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Speaking with Spirits

The Hmong *Ntoo Xeeb* New Year Ceremony

Abstract

The Hmong *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony described in this text was conducted by the elders of Ban Mae Sa Mai (Mae Sa Mai village), located in Tambol Pong Yareng, Mae Rim District, Thailand, approximately thirty kilometers north of Chiang Mai. The *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony is a principal New Year's ritual in which all responsible male heads of households in the village are expected to participate. This is a way of showing respect to all four benevolent spirits of the locality, with the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit as the titular head, and to thank them for safeguarding the villagers over the past year. It constitutes one of the most sacred communal rituals undertaken by the villagers of Mae Sa Mai. This detailed description of the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony focuses on a particular ritual practice of the Hmong, and aims to encourage future scholarly inquiry about specifics of Hmong animist beliefs as manifested in ceremonial rituals. The article addresses lacunae in scholarly accounts of Hmong ceremonial ritual practices, which have led to confusion about particular aspects of Hmong shamanism.

Keywords: Hmong—shamanism—New Year ritual cermony—Miao—Meo

OVER THE PAST two decades, the term "Hmong" has come to be used internationally to refer to fiercely independent montagnards who have lived for centuries in isolated mountain villages throughout southern China and Southeast Asia (YANG 1975, 6). It has been proposed that they were the autochthonous inhabitants of central China (Yellow River basin) before the Han Chinese settled there during the third millennium BCE (MOTTIN 1984, 99). Military and population expansion into fertile lowlands by the Han eventually forced the Hmong to migrate southwards to the mountainous province of Guizhou, with an average elevation of four thousand feet above sea level. From that lofty region, the Hmong held out against the Chinese empire for more than two millennia, periodically establishing their own independent kingdoms until annihilation and genocide by the Qing Dynasty in 1776. There were subsequent Hmong diasporas to Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand.

The Hmong have long been called Miao (alternatively spelled Meo) by Han Chinese, who used the term as a general catchword to refer to all non-Chinese in the south in ancient historical works such as the *Zhanguo ce* (*Intrigues of the Warring States*) and *Shi ji* (*Records of the Historian*) (JENKS 1994, 32). The Chinese character is composed of the "grass" radical over "field," which may be interpreted to mean "rice-plant shoot" or "sons of the soil" (WIENS 1954, 73). This suggests an early status the Miao may have held as indigenous farmers. A leading Hmong intellectual, Yang Dao, believes that the word's meaning in Chinese is "barbarian" or "uncivilized" (YANG 1982, 6). It has been proposed that "these names are onomatopoetic designations for 'cat' and both carry derogatory connotations" (SCHWÖRER-KOHL 1995, 241). This refers to the fact that Meo, pronounced in a different tone, can mean cat in Vietnamese (MOTTIN 1984, 99) and in Thai (ENWALL 1992, 26). Many scholars claim that Hmong means "Free People" (BRITTAN 1997, 5; GIACCHINO-BAKER 1995, 50; CHAN 1993, 2; CONQUERGOOD 1986, iii) but a preeminent Western scholar has written that "as far as I know there is no evidence that would legitimate this claim" (MOTTIN, 1984, 99). A more literal translation would be "human being" (LIVO and CHA 1991, 1; YANG 1992, 253). What is

indisputable is that the Hmong have vigorously resisted assimilation by dominant alien cultures throughout their long history.[1]

The indomitable will of the Hmong to maintain their own independent cultural identity through the vicissitudes of centuries of migration from political and military oppression finds symbolic expression in traditional ritual practices. These ceremonies not only symbolize the complex relations in the Hmong animist belief system, but also represent a social construction of remembering. This social memory articulates a collective experience (FENTRESS and WICKHAM 1992, 25), giving a group a way to know the past and providing a basis for identity and an instrument for influencing the actions and practices of its members. Although the Hmong, together with other upland peoples, have been characterized as remote from the influence of the secularizing nation-state, they have not remained immune to a crisis of identity brought on by increasing integration into the global market economy. Yet they have not completely yielded to demystification; Hmong village ritual ceremonies serve to affirm the powers of locality and local spirits. What the Hmong regard as the central aspects of their culture, their *kevcai*, (usually translated as "customs," but can be more accurately rendered as "ways") are renewed by traditional New Year ritual ceremonies. These ritual practices constitute sites of contestation over what should be preserved and what must be rejected in Hmong culture, particularly within the context of modern secularization (TAPP 2002, 97).

YANG Dao has referred to the Hmong New Year celebration as *Tsiab Peb Caug*, (1992, 300). It has been described as

> the only Hmong religious ceremony shared by the entire community…. Shamans performed ritual sacrifices to placate the spirits of the forest and field, to honor house spirits, dead ancestors, and the souls of the living members of the family, as well as the souls of the family's livestock…. The festival lasted for three days. And except for the time reserved for ritual sacrifices, during those three days Hmong, young and old, visited friends and relatives, ate and drank, and played games from dawn to dusk. (QUINCY 1995, 110–11)

Currently, Hmong New Year celebrations in northern Thailand no longer coincide with the lunar calendar, but have been adapted to fit the Western calendar; also celebrations are not limited to three days, but take place during an entire week, December 26 through January 1, with different villages within a locality rotating festivities so that neighboring villages can attend each other's events.[2] A central function of spiritual renewal is conveyed by this description:

> Of the various farming-related ceremonies in the Hmong annual lunar cycle, the New Year Celebration (*naj peb caug*) [an alternative Hmong term] was the most elaborate and important.... Standing as a spiritual and material marker between the old year and the new, the ceremony is aimed in general at removing the evil influences that had assimilated during the previous year and ensuring an adequate supply of good fortune for the next. All the specific rituals performed during the celebration involved expiation, supplication, and sacrifice intended to reassemble the ancestral souls and familiar spirits back at the village to secure their spiritual assistance for the coming year. (SCOTT 1982, 67)

