

## **Hmong History, Customs and Culture---In Brief Racial and Ethnic Minorities (Sociology 225)---Jac D. Bulk**

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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.

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

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 guest in the house. 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 here 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.

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 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 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.