (Tapp, 1989, p. 43).

What is Hmong? Discussing the Hmong identity, Lee (1986) stresses the importance of Hmong beliefs and rituals, “to a Hmong, what distinguishes the Hmong from other people is their Hmong way of life. This way of life is centered around shifting agriculture, a language with mutually intelligible dialects, a strong belief in ancestor worship and animism, a division of labor according to family membership and sex, a social structure based on kinship ties through the patrilineage and clan systems, a patrilocal pattern of residence, a history of migration from southern China and a long tradition of being stateless.” Later, Lee (1996) proposes that, a number of factors characterize a person as Hmong, including: being born Hmong, having a Hmong name, speaking a Hmong language, belonging to a Hmong clan and observing Hmong rituals.

Temple of Hmongism: The Case

Temple of Hmongism, a newly established Hmong religious organization based in St Paul, Minnesota, is not a new religion. As explained in the group’s brochure, “Hmongism is a true Hmong religion. It is not a new and completely different religion, but a simplified version of our very costly traditional religion.”

It states that, “Hmongism means Hmong religion, as of Hinduism, Judaism, Daoism, or Buddhism. Temple of Hmongism is the name of the group, and the temple.” Temple of

Hmongism was launched on August 5, 2012, by “a group of well-informed Hmong men and women.” It sets itself apart from other Hmong religious groups, by stating that its foundation is “based on research, not on dreams or messianic belief.”

Hmongism, right from the very beginning, claims to be “a true Hmong religion”, and has its root in time-honored traditional Hmong beliefs. As the brochure states, “based on research, we believe that we do have a very good religion of our own, now called Hmongism.” It further explains, “Hmongism talks about the spiritual side of a human soul from birth to death, to the heavenly world, and to reincarnation. Hmongism is as good as a religion as any other and perhaps better than many.” Temple of Hmongism is positioning itself as “our religion of the future”, “We are proud to be Hmong, and we believe in reform to simplify our traditional and costly religion in order to survive and prosper in today’s world. We are not looking for or creating a completely new and different religion. Hmongism is it.”

Yuepheng Xiong, one of the founders and president of Temple of Hmongism explains that Temple of Hmongism reforms the traditional Hmong religious beliefs and rituals as “trim the leaves and leave the roots.” “The goal of the Temple of Hmongism is to reform and simplify our lengthy and costly religion in the areas of shamanism, weddings, funerals and other ceremonies in order to reduce time and money; thus, making it better and friendlier religion for our members and eventually for all Hmong.”

They are still doing research and consolidating the Hmong belief system, by identifying what truly constitutes the Hmong religious beliefs, and through discussing with the elders in Hmong communities and tracing Hmong religious practices back to Yunnan, Guizhou, and even Hunan, China. *Yawm Saub* and *Puj Saub*, *Ntxwj Nyoog*, *Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem*, *Siv Yis*, *Dab Xwb Kab*, *Niam Txiv Kabyeeb*, *Dab Txwv Koob* or *Dab Niam Dab Txiv*, *Dab Nyeg*, *Dab Qus*, *Vis Sub*

Vij Sw, Tswb Tshoj, and even the legendary Hmong ancestor, *Txiv Yawg* or Chi You. They are debating what the deities in Hmongism should be and how they should be appropriately worshipped. They hope in five to ten years, they could compile a Book of Hmongism, as a scripture for a Temple of Hmongism. With both consolidating beliefs and reforming rituals, the institutionalization of a Hmong traditional religion is underway.

For now, what concerns them most are the religious ritual practices. Xiong identifies several issues around the Hmong traditional religious ritual practices. One of the most important issues is their costliness. It is estimated by Temple of Hmongism that the Hmong community spends \$10 million a year on funerals in Minnesota, and over \$30 million a year throughout the United States. A normal Hmong funeral lasts from three to 10 days (Symonds detailed 10 days of a Hmong funeral's rituals), and costs anywhere from 40 to 50 thousand to over 100 thousand dollars, depending on the social status of the deceased. “These unnecessary practices have dragged us into poverty and backwardness. We are the victims of own religious practices. We have to change.” Temple of Hmongism aims to shorten the funeral process to one and a half days, reduces animal sacrifice to a minimum, and eliminates serving alcohol. As a result, a Hmongism funeral only costs about 10 to 15 thousand dollars.