Hmong New Year sacred rites include the traditional sweeping of each house to drive out all the evil spirits and misfortunes of the past year; the *Lwm Qaib* ceremony (JOHNSON 1992, 152; no translation provided), during which a rooster is sacrificed and blessings are pronounced for health and prosperity for a particular household during the New Year. Nusit Chindarsi has asserted that "all the sacrifices are done individually for each household, and there is no communal ritual for the whole village" (CHINDARSI, 1976, 139). However, this assertion does not account for the *Ntoo Xeeb* ritual ceremony, celebrated by the Hmong, when all heads of households congregate on the first day of January to perform a rite promoting the welfare of the entire village.

Presentation of this eyewitness account of the ritual Hmong New Year's *Ntoo Xeeb*[3] ceremony addresses several concerns. Firstly, although the entire New Year festival is generally recognized as the most important ritual occasion of Hmong village life (LYNCH 1999, 22; LIVO and CHA 1991, 8; SCOTT 1987, 37), no detailed description of the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony exists. Past scholarly discussions of Hmong New Year celebrations have focused on *pav pob*, public ball-tossing courtship games between unmarried boys and girls (LYNCH 1999, 31; YANG 1992, 301; BARNEY 1980, 21), and other social activities such as *tuaj lub*, top-spinning and hitting duels played by boys and young men (WILLCOX 1986, 98), public singing contests between women (CATLIN 1992, 44), crossbow shooting competitions (men), and traditional wooden-cart racing (boys). Furthermore, a thorough description and analysis of the *Ntoo Xeeb* rite, which is conducted by a *Txiv neeb muag dawb* shaman, affords an opportunity to distinguish between different functions and categories of Hmong shamans.

We have found only one Western scholarly reference to the sacred *Ntoo Xeeb* ritual ceremony: "Sometimes the spirits of particular trees are propitiated, especially at the New Year. These are known as the *ntoo xeeb*, or trees, which have their roots above ground" (TAPP, 1989a, 61–62). The specific

Ntoo Xeeb ceremony described in this text was conducted by the elders of Ban Mae Sa Mai (Mae Sa Mai village), located in Tambol Pong Yareng, Mae Rim District, Thailand, approximately thirty kilometers north of Chiang Mai, and has been held on the first day of January for over two decades, reflecting the calendrical influence of the modernizing Thai national project. This village of over one thousand five hundred White Hmong inhabitants was settled nearly fifty years ago by refugees from Yunnan province in southern China, fleeing the Communist regime. There are currently more than eighty thousand Hmong living in northern Thailand (BOYES and PIRABAN 1989, 11).

Access to this sacred ritual was gained through the assiduous efforts of my collaborating colleague, Dr. Bussakorn Sumrongthong. By doing joint fieldwork reflecting two distinct cultural perspectives (as a Western-trained academic and a traditional Thai musician), we endeavored to learn local truths about this specific ceremony, in order to understand particular manifestations of the Hmong ritual belief system. This entailed exhaustive on-site interviews with expert practitioners and informants, and frequent follow-up sessions between translators and researchers to confirm preliminary understandings.

PART I—PREPARATIONS FOR THE CEREMONY

At 9:30 AM, January 1, 2001, we leave Mae Sa Mai village (located at five thousand feet above sea level), and begin to climb up a very steep, winding trail that seems to go straight up to the sky, towards the Thwv Tim mountains, which lie to the east of the village. Although I consider myself in reasonably good physical condition, I find that I have to stop three times, gasping for breath, while my heart is doing its best to pop out of my chest. My gentle, soft-spoken Hmong host, retired village headman Njua Sae Tao, who is a head shorter than I am, flip flops effortlessly up the hill, while Bussakorn and I fight to maintain traction on steeply angled slopes in hiking boots. Stunning vistas of the luxuriant green forest landscape, occasionally broken by patches of the brown soil of cultivated fields down below, alleviate our physical distress somewhat. After an arduous half hour of struggling up the sheer dirt paths, we reach the hilltop where smoke from a freshly-lit fire curls up into the crisp mountain air.

About fifty men are already hard at work preparing the ground for the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony. Some are busy gathering loose firewood and stoking the fire. Others are inside a small circular clearing in the forest (about thirty feet in diameter), raking away loose leaves and sticks with makeshift brooms made from bushy branches. In the center of this area, a magnificent tree towers over a modest altar of bamboo and wood: this is braced on the corners by four tall posts extending up through the altar top. It is from here

that the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit will be called forth, as a venerated protector of the health and welfare of the people in the village. The tallest tree without blemish, with a straight trunk and perfectly formed straight branches has been chosen to present the physical emanation of the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit. A Thai scholarly description of the related *Tier Tee Tier Seng* spirits, or "protection spirits," is apropos:

> [T]here is one spirit of a whole mountain who is more important than the others. If one disturbs the dwelling place of a spirit it may strike back by causing misfortune to oneself, a family member, or one's crops or animals. Therefore it is important to the Hmong to placate these local spirits and to attempt to domesticate them by setting up a shrine where they can be served so that in return they will protect a village built on their land from wild animals, robbers, fire, enemies and outside evil spirits. When the Hmong want to set up a village, a shaman should if possible carry out ritual to persuade the head spirit of the mountain to…become a village protective spirit, and to call together the lesser local spirits of places they might disturb. They select a place high on the mountain where there is a large and well-formed tree surrounded by a stand of smaller trees. Here a shrine is set up for the spirit, and offerings are made to it each new year festival, so that it will look after all the people in the village. (CHINDARSI, 1976, 21)

