

# Tradition and Change in First and Second Generation Hmong-Americans

Ge Vang

Faculty Sponsor: Charles Lee, Department of History

## ABSTRACT

The objective of this project is to study the generation gap between Hmong parents and their children. A series of oral history interviews was conducted on the lives of Hmong adolescents, adults, and elders in the La Crosse community. Focusing on family life, education, religion, and other intergenerational topics, this research has revealed the existence of a significant generational gap between Hmong youth and their parents. The core issue dividing the generations is the conflict between maintaining traditional Hmong culture versus Americanization.

## INTRODUCTION

To fully understand Hmong life in La Crosse and comprehend issues such as the generational and cultural gap that exists between Hmong parents and their children one must understand this people's rich history. This study takes a look at the first and second generation within the Hmong community in La Crosse, focusing on the dynamics of traditional Hmong culture in contemporary America. Specifically, this paper explains family life dynamics and other intergenerational topics.

## METHODS

This research was done through a series of oral history interviews. In my research process I interviewed six Hmong high school students, five college students, and three adults along with a women's sewing group and a women's support group. All the participants of this research lived within La Crosse County. With the guidance and approval of Dr. Lee, my mentor, I had the opportunity to develop my own questions. These interviews are tape-recorded and will be transcribed and archived in Special Collections in Murphy Library.

## RESULTS

As noted above, in order for us to understand the issues of Hmong life in America one must understand the Hmong way of life before the secret war in Laos.<sup>1</sup> To the Hmong people the meaning of life circles around the family (to the Hmong people the term "family" can also mean "clan"). Every aspect of life—social, political and economical—revolves around the family. Having many children is a big part of the Hmong way of life. Traditionally, children stood for many things; economically they meant more people to help out with farming, and socially they contributed to a strong clan. Having a strong clan was crucial to political power, thus power and status was based upon the numbers that can be sustained in ones family. Having a child was viewed as a part of the life cycle. The parents cared for and nurtured the child until he or she became a young able adult. Towards the end of the parent's days, it

was time for the child to take his or her turn caring for the aging parents and grandparents. Thus the “traditional culture” was passed on from one generation to the next within a clan.

In my interviews with most of the Hmong students it was obvious that they were not clear about or did not know how to define their traditional culture. The phrase “traditional culture” translates in Hmong as “*way of law and good spirits.*” Traditional culture is hard to grasp, I myself struggled to define it in my questioning process.

To help us understand the importance of family and the *traditional culture* to the Hmong people one should take a glance at the marriage and funeral ceremonies. These two ceremonies are complicated and deep in meaning. They are not something that one can learn overnight. Hmong men and women spend their entire lives trying to learn them, thus only the elders and the gifted possess the skills required to perform such sacred tasks.

Marriage was not only seen as the coming together and joining of the bride and the groom, it was an opportunity to build upon and expand family ties for the generations to come. It was often viewed as the marriage of two clans. This view put pressure on the married couples to work things out in tough times, it also put pressure on both families to be cautious in dealing with conflicts because an unfair treatment of the other family member could have serious implications for future generations. Mai Xiong, an elderly woman from the women’s support group known as Women’s United for Friendship (WUFF) affirmed the seriousness and meaning of a Hmong marriage in her statement. When asked to talk about marriages between Hmong youth today, Mai answered,

...in our country according to Hmong way if the brother in-law’s son likes the daughter they would set engagements and marry the girl even when she is around thirteen to fourteen years of age even when the daughter doesn’t now how to do chores yet...if the brother in-law comes to ask the daughter’s hand in marriage for his son, one must allow the marriage to happen to avoid grudges...”<sup>2</sup>

In Mai’s statement she clearly talks about the importance of not upsetting family ties even if it meant that one has to sacrifice a daughter. Marriage can stand as a symbol of trust and love between established families.

For new marriages the ceremony can be long and exhausting because Marriage Negotiators on both sides have to trace both family histories to clear all past disputes and set terms that will be the guide for future marriages within the same two clans. These customary guidelines and values within the marriage process are just a few of the crucial beliefs that make up the intricate “way of law and good spirits.”

Funeral ceremonies require the attendance of every side of the family. All relatives must agree that the individual who passed away was given a proper burial and all issues concerning him or her were settled before the body can be buried. This is crucial because it forces family members to settle, limit, or not show grudges and to get along with one another. Upon one’s death, as in life, law and good order are honored.