The second issue is complexity. Some features of Hmong funerals are perceived as “redundant”, while others are seen as “contradictory, or simply outdated”. For example, they eliminated the *Tso Plig* (Soul Releasing) ceremony on the 13th day after death, because they believe it is redundant, since at the *Qhuab Ke (Showing the Way)* ritual during the funeral, the soul of the dead has already been released onto a journey to reincarnation. Some rituals or practices are all eliminated, like donation table where the grievers and funeral goers make a monetary contribution and the family members of the deceased chant a song of gratitude and

kowtow in response (*Kev Ua Tsaug*), as well as the *Lub Rooj Xim* (*Hais Xim* ceremony table) where all of the relevant parties of the deceased are represented around the table to discuss and solve all the problems and debts left by the deceased. They believe this makes the religious ritual more accessible and friendlier to young people, who do not know how to sing those ritual songs and kowtow. Also, more serious disputes can be resolved in court or after burial, and the funeral is reserved to show respect for the dead. This is actually one of the important reasons why Temple of Hmongism started. Many young Hmong people are drifting away from the traditional beliefs and rituals, because of the reasons mentioned above. “Hmongism will prevent our children from leaving us and our faith because Hmongism is better, friendlier, and cheaper,” says the brochure, “we simplify our rituals and programs, guaranteed to be easier, better, clearer, and precise, and most importantly to dramatically reduce time and money,” it promises, “Temple of Hmongism will grow and inspire our future generations to happily remain with Hmongism as their faith, full of Hmong identity and pride.”

Besides these two reasons, Lee (2010) also identifies some other issues that the Hmong confront in their practice of animism and traditional funeral rituals in the modern Western society, involving the law (e.g., killing live animals), practicality (living in a city neighborhood instead of an open village setting in the old country), lack of facilities or appropriate resources (e.g. no funeral home available, nowhere to burn paper money and incense), lack of expert performers and ritual teachers (e.g. no *Txiv Xaiv*), and lack of time.

The reform is necessary and imperative. Temple of Hmongism is membership-based, and all the members are considered to be “family”. It cuts across traditional clan-based lines, “Everyone and anyone, Hmong and non-Hmong, regardless of clan, gender, sexual orientation, and marital status, can be a member of Hmongism with the hope that it will become a national

Hmong religion.” Members pay a minimal membership fee per month per family to help with administrative cost, \$20 per month for a family up to 5 members, and \$25 for up to 10 family members, and \$30 for 11 and above. Members only pay for 20 years. After 20 years, they become permanent members. In the brochure, it states that, “the fee is guaranteed to be many times cheaper than both our traditional religion and Christianity.” Members will receive support in weddings, shamanism and funerals, with Hmongism priests and specialists helping with religious and spiritual needs, thus, “we are not concerned about the unknown and that we don't have to wait, beg, kowtow, please, and pay others anymore.”

The responsibility for all business matters of Temple of Hmongism lies in its board of directors. The majority of the board members are 1.5 generation of Hmong Americans, born in Laos or Thailand, who came to the US as refugees at a young age with their parents, grew up in the United States, and received a college education. This group of Hmong Americans is very conscious of and active in preserving Hmong culture and identity. They have been learning, disseminating, and protecting Hmong culture and traditions in the diaspora Hmong community for an extended period of time.

Temple of Hmongism eventually plans to construct a sacred space, a place of worship of the Temple of Hmongism, where all the religious practices will be moved from traditional Hmong houses into the Temple, with their own priests or *txiv plig* or *txiv coj dab*. Nevertheless, “Hmongism doesn't prohibit its members from doing some religious or spiritual practices in their house such as *teev xwm kab* (worship house spirit), *ua neeb* (healing rite and Shaman), or *hu plig* (soul calling), etc.”