This provides meaningful contextualization for a recent cryptic reference to the tree:

> Some Hmong also believe in a "Lord of the Land" who is thought to dwell in each specific locality. There is usually a special altar to this "Lord" nailed to the trunk of a prominent tree near the village. (BOYES and PIRABAN 1990, 15)

The location of the enclosure (*hois txog lubyaj ua xo tus ntoo xeeb*, the sacred meeting place of the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit) has been carefully chosen by the villagers. They have selected a high place on the hillside, from where the spirits can direct rainwater towards the village for farming and household chores. The entire clearing is enclosed by an imposing barbed wire fence, which had previously been set up to keep out unwelcome intruders and also to prevent wild animals from desecrating the sacred ground. After clearing the ground to their satisfaction, the Hmong villagers begin to make repairs to the gated entrance of the fence and to its wooden supporting stakes. Several tiers of small wooden bars are nailed to the posts at the entrance, and

several loose short sticks are threaded through the tiers by the presiding shaman, Mr. Blat Tao Sae Song, a ruddy, cheerful man with a toothy grin. The shaman also carefully places four bamboo tube containers on the altar, two filled with tea and two with rice wine; these are offerings to the four kinds of forest spirits. The *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit is in fact foremost among four major local guardian spirits, which serve to protect the Hmong village and its inhabitants: (1) *Ntoo Xeeb*—guardian of animals and human beings; (2) *Sab Seej*—guardian of the ground; (3) *Tis Tswv*—guardian of the forest; (4) *Looj Meg*—dragon spirit, guardian of the Otherworld.

The *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony, with the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit as the titular head, is a principal New Year's ritual in which all responsible male heads of households in the village are expected to participate as a way of showing respect to all four benevolent spirits of the locality, and to thank them for safeguarding the villagers over the past year. It constitutes one of the most sacred communal rituals undertaken by the villagers of Mae Sa Mai.[4] Perhaps for this reason, children are not encouraged to attend, although they are not expressly forbidden to be present. As latecomers straggle in, several teenage boys strategically position themselves on the periphery of the group, watching the proceedings closely, yet taking care not to get in the way of the adult men. The absence of children and females at the gathering is striking: only three women are present (excepting B. Sumrongthong), two of whom are young wives participating in a fertility rite with their husbands to ask the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit for children. The presence of the other woman advertises the efficacy of such a ritual, as she is returning to thank the *Ntoo Xeeb* for the recent birth of a baby boy.

A steady stream of laughter coming from the men heightens the spirit of celebration. Their joviality is no doubt stimulated by copious quantities of beer and homemade rice wine, which have been carried up the hill. Bussakorn and I watch astonished as a couple of slightly built Hmong villagers "pour" a hundred pound-plus pig out of a sack, which has been carried by hand up the hill that we had been scaling ourselves just minutes before. A second, slightly smaller pig (approximately seventy pounds) has already been "unpacked," and lies forlornly on the forest floor, feet bound, rooting around half-heartedly. The larger pig is more spirited and squeals loud protests. Both pigs will be sacrificed to the *Ntoo Xeeb* today.

Part ii—The Initial Ritual: Calling the Spirits (*Haus Cawv Pauj Ntoo Xeev*)

The shaman in charge of this ritual, Blat Tao Sae Song, forty-eight years old, begins the ceremony with a chant, using a mixture of Hmong and an ancient Chinese dialect from Kunming, Mon Draa (I have been unable to

FIGURE 1: Shaman praying. All photographs were taken by Hao Huang.

find a Barney-Smalley equivalent for this word). Hmong oral traditions assert that family ancestors formerly resided in Kunming many generations ago (FIGURE 1).

He ritually removes branches from the gate opening, which he had positioned only minutes earlier (*qhub qhov rooj*, opening the gate to the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit). Even to an outsider's ear, the words of the chant sound different from normal Hmong speech: highly tonally inflected, roughly outlining the interval of a minor third, with a downward slide at the end of each phrase. The literal meaning of each Chinese word has become obscure to present-day Hmong, even to those who chant it, yet the purpose of the ritual is clear to all those present: to invite the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit to manifest itself today during the ceremony, to accept the offerings of the villagers, and to agree to provide them with blessings.

Suddenly, signaled by a barely perceptible nod from the shaman, all the

men jostle through the gate to the altar in a mad rush, each holding a candle and incense to place on the altar. I find myself converted from observer to participant when a friendly elder offers me his own candle to place on the edge of the altar along with the others. Earlier, our host, Mr. Sae Tao, had told us that this was the day to ask for blessings—"whatever you want." I light the candle, which fizzles out three times, not exactly a confidence-inspiring portent. Next, I am given incense to place in a holder on one of the posts, above and to the right of the altar. Each participant joins in paying respect to the *Ntoo Xeeb* by bringing offerings, in the form of incense, candles, and bundles of white rice paper to be burnt (FIGURE 2). The latter represent money; each sheet is cut in the shape of a coin, then the sheets are stacked together in large bundles. The paper money is placed in two piles on the ground, one on each side of the altar. After the candles, incense, and paper are lit, creating a dense white smoke, the Hmong villagers promptly vacate the sacred enclosure, leaving the shaman alone there, wreathed in haze and light.

The shaman begins praying while holding the *Kuaj Neeb*, a wooden clapper in two pieces, in his right hand. As he chants, he throws the *Kuaj Neeb* on the ground repeatedly (*xyeem ntoo xeev*), more than three times.

FIGURE 2: Lighting the candles.

