

A Hmong Shaman's Séance

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INTRODUCTION

Their name. Among old Indochina hands the Hmong are better known by the name "Meo," but this term is pejorative and will not be used here. The word "Meo" derives from the Chinese "Miao" 苗 which seems to translate as "the inhabitants of the wild grass" or in other words as "the savages," or "the barbarians." For one reason or other, "Miao" was transformed into "Meo" when the ethnic group passed first into Vietnam and then further to Laos and Thailand. "Meo" means "cat" in Vietnamese. We might therefore have to see an allusion to "wild cat" in this word. Whatever the case may be, the ethnic group calls itself only by the term "Hmoob" (pronounced "hmong," with an aspirate, and in the high tone). Consequently this is the only term suitable to them. Some educated persons like Mr. Yang Dao, assume that "Hmoob" means "free man," but as far as I know there is no evidence that would legitimate this claim.

Their history. It is of interest to know that the Hmong were settled in China before the Chinese. When the Chinese advanced into the territory that is now China in the third millennium B.C., they encountered autochthonous inhabitants they called "Miao," or "Man" 蠻. However, there are trustworthy indications that make us think the "Miao" themselves had come from Mongolia or even from the arctic regions of Siberia, because their legends speak of "frozen plains," of "days lasting six months," of which they presently have absolutely no experience. Under pressure from the Chinese, the "Miao" moved little by little to the south, where they finally reached the province of Kwei-

chow and its environs. This province, with an average altitude of two thousand meters, served for a long time as their refuge. About eighteen hundred years after Christ, with the Chinese infiltrating more and more into the mountains, the Hmong had to fight serious battles. A certain number of them had once again to emigrate southward, moving "in most savage hordes, killing everything that crossed their way" as Chinese and Vietnamese sources would have it. Around the year 1800 they arrived in Vietnam, where they were repelled in their attempt to seize Hanoi. As a consequence they turned to the mountains of North Vietnam and began to proceed further into Laos around 1810. In Laos they spread out a little bit everywhere, always preferring elevated places, until they ended up crossing the border into Thailand around 1860, some hundred and twenty years ago. While in Thailand the Hmong still continued to advance. They arrived then in the region of Uthai, two hundred kilometers northwest of Bangkok.

In the course of the last wars in Indochina the Great Powers always tried to make use of the montagnards, who often are very good fighters and know the forests like their own pocket. The Hmong themselves were greatly committed to the struggle against the Laotian and Vietnamese communists under the leadership of their famous general Vang Pao, now retired in America. Since 1975, the date the Pathet Lao took over the power in Vientiane, 140,000 Hmong have crossed into Thailand as political refugees. Some 60,000 have been received in the United States and 7,100 in France (6,000 went to France herself, 1,100 to French Guyana). About 70,000 still stay in Thailand. They do not desire to go anywhere except Laos, where they had truly felt at ease.

Demographic distribution. There are approximately four million Hmong in the world: close to three million in the People's Republic of China, 250,000 in Vietnam, from 160,000 to 300,000 in Laos (figures from before 1975), and between 70,000 and 80,000 in Thailand. But statistics related to this matter are far from precise.

HMONG SHAMANISM

In General. Shamanism is an important form of religion in the world, yet it is one of the least understood forms. We may find the word "shaman" quite often in dictionaries, but only rarely do we encounter the words "shamanism," "shamanery" (*chamanerie*), or "shamanic." The word "shaman" has come to us from the Tungus language, but ethnologists agree unanimously that it is not a Tungus word. The term is alien to that language, an imported term. A very intriguing

hypothesis would have it that this word came from the Sanskrit and found its way into Lamaism from where it was then borrowed by Tungus. The influence of this form of Buddhism extended all the way to east Siberia. As a matter of fact, we find pagodas on the banks of the Amur. In Thai the word became "samana," meaning "the one who has overcome (repressed) his passions," in other words "the bonze." In this manner the Apostolic Nuntio in Bangkok is called "Samana thut" ("monk ambassador").

The geographic center of shamanism is to be found in Siberia, among such groups as the Yakut and Tungus in the east, the Samoyed in the arctic regions, the Teleut in the center, the Burjat in the south. Shamanism is also practiced by the Vogul of the Ural and the Tatars at the Wolga. It is further spread among the Mongols, the Altaic populations and the Uigur. However, it can also be found in many other areas of the world as among the Eskimo, certain Indian tribes of North America, the Araucans of Chile, in Oceania, in Indonesia and even in Africa.

Essential characteristics of shamanism. The shaman is first of all a master of ecstasy. It is thought that his soul becomes detached from his body during a séance in order to leave for the invisible world. He becomes therefore a spirit and puts himself on an equal standing with the other spirits. He can see them, talk to them, touch them, and if necessary catch them and liberate them so they can return home.