Temple of Hmongism provides services to assist its members with important rites of passage, such as funerals and weddings, in a reformed way. Traditionally, “mortuary rituals as

the most elaborate and important of Hmong rituals, and the Showing the Way chant, which guides the souls to the ancestors, is often cited as a key to Hmong cosmology” (Symonds, 2004, p.110). As Lor (2013) explains, the Hmong view death as a journey for the soul of the deceased to retrace his footsteps circling back to where he went through in life, where he was born, and then proceeding on a journey to meet his ancestors in the Afterlife. Traditional Hmong funerals are elaborate and take several days until the burial day. There are many procedures involved, done appropriately and accordingly, depending on the age, and gender of the deceased.

At a Hmongism Funeral: Performing Rituals

The Hmongism funeral I was invited to was held in a rented funeral home at Koob Moo Funeral Chapel in St. Paul, Minnesota. The funeral service was on a Saturday morning, and started at 9 o’clock in the morning and lasted until 11:30 pm, plus a few hours on Monday. When I got there, there were Temple of Hmongism board members and family members busy setting up the funeral hall. Walking through the entrance, there was a table on the left, with a contribution box (*Thawv pab nyiaj tshav ntuj*), signup sheets, pictures of the deceased and a vase of flowers on the top. Above the table was a yellow grounded banner of Temple of Hmongism, with the black-white logo of Hmongism on the left, on the right were written three phrases, “Hwm tus tuag” (Respect the deceased), “Hwm xyom cuab” (Respect the family), and “Nyob ntsiag to” (Stay quiet).

At 9 o’clock, a special car from the morgue pulled in at the gate. A casket was rolled out in a procession led by the *Kav Xwm* (funeral manager) holding a torch with artificial flames showing the way. The deceased was welcome to the funeral home. The casket was placed in the main funeral hall, right in front of a big picture of the deceased. On the left was a small table on which two booklets were placed. By the table was a torch stand and white and golden spiritual

money hanging down from the ceiling. On the right of the casket were funeral wreathes. Right in front, a drum hung on a post. After that, family and friends lined up in front of the casket to pay respect to the deceased.

Next up was the *Qhuab Ke* ritual, followed by the *Qeej Tu Siav* ritual. At the funeral, Temple of Hmongism provided ritual specialists, *Txiv Qhuab Ke* (guide), *Txiv Qeej* and *Txiv Nruas* (*qeej* and drum players), *Kav Xwm* (funeral manager), *Txiv Xaiv* (blessing master) to perform the funeral rituals. The *Txiv Qhuab Ke* sat by the small table in front of the casket, chanting a shortened version of *Qhuab Ke* (showing the way), depicting the journey of the soul of the dead to the afterlife. A Hmongism booklet, *Phau Ntawv Cuag Poj Cuag Yawm* (the book to your ancestors) was also offered to the deceased, as a portable passport to meet their ancestors in heaven.

Temple of Hmongism keeps the essential symbolic elements of a traditional Hmong funeral, such as *Qhuab Ke* (Showing the way), *Qeej Tu Siav* (Song of the last breath), *Qeej Tshais* (Song of breakfast), *Qeej Sus* (Song of lunch), *Qeej Hmo* (Song of dinner), *Zaj Qhuab Kom* (Blessing to the family), *Qeej Cob Tsiaj/ Qeej Hlawv Ntawv* (Song for burning spiritual money) and *Qeej Saw Kev* (Song of arising for the journey). On the other hand, they eliminate some other elements, such as washing the deceased since this is also performed at the morgue, animal sacrifice because of some regulations, as well as rituals such as *Qeej Tsa Nees* (Awaken the horse), *Lub Rooj Xim* (Hais Xim ceremony). Temple of Hmongism also shortens the *Qhuab Ke* ritual from 4 to 8 hours to only 30 minutes, *Qeej Tu Siav* from an hour to 30 minutes, and *Zaj Qhuab Kom* from a whole night to 30 minutes, by eliminating lots of repetitions (See the chart below).

During the funeral rituals, the *qeej* and drum play an important part, to not only guiding the spirit but creating a world of Hmong where the deceased was connected to the ancestors and the family and friends were all connected to a community of Hmong. This became a site where being Hmong is displayed and performed explicitly through these rituals. A friend of the family at the funeral commented that, “this is very Hmong.”