The *Kuaj Neeb* is a tool for divination made in earlier times from two halves of a buffalo horn, but now often made of wood (a material far more accessible to poor mountain villagers). In another example of Chinese presence in Hmong ritual practice, the word *Kuaj* was derived from the Chinese "Pa Koua" or "Eight Trigrams" of Taoist terminology (TAPP 1989a, 70). The two pieces comprise a couple, and are separately referred to as male or female. When both pieces of the *Kuaj Neeb* land flat side down pointing in opposite directions, it is believed that the spirits have accepted the offerings and are willing to come to the ceremony to fulfill all wishes made by the participants.

Next, the shaman beats the *Nruag Neeb* (a small black metal gong) three times while the pigs are dragged to the ground next to the altar, where they are to be slaughtered as sacrifices. The *Nruag Neeb* amplifies the shaman's power: it represents spiritual strength through its penetrating, reverberating sound. It also serves to protect the shaman from evil spirits, like a shield. At this time, most participants reenter the enclosure to witness the sacrifice. The villagers have pooled their money to buy the large sacrificial pig, an offering to the *Ntoo Xeeb*, to ask for a New Year blessing for the entire community. The smaller pig is being offered by the couple who have been granted a son by the *Ntoo Xeeb*. First, the large pig's jugular vein is expertly slit, and there is much jubilation as the first drops of blood are caught in ritual bowls. The animal's death throes are, fortunately, brief. Afterwards, the second pig is sacrificed by a somewhat less expert butcher. As its throat is cut and its blood pours into a bowl, the death throes of this animal last for several minutes. Again, laughter and happiness accompany the act of sacrifice (a participant informs me in progress that this derives from anticipation of the food which the pigs will provide, and the prospect of future blessings gained from the animals' sacrifice). The pigs' tails are cut off and placed on the altar, nearby the two containers of tea and two containers of rice wine, and the rest of the carcasses are immediately hustled off to the open fires for cooking. Pigs blood is poured from the bowls on the remaining paper money.

The shaman then pours out all the liquid from the four bamboo containers on the altar on the ground as an offering to the four spirits; next he beats the *Nruag Neeb* again and begins to chant. The shaman follows this by throwing the *Kuaj Neeb* down on the ground several times, while he chants in Mon Draa. He holds the *Nruag Neeb* in his left hand; with his right, he alternately strikes the gong several times with the beater, while he continues to throw the *Kuaj Neeb* down several times. He continues this alternation three times, while he chants in Mon Draa, in order to summon and communicate with the spirits to ask for their blessing (*pauj thwv tig*).

Part III—Asking for a Baby

A shy young couple in their twenties, Mr. and Mrs. Sao Sae Song, who have been married for four years but are childless, approach the shaman in front of the altar to ask for a baby. They have brought incense, candles, and bundles of white rice paper "coins" as sacrifices to the spirits. The shaman chants to the spirits while throwing the *Kuaj Neeb* and beating the *Nruag Neeb*, in order to gain the attention of the spirits and to divine their intentions. The husband brings the literate world of twentieth-century Thailand into this traditional Hmong ceremony by writing (in Thai) his intentions to make specific offerings to the spirits if his wish for a child is granted. Until the twentieth century, Hmong was not a written language, and Thai is the language that Sao Sae Song has been taught to write in the village school. The written paper is then burnt in order to let the spirits know of the proposed contract. When both halves of the *Kuaj Neeb* fall flat side down, it is a signal that the spirits have consented to grant the wish. The same procedure is repeated by a second childless couple, who also implore the spirits through the shaman to grant them a child. These two ritual procedures occur while the pigs are being cooked over the open fires, and end just as some of the pig meat is ready to be eaten. All remaining paper money is burnt before the first part of the ceremony ends. The lunch break begins at around 11:00 AM.

Part IV—A Traditional Hmong Barbecue Lunch

A traditional Hmong barbecue, held in the middle of a mountain forest, is a remarkable event. I had anticipated that roasting a hundred-pound pig would take hours, if not days. But this did not take into account the ingenuity and practicality of the Hmong, who simply carved both animals up into small pieces, impaled the pieces on ends of sharpened sticks, and roasted the manageable portions quickly and adeptly (FIGURES 3 and 4). Instead of waiting for large pieces to be cooked through, a constant stream of small portions are cooked and shared with everyone present, with a minimum of fuss. Young men act as cooks and servers, middle aged men perform as supervisors, and respect is shown to the village elders by serving them hand and foot.

To my surprise, I am directed to sit with the special group of elders, who are all in their fifties and sixties. I soon learn that I am in a privileged position, since elders are not only served first, but are also offered the tastiest morsels. First comes the crispy roasted pig fat, then lean meat, and finally offal. The freshly roasted meat, rolled in small piles of salt and topped with chili paste, is delicious. I endure several anxious moments when, as among the first to be offered seared rare pig liver as a special treat, I feel compelled to eat some of this practically raw organ meat. I seek to assuage my fears of

FIGURE 3: Traditional Hmong barbecue—preparing the meat.

FIGURE 4: Traditional Hmong barbecue—cooking the meat.

hepatitis with fiery gulps of what I fervently hope will be sterilizing rice wine. To reject this delicacy, offered only to the elders, is unthinkable; such an act would impugn the gracious hospitality of my Hmong hosts.

PART V—RECEIVING THE BLESSING FROM THE SPIRITS (*THOV THWV TIM*)

At twelve noon, towards the end of lunch, the presiding shaman is asked by the elders to sit in the place of honor, on the ground to the left of the *Ntoo Xeeb* tree and altar (FIGURE 5). Four elders, who appear to be among the oldest men in the community, take their places seated alongside the shaman. These five men represent the five major patrilineal clans of the village—the shaman's surname of Sae Song, as well as Sae Tao, Sae Hang, Sae Lee, and Sae Yang.[5] Two separate plates of pork and rice are placed in front of each man, and then small bowls of homemade rice wine are served to these leading elders. After toasting the spirits and drinking a bowl of rice wine, the shaman cuts some small pieces of pork and puts them on top of some rice, which is laid on a banana leaf, to serve to the spirits. He also pours rice wine on top of the spirits' food and chants an invitation in Mon Draa to the spirits

FIGURE 5: Presiding shaman sitting in place of honor by the *Ntoo Xeeb* tree.