The shaman is a healer. At least among the Hmong, the ancestor of the shaman is a being called "Siv Yis" ("the one who can heal"). As a matter of fact, the Hmong do not impute illness to natural but to supernatural causes. Only the shaman has the ability to fight against them. Rather than being a religion shamanism is first of all part of the field of medicine, but it is a special field as it is founded on beliefs.

The shaman is further the adversary of whatever evil forces there might be in order to make sure that the community can always enjoy all the security it needs. He is the preeminent champion in the struggle against the demonic, the great protector against demons. His primary implement is a dagger he implants in front of the altar at the outset of a shamanic rite, which serves to fight off the evil spirits. The shaman should not be confused with the sorcerer, who concludes a pact with the demons to the greatest detriment of his own fellows.

Finally, the shaman is the master of his spirits. Everywhere in the primitive world we find individuals who claim to entertain special relationships with the spirits, but the shaman distinguishes himself by the fact that he is not an *instrument* of the spirits. He is superior to

them and commands them.

Basic beliefs. The Hmong believe that every human being possesses several souls, but they do not quite agree on their number. Some think that a person has two souls. Others, however, assume that a person has three, seven, nine, twelve or even thirty-two souls. Such differences in opinion depend on which number a particular person might see as the perfect number. In most probability, the number two does not mean more than the plural in its most elementary form. Three is often a basic number corresponding from antiquity with a division of the universe into three worlds: the sky, the earth and the netherworld. But it could equally correspond with the three classes into which the Hmong group souls (souls of human, animal or vegetal form). Many of those who favor this number hold that after death one of the three souls remains at the tomb of the dead, while the second is reincarnated into an animal and the third into a plant. The numbers seven and twelve are probably of Mesopotamian origin, signifying plenitude. The number thirty-two is of Indian origin and corresponds with the thirty-two parts of the body. Accordingly, each of these souls would then animate one part of the body.

It is thought that sometimes souls may not be satisfied with their owner and would therefore try to incarnate themselves elsewhere. Say, for example, that I am a hard-working Hmong farmer. My right hand is wrinkled and callous. Because of an accident that happened while I was at work, my hand is hurt. Close to me there lives a young girl that takes great care of herself. She has a very tender and beautiful hand. One day, the soul of my hand cannot stand it any longer, and it "falls," as the Hmong would say. By this it must be understood that the soul of the farmer's hand escapes in order to reincarnate itself in the girl's hand that is so soft.

By abandoning its owner, the soul leaves him mutilated and sick. Fortunately for the owner, however, the party is not yet over. In order to be able to reincarnate itself, the soul has first to receive a certificate of reincarnation from the deity of death, the terrible Ntxwj Nyoog (pronounced "Ndzeu Nyong") who lives at the top of a heaven that is formed out of twelve mountains arranged in order of increasing height. The path to the cave of this deity is only a very small foot path that winds through the forests and is littered with a thousand traps. Thus it is a very dangerous and very long journey. This is precisely the reason a sick person must seek the aid of a specialist who can enter the world of the spirits, run after the fugitive souls and bring them back home by force. This kind of specialist is the shaman.

What is it then that enables the shaman to enjoy such exceptional powers? The Hmong say that even before the advent of humans there was a deity who lived somewhere on the moon and was very good. His name is Saub (pronounced "Shao"), or grand-father Saub. If Ntxwj Nyoog is the deity of death, Saub is his antithesis, because he is the deity of life. He presided over the creation of the world and over the creation of the original couple and its descendants. Every day he opens the window of heaven in order to glance at his creatures and see whether they have grown and multiplied as he planned. He was greatly surprised one day when he saw that Ntxwj Nyoog was devouring humans one after the other with such rapacity that their race threatened to disappear for good. Because he could not take care of everything himself, he decided to choose a human being and to provide him with special powers to fight Ntxwj Nyoog. So he chose a young man filled with zeal and called him "Siv Yis," "the healer."

He gave him a winged horse that would allow him to circulate through invisible space, a troupe of auxiliary spirits to assist him and all the weapons he needed. Siv Yis began to fight Ntxwj Nyoog and even blinded him until one day due to an inexcusable mistake he had to leave this world and rejoin the heavens. He is the ancestor of the shamans and lives today on the same mountain as Ntxwj Nyoog. But while the deity of death lives at the foot of a mountain, Siv Yis lives right on the top of it and so controls the demon. He resides in a cave that is cut into the side of the rock wall, surrounded by a multitude of auxiliary spirits fluttering back and forth; around the cave he cultivates a garden full of medicinal plants and has a pond whose waters are endowed with curative properties.

