

Hmong Religion

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I. THE OTHERWORLD

INTRODUCTION

The Hmong are pantheists, believing in a variety of natural and supernatural spiritual forces living in and animating all things. The Hmong world is inhabited by a variety of natural, ancestral, and supernatural spirits or gods. As with much in Hmong religion, Chinese influence is strong, and the Hmong Otherworld is closely modelled on the Chinese Otherworld, which in turn represents an inversion of the classical Chinese bureaucracy. The Hmong world of *yeeb ceeb* parallels the Chinese world of *yin*, the dark world of the spirits: the Hmong world of *yaj ceeb* parallels the Chinese world of *yang*, the bright world of men and women, of material objects and nature. In previous times, the Hmong often say, men and spirits could meet and talk to each other, and the passage between the two worlds was much easier. Now that the two worlds have become divided, only the shaman may, with impunity, venture into the Otherworld and return safely to this one.

SPIRITUAL BEINGS

In the Hmong song of Creation which is sung during the funeral rites, it is told how it was the frog, Nplooj Lwg, who first created the world of men and spirits. However, he was killed by the first humans, in a rage because he had lied to them about the size of the world (he had said it was no larger than the palm of a hand, the sole of a foot).¹ The frog's dying curse was that henceforth mankind would know sickness and death, the leaves would fall from the trees and the forests grow thinner.

Mankind would suffer from rains and the heat of the sun, the world of men and spirits would be divided into the world of men and the world of spirits, and men would no longer be able to rise up again, as they had previously done, on the thirteenth day after death.

The two Lords of the Otherworld are dreaded and fearful figures. One is Ntxwj Nyug, who judges the souls² of those who are to be reincarnated into animal, vegetable, or human form after their death. Ntxwj Nyug resides at the top of a mighty mountain, guarding the gates which must be crossed before the souls of the dead can return to the village of their ancestors. He is fond of feasting, and keeps a great herd of heavenly cattle which it is the fate of some Hmong in the otherworld to become. He is seconded by Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem, who issues licences for rebirth behind a great writing desk, seated on a magnificent and terrifying throne. Ntxwj Nyug and Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem are the couple who control life and death. Once one's licence for life has expired, only the shaman can intervene, sometimes, with Ntxwj Nyug for an extension of its term to prolong one's life on earth.

The other most important deity is Saub, a kindly figure who, although he has now become to some extent disinterested in the affairs of men, may still be appealed to in times of need. Saub was present at the creation of mankind, and is still believed to be living somewhere in the far realms of the otherworld. Saub is associated with fertility and reproduction. It was Saub who supplied the first seeds, and caused the first hen to lay eggs. After the mighty floods which covered the earth had come, it was Saub who advised the brother and sister who had survived the flood in a vessel of wood. He told them that in order to repopulate the earth they should marry. Their union gave birth to a shapeless lump of flesh. Saub advised them to carve this into twelve pieces, from which originate the twelve ideal Hmong clans.³

In a story told to account for the origins or 'roots' (*hawpau*) of shamanism, it is recounted how at the dawn of time Ntxwj Nyug (who is incorrigibly wicked) was observed to be killing humans faster than they were being created. Saub entrusted some of his healing powers to a mortal named Siv Yis, who was thus enabled to cure illness and disease. Begged to return to earth after his ascent to heaven on his death, Siv Yis promised to do so if called upon at the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month, but when the time came, realising everyone had overslept as he was halfway down the celestial ladder which joins the two worlds, Siv Yis in a tantrum threw his instruments down upon the earth and, despairing of human kind, returned to his heavenly abode. Some of these instruments were picked up by different people, who used them, and so became shamans. It is these instruments which form the equipment

of the shaman.⁵

Siv Yis was the premier shaman, and shamans today still refer to themselves as 'Siv Yis' in trance, (when they call Siv Yis 'Nyiaj Yig'). A host of ancestral spirits known as *neeb* accompany the shaman on his journey to the otherworld. These *neeb* include a great number of natural and supernatural forces and figures, such as the sparrowhawk and the swallow, dragons and tigers,—the wood-pecker who pecks insects from the growing bamboo soul, and the spider who stretches a bridge of copper and iron for the troops of the shaman to cross, soldiers and cavalrymen, but their origin is probably in the ancestral spirits of the shaman.⁶

Other important inhabitants of the otherworld include the ancient dragons, and the oldest dragon of all, the Zaj Laug, who controls the waters which surround the flat earth, sustained forever on the shoulders of four giants, and the rains which fall upon it and assure plentiful harvests. The shape of the dragon is poetically said to be glimpsed in the form of a rainbow (*zaj sawv*). The Dragon King is said to reside in a Palace at the bottom of the sea where he rules an aquarian world and is served by servants in the form of fishes. Often large pools or lakes, known as *lub pas zaj*, are said to be inhabited by dragons who should not be disturbed.⁷