FIGURE 6: Group of men kowtowing (*pe*) to shaman (far left) and leading elders.

to come and eat the food. Only after the spirits are thusly served do the elders formally eat some of the sacred food on their plates by hand, and drink some of the rice wine. With these acts, they are sharing food and drink with the spirits (*ua tsaus ntxi neeb*). In the meantime, the other males line up in several rows facing the elders in the sacred clearing. They remain standing as the shaman blesses them on behalf of the *Ntoo Xeeb*:

> Shaman: For all you have done today, the *Ntoo Xeeb* recognizes you and has graciously accepted your offerings. The *Ntoo Xeeb* agrees to protect you and bless you all with good health and a good life with prosperity. You will all enjoy happiness, and your happiness will spread to all your family members. The *Ntoo Xeeb* has blessed you all.
>
> (Our host, chief informant and translator, Njua Sae Tao, translated all spoken Hmong in-progress during the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony for Dr. Sumrongthong.)

The standing group, led by the thirty-something deputy headman of the village, responds to the shaman in low tones with two moaning syllables, "oh…oh…;" they acknowledge his blessing by clasping both hands together, as a sign of respect, recognition, and thanks. Then they get down on their knees and *pe* (kowtow with heads and knuckles to the ground) before the shaman and other leading elders, and this kowtowing is repeated at the end of each phrase of the blessing (FIGURE 6).

PART VI—THANKING THE *NTOO XEEB* FOR A BABY SON

At 12:40 PM, Mr. and Mrs. Song Sae Tao, a couple in their mid-twenties, bring their eight-month-old son to the shaman. It is believed that the boy was granted to them after the couple made a request for a child at the 1999 *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony. The select line of four elders plus shaman has been considerably enlarged to include other leading adult males from the village. I feel honored and touched to be asked to sit with this group, each of whom is expected to bestow a blessing on the family of this auspicious child, a gift from the *Ntoo Xeeb*. A representative of the young couple, an older man from the husband's clan, steps forward to thank the *Ntoo Xeeb* for giving the couple a healthy baby. He thanks the shaman for his assistance, since Blat Tao Sae Song presided over the successful ritual of requesting a child from the *Ntoo Xeeb* two years earlier.

Representative: Today a couple comes to thank the *Ntoo Xeeb* for giving them a baby boy. They have come to give all the offerings which they promised two years ago to the *Ntoo Xeeb*. They are grateful for the *Ntoo Xeeb*'s gift and would like to thank the spirit and the shaman for their efforts on the family's behalf. Please bless them on behalf of the *Ntoo Xeeb*.

Shaman: The *Ntoo Xeeb* and I are blessing you, this couple and their son. We wish you all happiness and good health in perpetuity.

Elder Sae Tao (sitting next to shaman on the right):
On behalf of the men of the Sae Tao clan, I acknowledge this story. I wish you good luck, not only in having this child, but also by having as many more babies as you wish in the future.

Elder Sae Yang (on the right of Sae Tao):
You did not have a child in former days and then you asked for a child from the *Ntoo Xeeb*. Now you have a baby boy who is now in front of us. I ask for the best to happen to you and your family members. As many children as you wish to have, you can expect to receive.

Elder Sae Hang (on the right of Sae Yang):
Now you have got a son, I am glad to see him and I wish you and your son all the best for your hopes.

Elder Sae Lee (on the right of Sae Hang):
You made a request to the *Ntoo Xeeb* for a child, now you have got a son as you wished. You have given the *Ntoo Xeeb* what you promised and the spirit knows that. I wish you a

good life, very green like the forest and very clear like a flowing waterfall.

After the initial blessings from the five representative elders, other leading adult males offer blessings to the baby and the couple, proceeding from oldest to youngest. At my turn, I offer my wishes to the couple that their family will be blessed with good health, long life, and good fortune, and that their son will grow up to make them proud parents.

Part vii—Thanking the Shaman and the Leading Elders

At this point of the discussion it is important to clarify that the shaman in charge of the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony, Blat Tao Sae Song, was chosen by the village not only because of his spiritual authority, but also because of the social standing of his clan within the village community. He performed well in such ceremonies in the past, and this year it was decided to give this special honor to his clan, to be thus represented. His participation as a shaman in this ceremony represents an intersection between the spiritual and social planes. He is a *Txiv neeb muag dawb* who voluntarily chose to become a shaman, learning how to call the spirits and negotiate with them by studying for three years with a shamanic teacher.

At 12:55 PM, the deputy headman of the village stands up to give a public speech, to thank the shaman and the leading elders for their service on behalf of the village:

Deputy headman: You have done much for us, we are very grateful to you. Please give us your blessing for good luck.

Shaman: I wish all of you good luck, and it is the wish of the *Ntoo Xeeb* to bless you all, including your families. You will enjoy a good life, good health, and wealth forever.

Participants led by deputy headman: oh…oh….

Elder Sae Tao: I wish all of you, your fathers, mothers and relatives to have a warm, loving family. All bad things and feelings will be gone.

Elder Sae Yang: The *Ntoo Xeeb* knows about everything you all have done, and the spirit has accepted all of your offerings. I ask the *Ntoo Xeeb* to bless you with a peaceful life. This village will have no bad people. The *Ntoo Xeeb* will protect you all.

