

SOC 212---Hmong Family Traditions

Hmong Origins

The Hmong American population was counted at 186,310 in the 2000 US Census. Hmong world population is now about 10 million of which 8 million are living in China. The Hmong geographic place of origin is not exactly known. However we do know that Hmong people are one of the most ancient peoples on the earth today and it appears that early Hmong culture originates in Eurasia somewhere to the North of present day China. All of the evidence relating to the earliest periods of Hmong history survive through Hmong oral tradition. Early Chinese written records do survive that identify the Hmong people as long ago as 2500 BCE and describe them as migrants from Siberia. Both Chinese written and Hmong oral histories do agree that for thousands of years Chinese peoples attempted to conquer the Hmong and forcibly assimilate them. Despite periodic wars of genocide against the Hmong by many Chinese dynasties, the Hmong have successfully resisted being devoured by Chinese culture. However, today there are some Hmong who are described as “cooked” versus “raw” Hmong. This distinction refers to how much of the traditional Hmong culture has been retained and how much has been lost to the dominant Chinese culture. A few hundred years ago many Hmong began to migrate out of Southern China and into Northern Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand where they lived in the hilltops far removed from the indigenous populations of those countries. The Hmong in these regions remained fiercely independent and self-sufficient albeit in relative isolation from their surrounding populations. The Hmong are an oral tradition just as American Indians are and only recently have begun to incorporate a literacy tradition into the Hmong social fabric. To the amazement of many, the Hmong have strongly embraced higher education and have achieved at a very fast rate in contemporary American society despite the considerable disadvantages of not having highly literate parents or above average family income.

Hmong Clan Structure and Social Organization

There are about twenty Hmong clans (“xeem”) in the world---some of the Hmong clan names are Vang, Chang, Lo (or Lor or Low), Cheng, Kue, Kong, Khang, Her, Hang, Kue, Lee, Moua, Thao (pronounced “taw”), Vang, Vue, Xiong (pronounced “Shung”), Yang, and Fang. Clan membership comes through birth, marriage, or adoption. All children acquire membership into the father’s clan group at their birth. Women acquire the clan membership of their husbands upon their marriage. Adopted children acquire the clan membership of the nuclear family that adopts them.

Hmong society requires strict exogamy---the person must marry outside his or her clan group. Hmong marriages require the exchange of a bride price from the husband’s family to the wife’s family (traditionally, bars of silver commensurate with the status of the bride). The Hmong clan system is

patrilineal. If the husband is killed or dies, the husband's clan group will take care of his wife and children. If a young woman's husband dies, then she is permitted to remarry, but if she does she must marry outside of the husband's clan group unless she marries the husband's brother.

There are a great many clan obligations of a variety of sorts all of which help to solidify the Hmong community structure and clan identity. For example, a Hmong person may not die in the household of another clan. Hmong are expected to be hospitable and helpful to fellow clan members regardless of whether or not they have ever met that person before; this can be an especially valuable custom for any Hmong person who is traveling across the United States and is in need of some temporary shelter and hospitality. Clan leaders are very important persons within the community who help resolve disputes and conflict within the clan and that includes marital disputes; hence, the clan leader is a sort of **de facto** marital counselor who others turn to in times of trouble. Within the clan structure of social obligations, the Hmong elders have authority over the younger Hmong. [This is generally found to be true of all Asian cultures and is sometimes referred to as the custom of "filial piety" or respect for elders.]. A traditional Hmong saying goes "Older people see the sky first." This aphorism signifies that older people are wiser and tend to see the "bigger picture" better than do younger persons.

Traditional Hmong Sex Roles

A husband's duty involves family leadership and the provision for the physical and spiritual welfare of his family. Husbands have authority over wives and make major decisions regarding family affairs. Hmong women are responsible for nurturing the children, preparing meals, feeding animals, and sharing in agricultural labor. Traditionally Hmong women eat meals only after the Hmong men have eaten first especially if there are guests in the house. As with most other Asian cultures, males tend to be preferred over girls---this attitude is expressed in an old Hmong adage that says "Nine fireplaces are not as bright as the sun; nine daughters are not worth as much as one son."

Daughters normally follow their mother's roles when they are about ten to twelve years old. In the United States today sex roles among the Hmong are changing. Hmong children are more independent in the United States than they were in Laos. Children often have greater command of English language both in the written and spoken forms than their parents and this gives them relatively greater power within the family. Frequently both the Hmong parents work full-time and child-care responsibilities may be assumed by elders or shared by other family members. It is still common for Hmong girls to marry and have children prior to high school graduation but the educational expectations of these girls remains equal to those of the non-married Hmong teenagers without children.

Hmong Childbirth

As regards childbirth, Hmong women traditionally have worked up until the day of delivery. Hmong women have traditionally delivered their babies while standing in a squatting position to facilitate the vertical delivery of the newborn. The newborn's placenta or "black jacket" has been, by custom, buried in a very specific location within the Hmong household---the male's placenta being buried under the center-post of the household while the female's placenta is buried under the bed. Hmong religious belief requires that the deceased person return to his or her place of birth and recover his or her "black jacket" before proceeding on to the spirit world to be reborn. By custom Hmong women must not engage in any strenuous physical activity for thirty days after childbirth. In addition, Hmong women must stay warm and eat and drink only hot foods. No bathing is allowed at this time but women are permitted to sponge themselves with warm water to keep clean. The woman's diet immediately after childbirth is regulated to only hot rice and chicken soup with special green herbs.

Divorce and Child Custody

Divorce is rare in traditional Hmong society. However, if the husband and wife cannot be reconciled then the clan groups will permit a divorce and the bride price must be returned to the husband's family. Divorce has become much more common for the Hmong in the United States. By tradition, the Hmong husband will get custody of all the male children regardless of the circumstances surrounding the divorce. If the wife committed adultery then the husband will get custody of all the children otherwise the wife will get custody of the female children. In the event that the husband dies, then the husband's clan group will get custody of all the male children despite the fact that the mother is still alive. However, in America these child custody customs do not apply if the Hmong have a legal divorce and a child custody hearing occurs in an American courtroom.

The Shaman

The shaman is the spiritual leader in the Hmong community. The shaman is not what we call a doctor but is a spiritual healer who deals with problems such as depression, mental illness, lethargy and lost vitality which are taken to be caused by the person having lost one of his or her three "souls". There are a variety of reasons why a person might lose one of his or her "souls" at any time during the person's life. However, when this does occur the first recourse is to have the head of the family try to recover the lost soul. If this does not succeed, then it may become necessary to recruit the help of a shaman to make the journey into the spirit world in a special ceremony. Persons do not choose to become shamans ... they must have a calling to this most honorable profession. The two primary ways that persons are recruited to become a shaman is either through

dreams that one has or through some types of physical illness that result in the person having seizures such as typically occurs during an epileptic fit. The shaman is not paid for his work as is a doctor in the United States but his work is greatly respected and the shaman is accorded very high status in the Hmong community.

The shaman's services are also necessary at funerals as it is the shaman who must guide the soul of the deceased person to retrieve his or her "black jacket" on route to the spirit world. It is traditional for the shaman to make a sacrifice of a live pig at a funeral ceremony. Hmong are expected to cry loudly and openly at the funeral ceremony and to say out loud why they are so sad. If the relatives do not cry at the funeral that is taken to mean that they do not love the deceased person.