The *neeb*, the host of spirits invoked by the shaman, are opposed to the *dab*, which is the ordinary word for spirits, although all may be referred to together as *dab neeb*, the widest category of all the spirits and supernatural forces known to the Hmong. The *dab* are themselves divided into several groups, of which the most important, although special *dab* are associated with the vocations of hunting, herbalism, and blacksmithery, are the *dab nyeg* and the *dab qus*. The *dab nyeg* include the domesticated spirits (*dab qhuas*) which inhabit various parts of the Hmong house and protect the household. The *dab qus* are wild, forest spirits, who inhabit particular spots of the natural landscape although they roam, and may attack or capture human souls. All nature is imbued with spiritual essences, but *dab qus* have a particular predilection for wild and uncultivated spots, prominent crags or solitary boulders, dark clumps of bushes and isolated groves of trees. Throwing a stone at such a grove of trees, or disturbing a boulder, may disturb such a *dab qus* and rouse it to attack and inflict (*hem*) harm upon one. A particular class of evil spirits is formed by *vij sub vij sw*, spirits of accident and disaster which particularly strike the household and its neighbourhood, and must be periodically routed and exorcised. There are said to be huge beings 'like trees' which move through the forest and devour people at night. Sometimes the spirits of particular trees are propitiated, especially at the New Year. These are known as *ntoo xeeb*, or trees,

which have their roots above the ground.

Particular forces of nature are also personified in a more concrete way. The most important of these are Nkauj Hnub and Nraug Hli, or the Lady Sun and the Lord Moon, (which is the opposite of the way the Chinese think about the sun and moon), and Xob, Thunder, or the God of Thunder. Xob is actually both thunder and lightening, and many stories are told of how Xob, pictured as a winged creature, was once trapped and hung up above the fire to dry, but escaped and flew booming away across the rice-fields, causing stunted rice-crops for ever afterwards. In stories of the flood it is also said that the waters mounted up so high that they knocked against the gong at the mountain roof-top of the world, rousing Xob who came to man's rescue.

SEMI-LEGENDARY AND HEROIC FIGURES

Various semi-legendary, heroic figures are also called upon by the shaman in his trance. Although not quite of the category of 'Immortals', like Saub, Ntxwj Nyug, or Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem, nor of the category of personified natural forces like the Sun and Moon, or Xob, they are conceived to be resting somewhere, like Siv Yis, in the Otherworld, and to have once been mortals. Kaj Yuam, the Heavenly Archer, is one of these. As a man he fashioned the first cross-bow, out of iron and copper, which he fired in turn at each of the nine suns that turned around the world, causing drought and death. He shot eight of them, but the last sun was so frightened she disappeared, and would not re-emerge until she heard the crowing of a cock the head of which, struck by her first rays, ever afterwards bore a red plume. This is why the sun will not appear until after cock's crow in the morning, and also why the cock is seen as a heavenly herald, who leads the soul of the deceased into the otherworld.⁸

Tswb Tchoj is another of these heroic figures of the Hmong past. Tswb Tchoj was born of the magical union between a boar and a human maiden. He fought many times against the Chinese, whom it is said always persecuted the Hmong, in various incarnations. Tswb Tchoj became the King (*Vaj*) or Emperor (*Huab Tais*) of all China, but because of a mishap,⁹ was tricked out of his rightful inheritance by the clever Chinese, and so died. Tswb Tchoj, however, like Siv Yis, promised to return to the earth one day to help his people, and in some quarters it is believed that he will still return, for it is the figure of Tswb Tchoj which has inspired the prophetic leaders of the various messianic movements of the Hmong against numerically more dominant peoples.

HOUSE AND COSMOS

The Hmong house, and its surrounding garden plots, is truly a reflection of the cosmos. If the roof and rafters of the house represent the vault of heaven, then the earthen floor represents the world of nature. Between heaven and earth is the world of men and of social life. In the pillars of the house dwell the ancestral spirits of the male head of the household, and each quarter of the house has its presiding deity, to which various offerings must be made. These include the *dab ncej cuab*, or spirit of the main housepost. It is particularly here that the ancestral spirits are supposed to reside, and the head of Green Hmong households will sacrifice a pig to this spirit once every two or three years.¹⁰ Other spirits in the Hmong house are the *dab qhov cub*, or spirit of the cooking hearth (in the middle of the floor), and the *dab qhov txos*, or spirit of the ritual hearth, the large raised oven used for ceremonial occasions or otherwise for pigswill. Above the fire the loft is guarded by the *dab nthab*, while outside the house the *dab txhiaj meej* is the special spirit which guards the lintel of the front door, fronting the valley, honoured in the form of a red cloth covering several silver coins pinned up above the door, which must be renewed every New Year. Inside the bedrooms of the house the *dab roog*, or spirit of the marital bedroom, resides in a gourd in the bedroom, and is associated with the woman of the house. Immediately opposite the front door is the *dab xwm kab*, known as the spirits of wealth and richness, who protect the entire household and all its members. The *dab xwm kab* are represented by a special altar in the form of a piece of rice-paper on the wall opposite the front door, which is daubed with chicken's blood and feathers, and silver and gold leaf. Sub-clans vary according to the number of household spirits they worship, but all traditional households will maintain the *dab xwm kab*. Next to the altar of the *dab xwm kab*, in houses where a shaman lives, will be the altar of the shaman. This is a special hanging or standing altar, which can be quite elaborate, with two or three tiers depending on the status of the shaman. It is believed to represent Siv Yis' grotto near the top of a supernatural mountain, above a pool near which grows the flower of immortality.¹¹ This pool is represented by a bowl of water placed upon the altar. From the altar run several cotton threads which are attached to the central housepost, and it is along these threads that the *neeb* travel when they visit the altar of the shaman, or when at the New Year they return to their home with Siv Yis for a few days of rest. Another altar may be set up either side of the shaman's altar or the altar to the *dab xwm kab*. This is devoted to a special category of spirits known as the *dab tshuaj*, or spirits of medicine, which are generally worshipped by women, since it is usually women who specialise