Elder Sae Hang: You wanted me to bless you, and I will give you my best wishes. I wish you all long life and happiness.

Elder Sae Lee: On behalf of the shaman, I will say a blessing for you all. I

> wish you all happiness during your life in this village. Not only will you be happy, but also your father, mother, and children. This blessing comes from the *Ntoo Xeeb*, not from me.

At the close of this round of blessings, all adult participants share cups of beer with each other to drink. It is Hmong belief that drinking beer after the blessing ceremony ensures good luck to everyone present. Next, the followers collect money from the group to offer to the shaman and the other four leading elders, in order to thank them. The shaman receives more money than the others. The final formal part of the ceremony ensues, focusing specifically on the shaman. The deputy headman stands up to make a concluding speech:

> Deputy headman: I would like to thank you on behalf of a couple for what you have done for them. We give you this money from all of us in the village.
>
> Shaman: I have not done very much for this ceremony, yet you give me this money. I thank you all. I bless you all with good luck in all things in your life.

The shaman pours some beer on the last offering to the spirits, some bits of pork with rice on a banana leaf, and then drinks some beer himself. This is a way of showing respect to the *Ntoo Xeeb*, by serving the spirit before drinking himself. All adult males get up from their formal places and leave the sacred enclosure, and begin to give thanks to the shaman and the elders, as well as exchanging blessings with one another. Once more, beer and rice wine is shared by all in a spirit of rejoicing and camaraderie. I am plied with a large amount of alcohol, as I am asked to drink multiple toasts to the health of many individual villagers in succession.

At 1:10 PM, following the complete round of blessings, the shaman takes some short lengths of white string which have been laid on the altar, and walks out of the cleared enclosure to the mother of the Sae Tao baby boy, who was a gift of the *Ntoo Xeeb*. He ties a length of the white string around each of the baby's wrists. *Khi hluas*, the ritual act of tying a string around a person's wrist, serves to bind the child's soul or spirit self (*tus plig*) to his body (*tsev*) (TAPP 1989b, 114) to prevent evil spirits from stealing it away, which would make the boy sicken and die (as explained during the ritual by a participant). I am told by other informants that tying the string around the wrist of the baby also represents blessings on the child, and protects him from evil spirits. Each participant is given some strands of white string. Following the shaman's example, we each solemnly speak a few words of

encouragement to the parents and give them a small amount of "lucky money" for the baby before tying the knots over his wrists. It has been written that this constitutes one of the "oldest *kevcai*, or customs, which the Hmong have, which have always been Hmong, have never changed, and are spoken in Hmong" (TAPP 1989a, 66–7). The baby, shaven-headed, looks at us with calm curiosity from his perch on his mother's knees.

PART VIII—CLOSING THE CEREMONY

By 1:30 PM, the fires have been put out, the liquor bottles and other barbecue paraphernalia have been cleared, and the shaman closes the gate to the sacred enclosure. He replaces the sticks that he had removed from the gate to mark the ending of the ritual ceremony. The sacred ground is formally closed until next year's *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony. Laughing and conversing, the villagers return to their homes, filled with hope and a sense of well-being. One participant avers that this ceremony is always special because it brings all the men in the community together, and old grudges and jealousies are laid aside so that the whole village can have a fresh start at the beginning of the New Year. Judging from the relaxed high spirits expressed by these often stoic adult Hmong men, communal solidarity and goodwill have been effectively renewed.

As I stumble down the steep path, tripping over roots and rocks, I marvel at the light-footedness of these montagnard people. Despite my best efforts, once again I bring up the rear; traumatized by the shock of thumping down the hills, my back gives out that afternoon. Meanwhile around me, undisturbed by the portentous import of the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony, life in Mae Sa Mai village on a holiday continues: women hanging out washing, men wagering on cockfights, boys playing with tops, the ubiquitous Thai pop music broadcast over the village PA system day and night, and groups of adolescent girls and boys, resplendent in their elaborately embroidered Hmong costumes, coquettishly tossing balls to each other in the New Year's courtship games in the village square.

ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

The Hmong believe in a multitude of life-souls precariously housed within one body, which interact with other spirits. "All souls must be united with the body for a person to have good health.… Loss of one or more souls is thought to cause a wide variety of mental health problems" (BLIATOUT 1986, 351). "[T]he natural world is alive with spirits. Trees, mountains, rivers, rocks, and lightning are all animated by distinctive spirits.… Most animals are regarded as kindred creatures who share and exchange souls [with one another and with human beings]" (CONQUERGOOD 1989, 6). The spirit

world can be divided into three categories: the spirits of inhabited spaces such as homes, villages, and cultivated fields (*dab nyeg*); the spirits of the untamed periphery of forests and mountains (*dab qus*); and the ancestor spirits (*dab txwvkoob*), who have power to intervene in the spirit Otherworld on behalf of descendents (SCOTT 1987, 34). The purpose of life is to maintain a balance within oneself, with family ancestors, with animals, forces of nature, and with spirits of the unseen world. The point of many Hmong spiritual rituals is to regain a missing balance (WILLCOX 1985, 33).

The *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony may be interpreted as a negotiation between these different categories of spirits on behalf of Mae Sa Mai village): the shaman is the interlocutor of the four benevolent local spirits led by the *Ntoo Xeeb*, representing the untamed forest and mountains; the clan elders, as representatives of the ancestral spirits, also have authority to act as intermediaries for the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit; through their combined efforts, blessings are bestowed on the male heads of households who interact daily with the spirits of inhabited places. On special occasions, such as New Year celebrations, weddings, and funerals, the ritual system is affirmed by bringing together living members of kinship groups (clans) to discharge mutual obligations. The young depend on the elders for spiritual guidance and the wisdom of experience, while the elders rely on the moral support and physical participation of the young, in order for all members of the community to enact a common belief system as Hmong.