When Siv Yis announced to humans that he had to leave this world, they were desperate. Who, now, would protect them against Ntxwj Nyoog, cure them from illness and release them from death? At that time Siv Yis promised not to abandon them, but to choose successors and share his powers with them. But only he himself would appoint them, and thus nobody becomes a shaman by his own will. Once acquired, this function is not transmitted from parent to child. Siv Yis alone selects his chosen individuals. He makes them very ill to show that he is calling them, and an experienced shaman then confirms the choice. Men as well a women may become shamans, but female shamans are fewer in number.

From this we see that the Hmong still have shamans to cure their diseases. And from my own observation I can say that they are quite numerous, amounting to one shaman—male or female—to five families. This is quite understandable, because the Hmong live in small and

isolated villages, and cannot run the risk of lacking healers.

HEALING TECHNIQUES

When somebody in a family becomes sick, the head of the family goes to see the shaman, falls to his knees before him and says: "Ah, Father, my boy is badly sick. We implore you to come and help us."

The shaman reassures him with good words and then, without any delay, he throws his instruments of divination (two halves of the extremity of a goat or a buffalo horn) to the ground in front of his altar in order to consult with his auxiliary spirits, and addresses an ultimatum to them. If the sick person feels better after three days, it means that the spirits are ready to come to the aid of the head of the family. Upon that the man will come again to see the shaman, who will then go ahead with the healing ritual proper. But if after three days the state of the sick seems to have deteriorated, it means that the spirits feel they were not capable of finding relief for the boy. In such a case the father has no choice other than wait longer or to look for another shaman.

As we can gather from this, the shaman does not compromise himself. The healing ritual is very important. We shall see later that he asks that a pig be sacrificed. Therefore he cannot attempt to start the ritual without being assured beforehand of its success. He is concerned about his reputation. He does not just request that the sick person improve, but he must have the head of the family decide whether an improvement has occurred. Thus nobody can reproach him for anything.

If the patient improves after three days the head of the family comes to see the shaman again and asks him to begin with the healing ritual. There is, however, no hurry about all this. The two men agree on a day convenient for both of them. It may be two or three weeks later, giving the head of the family enough time to procure a pig. On the agreed day the shaman visits the family of the sick. It is to be noted that he has not encountered the sick person until this moment. Yet, this does not really matter, because everything is a question of the spirits, whom he could consult as well at home. The hosts have prepared a small altar, symbolizing the cave of Siv Yis, and in front of the altar they have put a small bench that serves as "winged horse" for the shaman. The latter sits on that bench, covers his face with a black veil (symbol of the invisible and dark world he is about to enter), grabs with his right hand a disc circle that is fitted with a small handle (symbolizing his horse's bit), and puts a metal ring that has small bells (they are the bells of his mount) on a finger of his left hand. He leans

over the joss sticks his aids had prepared on the altar, and deeply inhaling their smell, he gets ready to fall into trance.

A shamanic séance lasts from thirty minutes to two hours. During this time the shaman sings of his experiences: what he sees, what he does, and especially the orders he gives to his spirits. While he sings he dances on his bench and agitates the ring and the bell rhythmically so as to imitate a frantic cavalcade.

I have studied some twenty séances. They contain basically five main parts:

1. *The shaman enters into trance and summons the spirits.* With an (invisible) leap the shaman enters the realm of the spirits and finds himself before the cave of his ancestor. But the auxiliary spirits are just like big children. If they have not been called upon for services they disperse here and there to amuse themselves. The shaman has to summon them first. The spirits are innumerable and appear in couples. Some of them are animal spirits: spirit tigers, elephants, boars, bears, dogs, monkeys, etc. There are also nature spirits: thunder, rain, wind, sun, moon, etc. We can further distinguish physician spirits, blacksmith spirits, ancestor spirits and the like. This crowd gathers in big rush. They all have already put on their armour and the rifles fire here and there. The spirits settle on the altar, the table or on the benches. Spirits charged with the task to receive the arrivals have cups of tea or pipes with opium passed around. This is what is asked for by the laws of human hospitality, and is the same among the spirits. After that the shaman presents his case: a Hmong family has come to make an appeal to them in a thorny problem. Therefore, it will be necessary "to go and *make a tour of the sky and the earth.*" It will be a rough day. One has to be prepared for all eventualities!

2. *The shaman and his troupe proceed to the house of the patient* to search there for the traces of the fugitive soul. The troupe of auxiliary spirits flies off to the patient's house. Swallow and Sparrow-hawk fly ahead and land on the roof of the house or in the hand of the master of the house. The shaman knocks on the door. The domestic spirits open the door fearfully, frightened by all the noise. But recognizing the auxiliary spirits they throw the door wide open and the troupe bursts into the house. Everybody greets one another and exchanges the latest news. They have not seen each other for a long time. Those in charge of the welcoming service pass around tea and opium.