Take a people with very strong family values, who did not have their own form of written language until 1953, and place them into a complex modern society such as the United States and one will start to notice a few predicaments amongst the young and the old. Hmong family values, the core “law and good spirits,” placed in the center of a new world that stresses, encourages and nurtures independence and autonomy will definitely lead to conflict. There

are several reasons behind the differences between Hmong parents and their children, but the core issue dividing the generations is the conflict between maintaining traditional Hmong culture versus Americanization. This problem comes about mostly due to the contradictory family values between the Hmong and mainstream society.

Elders and adults want their children to learn the traditional culture and customs because it gives them their identity. Most of the elders preach that the children cannot escape who they are, that the sooner they learn about the culture the better off they will be. The women from Women's United for Friendship and the women's sewing group all agreed that it is a must for the children to learn the "traditional culture." However, Xia Dang Vang, a clan leader in La Crosse commented:

...going about carrying yourself differently is difficult, in this world you can not only carry yourself in your way, you also can not carry yourself in their way, you must use half and half, learn to use what is good in both, learn what is good and use them, throw away the bad things and use only the good."<sup>3</sup>

Xia Dang is one of the younger clan leaders in La Crosse. He tries to understand the youth's struggle today. He said that he understands their struggle but that they should at least learn the good things from their traditional culture.

Even though most of the youth and children today believe some of the traditional culture is important they claim that they do not have time for such time consuming education. They argued that they have too many things to worry about and that the elders and adults don't fully understand what they are going through. For example, Lisa Yang, a Hmong female college student, in response to a question about the issues that she had to face through school she answered:

"I think I had a lot of problems with friends and family, middle school I had a lot of problems with family, I think with how my family or my parents understood me, growing up in a...I guess a Americanized world and not be...well I am an American because I am an Americanize citizen, but I'm Hmong so it...it makes it tougher because you want to be this Americanize person because you see how your friends are and you see how the world is, but yet your parents don't see it with in...through the same eyes because and they see things totally different because they are not one-hundred percent adapted, so it was very hard for them to understand why I was gone a lot or why I wasn't home or just why I was involved in the things that I was in, whether it was good or bad, they would always assume it was bad."<sup>4</sup>

Eessi Vang, a non-traditional freshman male student, does not see the benefit for him of learning the "traditional culture." When Eessi was younger he was part of a gang, which lead him to a lot of high-risk activities that got him in trouble with the law. He started to run away from home at the age of thirteen because he said his parents did not understand his needs to have fun and be with friends. When asked whether he had time for the "traditional culture" or thinks about it, Eessi answered,

“Now days, I know it’s important, to say that I have time for it, yes I do, but to put it into actual use, I doubt that I’ll put into a lot of use. Most of the culture is done through certain ceremonies and occasions only, its not like an everyday thing...I tried to learn when the opportunity comes, but sometimes I just don’t do it, because its not something that I’m interested in. Like the Shamans, I don’t think I need to learn much about that because its something that I don’t think I’ll be doing in my own life.”<sup>5</sup>

For the most part both high school students and college students think of themselves as in-between a traditional and modern Hmong youth. It is apparent that the more Hmong children and youth are exposed to the mainstream culture the more they will tend to question their own culture.

The contradiction of mainstream and Hmong ideologies and values tend to turn Hmong youth away from their traditional culture. The expectation of Hmong females is a good example of contradictory values between the old and new. Young women have to play various roles in society. In the mainstream they have to be an educated student and a constant learner. They are encouraged to be strong independent individuals, to think for themselves and be competitive intellectuals who should question things. In the Hmong community family comes first, young women are expected to be obedient, respectful, passive, and hard working daughters. When I posed the question, “Do you believe that the youth today will be able to carry on the Hmong name in the future?” Za Moua from the women’s support group WUFF replied,

For me, probably not because I feel that we are changing so much, we are assimilating so much that I feel like we need to spend more time adapting to the Western society and not just suddenly change over because we see a lot of kids you know, they are going through this trend where I got to wear my Tommy Hilfiger pants and my Tommy Hilfiger shirt and here you have a parent where they can’t even afford that, you know, their dollar per hour, they only work for eight dollars an hour and here you have a paints that are seventy to eighty bucks. I think that we are going so fast that when you ask, “do you know even now what Hmong is?” and I believe that some of them don’t even know what it is because they don’t have an understanding of where their parents came from and why they are here. They just think, oh, I’m Hmong and that’s it, and I don’t think they know a lot about why they are Hmong ...its hard for the parents to educate them because they are so Americanize too, but than yet they are stuck right in the middle where they want to be Americanize, but mom and dad want them to be traditional Hmong boys and girls, but than that doesn’t work and they are going through a hard time. Even myself you know, I’m raised up here, but I’m also stuck in the middle because I have a family where is traditional, we go through all these traditional things and rituals, and then its harder for us to adjust, when I’m married into a traditional family...here when I’m working too, I have to change back and forth...”<sup>6</sup>