Hmong folk stories and particular details of Hmong shamanic practice suggest a Siberian root, with analogous features of the shamanic trance, the notion of a shamanic vocation, and rites of initiation. The Hmong shaman has been described as a "'professional shaman,' the type ascribed to tribal groups like the Chukchi or the Koriak of northeastern Siberia, and an individual who, unlike the 'clan shamans' of some other groups, plays no political role" (LEMOINE 1996, 144). The role played by Blat Tao Sae Song, the shaman in the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony, challenges such categorical limitations. It is clear that he performs both a spiritual and a political role, as a negotiator with the *Ntoo Xeeb* spirit and as a public representative of his clan. Lemoine has also asserted, "If a shaman is seen taking part in a ritual, it is never as a shaman but in his capacity as a ritualist after he has secured a further qualification.... The shaman's activity differs from that of the ritualist" (LEMOINE 1986, 339). This exclusionary definition of a shaman fails to acknowledge the *Txiv neeb muag dawb* shaman, who focuses on performing ritual ceremonies for the community and minor healing rites. His esoteric knowledge of Mon Draa, which empowers him to intercede with spirits on behalf of others, authorizes him to be a shaman.

Lacunae in scholarly accounts of specific Hmong ceremonial ritual

practices have led to confusion about certain aspects of Hmong shamanism. This extends to misapprehensions as to what the Hmong name is for shaman, whether there is more than one kind of shaman, and what kinds of shamanic power exist and how they are gained. It has been written: "The Hmong word for shaman—*Ua Neeb*—means 'making' or 'going the way of the spirit'" (CONQUERGOOD 1986, iv). This is a misreading. In fact, *ua neeb* does not refer to a shaman per se—it describes what Hmong shamans do, which literally means to "work with or to manage the spirit helpers" (LEMOINE 1986, 348). This contrasts with *ua dab*, propitiating the ordinary spirits, which any ordinary head of a household may perform. "It is also said that while *ua dab* is for oneself [or the members of one's own household], *ua neeb* must be for the benefit of others" (TAPP 1989a, 65).

The Hmong recognize multiple categories of shamans, a distinction that has been made explicit only by TAPP (1989a, 64). Previous scholars have focused almost exclusively on the *Txiv Neeb muag dub*, in which case the spirit has come into the body without the individual's choice. Interestingly, several shamans of this kind asserted in interviews that they had not wished to be shamans, but had been chosen by spirits through experiencing a serious illness, which the shaman practicing their healing rite diagnosed as the result of spiritual "visitation." In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, epilepsy is cited as an illness that has often been interpreted by the Hmong as a sign that an afflicted person is destined to be a shaman (FADIMAN 1997, 21). Part of the price of getting well was to pledge to become a *Txiv Neeb muag dub*; this decision was undertaken with encouragement from the person's immediate family, the clan, even the whole village. To refuse to accept such a role would mean inviting the displeasure of the spirits, which would be a catastrophe (THAO 1986, 375). For the individual, deciding to become a shaman was part of the process of changing from being a victim of the spirits to becoming an active interlocutor of the spirit world. This kind of future shaman seeks help from a Master Shaman, *Xib Hwm*, who does not teach particular ritual techniques so much as learning to control and organize the experience of encountering the *neeb* (TAPP 1989a, 72).

The *Txiv Neeb muag dub* category applies to those who have been chosen by the spirits to be shamans, whose calling is often revealed through a serious illness (or other manifestation of a visit from the spirits). It belongs to the "dark-faced" shamanism of the Otherworld, the *yeeb* (*yin*) world (TAPP 1989a, 64). These shamans have gained access to and mastery over the spirit Otherworld; "much of the Hmong Otherworld was pictured as a celestial hierarchy, presided over by Imperial Chinese officials (such as the 'Fourth Mandarin'), who controlled life and death" (TAPP 2001, 13). In fact, in an astonishing break with traditional Hmong patriarchal structure, there are a few female

Txiv Neeb muag dub who have been chosen to work with and through spirits. "The Hmong would explain that a male soul has been reincarnated in a female body" (LEMOINE 1986, 342). Hence, the devalued female gender occasionally finds a way to power through mimesis of powerful male figures. Many *Txiv Neeb muag dub*, male and female, cite ancestors who were also chosen by the spirits; this spirit wisdom seems to speak through the blood.

Another kind of Hmong shaman, scarcely acknowledged by previous scholars, is *Txiv Neeb muag dawb*, those who have become shamans through their own volition by studying with a shamanic teacher to learn how to call the spirits and negotiate with them. Their powers belong to the "white-faced" shamanism of this physical plane, the *yab* (*yang*) world (TAPP 1989a, 64), which is not associated with any kind of trance. This accounts for the tantalizing statement, "[t]here are some people who learn to be a Shaman without a visit from the Shaman spirit" (MATTISON, LO, and SCARSETH 1994, 93). Blat Tao Sae Song, the shaman who presided over the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony, did not suffer a debilitating illness. Instead, his involvement in shamanism is entirely his own choice. This has shaped his attitude towards shamanism, which focuses on skill acquisition by learning special secret wisdom (*ḳawm txuj ḳawm ci*): he maintains that among the Hmong, only two in twenty can learn to be a *Txiv Neeb muag dawb*, due to most people's insufficient patience or brain power. He emphasizes the difficulty in memorizing the special chant language, the Chinese words of Mon Draa, which have been passed on through generations of shamans. Originally, he wished to become a shaman in order to protect his own family. He has since gained an appreciation of what he does for his entire community, and he has begun to teach two nephews in their twenties to be shamans by passing on his ritual knowledge. Yet Blat Sae Song is not entirely devoid of mystical experiences: in dreams, he confides, spirits come to him to tell him things.