But the shaman claps into his hands and reminds the troupe that they did not come to this place to have a good time. They should search for the traces of the soul gone astray, because they will not be

able to take up its pursuit blindly. The lantern spirit, full of vigour, takes up his lantern, followed by his mate, the phoenix, whose dots of color suggest eyes. The two rummage through every corner of the house. Suddenly there is a cry of joy: the spirits have found a hole in a partition wall. Evidently this is the hole the soul went through to join Ntxwj Nyoog.

3. *Fantastic cavalcade in search of the escaped soul* and discovery of that soul. This start to a renewed flight is pathetic, because now it is not a question of a simple excursion—rather they are entering a war. In order to indicate this the shaman jumps onto his bench twelve times, symbolizing by this action the twelve leaps of his horse over the twelve mountains that form the heavens. This cavalcade brings the spirits right to the entrance of Ntxwj Nyoog's cave.

The little soul, sensing that it is being pursued, doubles its efforts, but there are numerous obstacles in its way. The shaman, for his part, also has no intention of giving up. He pushes his warriors ahead. The troupe misses the right way. It sets out on a path to the left, but it should have gone to the right. The fishermen spirits throw their nets on all sides, but the soul has had time to evade them. Finally, they catch up with it. Gasping and exhausted, it stumbles at the edge of a hole and falls into it. Immediately the auxiliary spirits sound the bugle. The troupe surrounds the hole. The spirits with long arms (the monkeys) roll up their sleeves, kneel down at the rim of the hole and give a helping hand to the quivering little soul. It is pulled out from the hole. The nurse spirits blow water from the pond that lies in front of Siv Yis's cave over its face to bring it back to life.

Then the shaman requests the brawny spirits to throw a large stone into the hole to fill it up, because the soul can hardly be trusted. Who knows? It still could escape and leap into the hole again. The term "stone" that is used here is in fact a euphemism. In reality it is a pig that is meant here. At these words, the assistants of the shaman throw themselves on the pig, which is still running around. They tie it up, bring it into the room, place it behind the shaman, and strangle it. There is no shamanic séance without a "stone."

4. *The troupe leads the fugitive soul back to the house.* A small female spirit is designated to carry the convalescent soul on her back, the same way all Hmong and Chinese mothers carry their babies. The whole troupe returns to the house of the patient. The shaman knocks on the door. The domestic spirits open with precaution, but they recognize their friends. Each spirit congratulates himself and boasts of his deeds. Everybody recovers by drinking a cup of tea or having a

whiff at the pipe. But the shaman summons everybody and very delicately the spirits take up the little soul and place it into a small chest that is laid out with satin and silk. After that they put the chest at the foot of the main pillar, the center of the house and of the Hmong universe. Then they proceed to give the house a thorough cleaning, resetting the pillars and sweeping out the dirt. In fact, it is not sufficient that the soul has come back, for the universe in which it is again to move needs to be healthy and pure, so that the soul will not again be tempted to escape. At the end the shaman directs the domestic spirits to be more vigilant from now on. He thanks them for their welcome and steps over the threshold of the house to leave.

5. *Return of the spirits to their altar and return of the shaman to the world of the humans.* The drum spirits call for a final gathering while the "sargents" check their lists to see if everybody is there. It would not be good to leave somebody out. The whole troupe flies off and perches on the shaman's altar. Everybody takes off his armour. Some lay their helmets and their cuirass on the altar with much care as they should, and others just throw them away pell-mell, because they are too tired. Swallow and Sparrow-hawk fold their tails as one would fold a fan. The great Groom leads the shaman's horse back to its stable. The animal is dripping with sweat and paws the ground with impatience to receive its fodder. The quail spirits are asked to cover the paths by putting brushwood and leaves here and there onto the traces of the shaman in such a way that the evil spirits cannot pursue him. The shaman like a good father throws popcorn to the small spirits who cry and ask for sweets. Then he falls back into the world of the humans with a gigantic pirouette, all happy that he finally is able "to reengage in conversation with beings of my own kind."

The shaman indeed rises from his bench and takes off his veil, while his assistants prostrate themselves before him, touching the ground with their foreheads and proclaim: "Ah, here you are all out of breath! *You have made the tour of the sky and of the earth.* Here you are dripping with sweat!"

Everything has come back to normal, but the shaman is exhausted and his face is dropping with sweat. His assistants step forth and wipe his face with a towel previously dipped in fresh, or perhaps lukewarm water. While he is gradually recuperating from the long ordeal the shaman sits on a bench behind the small fire place of the house and smokes a pipe.

All that time the women of the house were busy preparing rice and especially boiling the slaughtered pig and a chicken. After the

men have consulted the chicken about the future, they sit down for a meal that continues late into the night. Finally the shaman picks up the pieces of meat that are his share, the head and a leg of the pig, and leaves for his home.

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