Another issue that complicates life for Hmong youth and Hmong life in general is religion. Religion is also considered part of the culture, thus the elders and adults classify a person to be either someone who is learning the culture or someone who is not. For the most part, the hardcore traditional Hmong would consider the church going people as those who had given up on the traditional culture (“*way of law and good spirits*”). However it must be noted that some Hmong people who go to church differ from this view.

Even though Hmong adults and parents want their children to learn about the Hmong culture, they are not strict about it, they are lenient in letting their children explore other beliefs as long as the teachings are done with good-intentions, such as going to church. So today it is not uncommon to find a Hmong household with the parents and grandparents practicing traditional ceremonial customs and the children going to church at the same time. The contradictions of both ideas from the church and the traditional culture may cause some small cultural gap between the children and their parents. An example is Romain Vang’s family. In Romain’s family all of the children go to church except for the parents. The unique thing about the situation is that Romain’s father is considered as a traditional clan leader in Eau Claire.<sup>7</sup> Tou Ger Moua also gave examples of his family going to church but eventually converted back to the traditional culture.<sup>8</sup> Gao Vue said she is not a Christian, but she fully believes both in God and Shamanism.<sup>9</sup> May Vang, a middle age Hmong woman, explained that her family converted to Christianity but they still participate in some of the traditional customs.<sup>10</sup> Lisa Yang’s family was also split between Christianity and the “traditional culture.” Her mother and the children are strong believers in God, but her father faces pressure from the clan to stay with the traditional culture. Lisa believes her father is lost, because he doesn’t know what to do. When asked whether her family still takes part in the clan system with such a divided extended family, Lisa answered,

...I don’t know, with my family there is a lot of family issues, so I don’t see my relatives that much even if they are in town. Those that are in town, I don’t know, I’m not very fund of, so I don’t really interact with them. The one’s I interact with are usually the ones, kids my age, who I don’t really have to worried about family issues with, cause usually, usually, the only reasons why I don’t associate with my clan is based on the whole religion aspect because there has been family problems with that so, I don’t, I don’t know. I guess you can say I’m kind of upset with them, so I don’t, I don’t associate with them.

After Lisa’s answer I asked the follow-up question, “...What is the concern with the religion part? What is their concern and what is your concern?” Lisa replied,

Well, they want us to go back into the old ways, the old, just being animist again. And, I, I, for me its difficult because...I think for most the whole family its difficult because we’ve, we’re not, I wouldn’t say we’re not exposed to it, but we’ve never done it, we’ve never practice it, so its, its something new. I’m not saying its bad or anything, but ah, its just not how I was brought up, so, I mean if you are exposed to something different and you are forced to, to do something that you don’t have any clue about, obviously you’re not going to like it. Especially when you, you’ve

been doing something for so long and all off a sudden someone tells you, you know, you should stop, you can't do that you have to do this. You're not goanna like it, and so, with that, my family members, my uncles and my distanced relatives are kind off persuading the family to, to just forget about Christianity and just to, ah, go back, and its not as easy as they think."

Lisa goes on to talk about how her mother did not want to go back to the traditional way because it meant her mom would have to abide by her father's voice, plus her mother is not ready to give up on god. Lisa's situation illustrates the complication within the Hmong community in terms of trying to hold on to the "*way of law and good spirits*" in a diverse society. It also displays a continuing issue within the Hmong community across America.

## CONCLUSIONS

With the "*way of law and good spirit*" being so hard to define and learn and with external influences, Hmong youth today often do not want to learn about their customs. The contradictions between the strong traditional family values and the mainstream culture often times create shame and embarrassment for the children to associate themselves with their culture. Issues such as gender gap and contradicting expectations also contribute to the youth's rebellion against the "traditional culture." Often times, parents have their own struggles between the traditional and mainstream culture that the children are left without a clear guidance. Sometimes with the parent's strict parenting style and their inability to understand their children's needs and desires to fit into the mainstream adds distance to the growing cultural and generational gap.

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