One of the *qeej* players was Her Vue, who used to be a Christian, but was converted back to Hmongism two years ago, because in Christianity, in his words, he “doesn't feel belong, and feels lonely.” He sees Christianity as being “white”, even at his old church, the Hmong and other American congregation worshipped in the same church at different times and were separated. He learned to play *qeej* at 13, when he was in Laos, but a Hmong pastor burned his *qeej* as evil, and stopped him from “playing for ghost.” After he heard on the radio about Hmongism two years ago, he joined Hmongism and re-embraced Hmong traditions. Unlike other Hmong who have a big family, after his mother passed away in Laos, he only has a sister in Minnesota. This is always a concern as to how perform ancestral worship and other rituals without many family members in his lineage. Being part of Hmongism makes him “feel at home,” he said in tears. Others mentioned that, in Hmong society, female widowers or divorcees who don’t have husbands could not carry on the responsibility of ancestral worship. Being part of Temple of Hmongism, they don’t have concerns about this any longer. Temple of Hmongism provides its members a unique social structure of belonging in a new social setting, where traditional ways of conducting religious rituals are gradually becoming more and more difficult.

<i>Txheej Txheem</i> (Procedure)	Hmongism	Traditional
<i>Qhuab Ke</i> (Showing the way)	30 mins	4-8 hours

<i>Qeej Tu Siav</i> (Song of the last breath)	30 mins	1 hour
<i>Qeej Tsa Nees</i> (Song of awakening the horse)	eliminated	
<i>Qeej Tshais</i> (Song of breakfast)		
<i>Qeej Sus</i> (Song of lunch)		
<i>Qeej Hmo</i> (Song of dinner)		
<i>Lub Rooj Xim</i> (Hais Xim ceremony)	eliminated	4-10 hours
<i>Zaj Qhuab Kom/Txiv Xaiv</i> (Blessing to the family)	30 mins	a whole night
<i>Qeej Cob Tsiaj/Qeej Hlawv Ntawv</i> (Song for Animal Sacrifice/ burning spiritual money)		
<i>Qeej Sawv Kev</i> (Song of arising for the journey)		

Although the membership of the Temple of Hmongism is growing every month, there are still obstacles and suspicions in the Hmong community as to whether Temple of Hmongism preserves the real essence of Hmong religious traditions. For example, Hmongism eliminates the rooster sacrifices, however, according to Vang (2015), Hmong believe that sacrificial animals play a crucial role in the journey (coj ua luag/keeping company) and the reincarnation process (thov ntawv thawj thiab rov qab los ua neeg dua). “The rooster guides the soul during the long journey into the spiritual world.” He explains that, “Hmong have learned over the years that the soul of the deceased cannot travel alone; it has to be accompanied by the sacrificial animals,” “without the sacrificial animals, Hmong believe, the soul of the deceased will be stranded” (p. 3). In Hmongism, they also omitted the *Qeej Tsa Nees* (Awaken the Horse) ceremony. However, it is believed that the horse is actually a spirit horse or a winged horse (Pegasus) from the sky. The soul rides it back from the physical world to the heavenly world when a person is dead according

to beliefs and this ceremony. One Hmong elder living in St. Paul expresses her concerns about the elimination of these two vital rituals, stating,

The chicken is the one that is the messenger leads the soul of the dead to be with the ancestors, in accordance with *Qhua Ke* to ensure that the soul of the dead is sent to be with the ancestral spirits, so that we don't have to worry that the soul would be lost and come back to haunt us.

Another important reform is Hmongism's *Taw Kev* (*Qhuab Ke*). Unlike its traditional counterpart, there is no directing of the soul to retrace his footsteps geographically to all of the places the deceased had lived, and to his/her hometown where the deceased was born, to put on the sacred jacket (placenta) on. Rather, Hmongism has a standardized version for everyone, with the name of the deceased mentioned. Some people question, "If they omitted these parts, will the soul of the deceased find its way to be reunited with the ancestors in the heavenly world?" Some even are afraid that if not done correctly, it might *txhaum dab* (offend the spirits).

Shifting away from "qub" (old) to "tshiaab" (new) in Hmongism, some people in the Hmong community, like Lor from St. Paul, worry that those things bears symbolic meanings and significances. By eliminating or altering them, "They are not preserving (Hmong) tradition, rather kind of destroying it."