For the *Txiv Neeb muag dawb*, who are exclusively male, spiritual agency is not gained through trance-state access to the spirit Otherworld. His power does not involve managing and commanding spirit helpers in battles with evil spirits. Rather, his influence derives from memorizing the special chant language, which allows him to communicate effectively with benevolent spirits to benefit the Hmong. This is the special language of the oral tradition described in the statement, "Hmong shamanism is a repository of many esoteric rituals and incantations. They constitute the main processes the Hmong use to cure and are substantially based upon oral texts which only a few individuals know" (THAO 1986, 366). But what does the incorporation of many Chinese words into Hmong sacred ritual language mean? Have the Hmong surrendered spiritual authority to their historical Han enemies and oppressors? Tapp perceptively answers,

> Explanations of the legions of Taoist spirit-soldiers invoked by the Hmong shaman, or his recourse to Chinese chants, either in purely historical terms of the Chinese influences upon the Hmong, or in terms of the mystifying effects of the use of unintelligible languages as in Pali or Latin rituals, are inadequate to illuminate the significance of the phenomenon in construction of cultural identities and the constitution of discourse… the sort of questions we have to deal with are, therefore, whether control of 'Chinese' spirits by the Hmong shaman represents the permeation of Hmong shamanic practices by Sinitic values and ethicsm or an attempt to internalize or subvert the power of a sovereign state by a minority group…. (TAPP 2000, 90)

On the mixture of ancient Chinese and Hmong words in Mon Draa, Lemoine's comment may apply: "The coexistence in the shaman's metaphor of two registers, one vernacular and the other borrowed from the dominant other culture, guarantees the mastery of all healing knowledge in the shamanic strategy of empowerment" (LEMOINE 1996, 157). Perhaps reflecting the status of Hmong folk culture as a minority voice in constant contact with and in opposition to Han Chinese culture, both languages are used to ensure effective communication with the complex spirit Otherworld. And it is this conjoining power that the *Txiv Neeb muag dawb* shaman Blat Tao Sae Song invokes during the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony, on behalf of the village of Mae Sa Mai.

NOTES

*This detailed description of the *Ntoo Xeeb* ceremony focuses on a particular ritual practice of the Hmong, and aims to encourage future scholarly inquiry about specifics of Hmong animist beliefs as manifested in ceremonial rituals. Special thanks go to Bussakorn Sumrongthong of Chulalongkorn University. Due to traditional Hmong patriarchal mores, Dr. Sumrongthong, who is female, was occasionally prohibited from active participation in male-centered ritual procedures, but she performed as an invaluable liaison between native male informants, translators, and the male researcher (Huang). Other scholars who may be interested in access to personal archives of fieldnotes, audiotapes of interviews, video recordings of performances, and still photographs may contact H. Huang (hahuang@scrippscol.edu) and/or B. Sumrongthong (Bussakorn.S@Chula.ac.th). Fieldwork for this article was made possible through a faculty research and development grant from the Irvine Foundation, under the auspices of Scripps College during Huang's sabbatical leave.

1. A co-author of this essay, Hao Huang, maintains a personal interest in this particular culture motivated in part by a family history that problematizes the historical status of Chinese as bitter enemies of the Hmong over millennia. A distant ancestor, General Huang Ming, a loyalist holdout of the Ming Dynasty, retreated from the conquering Manchus from Guangxi to Guizhou in the late seventeenth century. He was given refuge by the Hmong of Lip'ing on the eastern border of Guizhou, who were proficient only in crossbows, swords, knives, and spears. In gratitude for their hospitality, Huang Ming and his soldiers instructed

the Lip'ing Hmong in the use of abandoned Chinese rifles, gunpowder, armor, and cannons, and taught them how to manufacture their own guns. This accounts for the origin of "the famous Hmong Blunderbuss, or flintlock rifle, which until recently was used by the Hmong throughout Indochina" (QUINCY 1995, 54).

2. Over the past fifteen years, Thai modernization projects have dramatically changed social and economic conditions in the northern hill villages. A system of modern highways has made access to once remote locations much easier, leading to an influx of tourists, both Western and Thai. There is much more contact between Hmong villages, as more and more families purchase cars. Lastly, almost all Hmong under thirty speak and write Thai, leading to integration if not complete assimilation into the modern Thai national mainstream.

3. The Barney-Smalley system of romanization is used for Hmong terms throughout this essay: the final consonant indicates intonation level, and doubled vowels indicate final nasalization.

4. Nusit Chindarsi's brief description of the similar *Tiertee Tier Seng* spirit ceremony of the Hmong Njua of Meto reinforces this interpretation of ritual function:

> The Hmong believe that this spirit looks after the people in a village.... A ceremony must be held to sacrifice to this spirit every year otherwise it will withdraw its protection from the people in the village.... A party comprising a shaman, the village headman and his assistants, and the representatives of the village households go to the grove.... [T]he shaman recites spells calling together all the spirits of earth, forest, and stream and the spirit of the mountain, to come and accept the sacrifice. The sacrifice is then killed and cooked and portions of it offered with a little rice to the spirits. The shaman invites them to take the offering and asks them to protect the village people and animals and promises that if they do, then there will be another offering at New Year. Because all households attend the rite, it unites the village despite sub-clan and clan differences. (CHINDARSI, 1976, 135)

5. Sae is used by Thai as a common prefix for surnames of immigrants from southern China who migrated to northern Thailand in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, to denote their origins.

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