Conclusion

The resilience of Hmong "indigenous religion" in the Hmong diaspora communities indicates that, after migrating to and settling down in the West for the last several decades, the traditional Hmong beliefs and rituals they brought along from their ancestral land do not cease to function. Rather they are resilient, and still continue to hold social significance.

On the surface level, the high cost of traditional Hmong funeral services, as well as the complexity of the funeral rituals were the major concerns to the group of people who started Temple of Hmongism, nevertheless, other real concerns for them were the consequences of young people leaving traditional Hmong beliefs and the ultimate impact of this on the Hmong as a whole.

As a minority group on the margins in the West, facing challenges from the mainstream society, some well-educated Hmong are making a conscious effort and engaging in a continuous search for cultural tradition, identity and a sense of belonging. The new religious organization, Temple of Hmongism, actually started a grassroots religious movement. It is just a part of a larger traditionalist and culturalist struggle and responds to the challenges that Hmong Americans are facing, and answers the given conditions of human existence of the Hmong, by reviving Hmong culture and tradition, reforming traditional beliefs and rituals, and inserting, strengthening, and articulating a Hmong identity. This indicates the collective agency and subjectivity of the Hmong at work in American society. To some extent, this is a battle about the future, and it involves reshaping the religious and cultural landscape of the Hmong community.

To some extent, religion does function to maintain social cohesion, as it might, in Durkheim's words, involve "constantly binding the people together" on a certain level. However, new religious movements have given rise to religious pluralism in the diaspora, with different religious affiliations, the boundary of ethnic identity is not at all static, rather, it is dynamic and always shifting. An indigenous religion, such as Temple of Hmongism, may strengthen Hmong identity, through performing religious rituals to connect Hmong individuals to the larger Hmong community and to their ancestral roots. Those religious rituals have become a site of identity performance. However, they do not necessarily define ethnic identity. That means

Hmong religious beliefs and rituals are not necessarily essential defining factors for being Hmong. There are Hmong who believe in other religions too and are they less Hmong in that regard? The religious boundary and ethnic boundary are not congruent. The new question is, will various Hmong religions converge? Or will the community be further divided along the lines between traditional religion and newly reformed religion?

This also signifies the beginning of institutionalization of Hmong traditional beliefs and rituals, a process moving from what C. K. Yang (1961) called “diffused religion” to “institutional religion”, in which “groups progress from simple and informal associations to more complex and formal structures. Religious institutionalization is essentially the attempt to develop that degree of religious permanence necessary to guarantee the continuity of the group and its beliefs” (O’dea, 1967, p. 285). The transnational Hmong community is caught up between “qub” (old) and “tshiab” (new), how will the Temple Hmongism be received by the Hmong community as it keeps reforming? What is the impact of this institutionalized Hmong religion on a changing transnational Hmong society and its social structure, since traditional family-clan based religious rituals and practices are being replaced with religious community-based ones? These questions remain to be answered.



Figure 1: Traditional *Tso Plig* ceremony



Figure 2: Traditional *Zaj Qhuab Kom*



Figure 3: The donation box

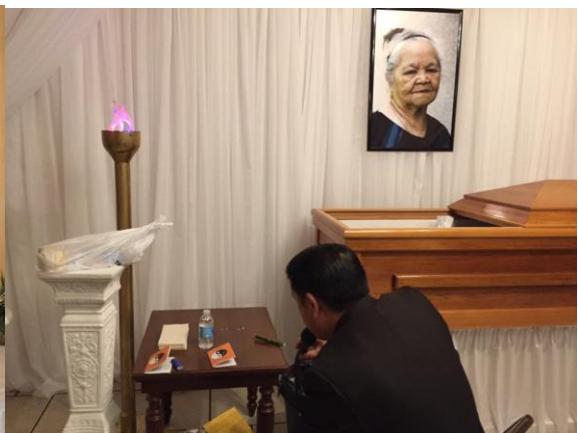


Figure 4: *Qhuab Ke* ritual



Figure 5: Playing *qeej* and drum



Figure 6: Temple of Hmong members

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