in the knowledge of herbal medicine. Outside the house and its gardens are the fields cultivated by members of the family, and beyond and between them, the wild world of uncultivated forest and fields reverting to forest, where the fierce *dab qus* may dwell. Here too a spirit known as Pog Ntxoog, or 'grandmother Ntxoog', may be encountered. Pog Ntxoog is a dreaded and fearful female spirit who lives in the depths of the forest and is often associated with tigers, who are feared by the Hmong because of a range of beliefs and legends about were-tigers.

The Otherworld is thought of as a harsh, mountainous landscape, similar to that of the natural world, and often entered beneath it, through holes or underground caves. At the meeting of the two worlds there is a great piece of water, crossed by a bridge.¹² Here the souls of men can meet with the spirits and communicate with them, although none know which are spirits and which men. Sometimes there is said to be a market-place on or around this bridge, where men and spirits trade, deal, bargain with each other. This may be the origin of the phrase, *yeeb yaj kiab*, the market of *yin and yang*, which refers to the abode of the dead. Here we can see something of the influence of the traditional environment of the Hmong in China, for it was the market-place which must have marked the traditional boundaries between the forested, mountainous world of the Hmong, and the urban bureaucratic world of the lowlands: supremely a place of exchange, transformation and substitution. Twelve great mountains, each higher than the others, ascending into the heavens, lead to the great mountain inhabited by Ntxwj Nyug, above which Siv Yis dwells. The soul of the dead must traverse these mountains in order first to reach Ntxwj Nyug, where he is judged, and then the village of his ancestors where he will dwell for a while before being reincarnated. The way there is fraught with ordeals: one mountain is made up of hairy caterpillars (there are fatally poisonous caterpillars in Asia) which can only be safely crossed with the aid of a pair of hemp slippers, which are consequently placed on corpses' feet.

CONTACTING THE OTHER WORLD

There are various means by which mortals may communicate with the supernatural world. The two most important are *ua dab* (propitiating the spirits) and *ua neeb* (shamanism). *Ua neeb* is itself divided into three main kinds: *ua neeb muag dub*, the dark-faced shamanism of the *yin* world, which is associated with possessive trance and, it is said, can only be learned from the *neeb* themselves: and *ua neeb muag dawb*, the white-faced shamanism of the *yang* world, which is not associated with any kind of trance, and may be learned by anyone who wishes to from

another shaman. Both these kinds of shamanism are said to have been originally taught by Siv Yis, and there is also a third kind of shamanism said to have been taught by him known as *ua txheeb*, a special form of divination of the future or the state of a sick person's soul through drawing lots among thirty-two bamboo lengths and a porcupine's quill.

Ua dab, or the practice of propitiating the ordinary spirits, is distinguished from *ua neeb*, in that any adult male, usually the head of a household, may perform, it while shamanism is a specialised vocation to which relatively few men and women are called. It is also said that while *ua dab* is for oneself, *ua neeb* must be for the benefit of others. This means that while shamanism must be practiced by a shaman for the benefit of a sick person who has consulted him, or for whose benefit he has been consulted by somebody else (such as the father of a sick child), who should not be a member of his own family (a shaman will usually call in another shaman if he himself or a member of his family is sick), *ua dab*, the work of the spirits, consists of particular rituals which are performed for one's own benefit, or for the benefit of members of one's own household. Thus most Hmong will know something about *ua dab*; only a few will know much about *ua neeb*. The otherworld can also be contacted through magic and through medicine.

The spirits of medicine are usually propitiated by a woman, often the oldest woman of a household, at a special hanging altar set up to one side of the *dab xwm kab* altar. 'Wild' herbs which grow in the forest are distinguished from 'tame' herbs which may be planted secretly around the house or close to the village, and the wisewoman carries in her head an enormous store of knowledge about these plants and the ailments they are useful for. Often rare herbs must be sought after very far afield, and in the travels which Hmong people may make in the slack period of the third to fourth months of the year, after the fields have been cleared, often herbs are requested from or brought to other villages at great distances. Usually only the roots are used, or infusions made from the leaves, boiled in chicken-broth, often with an egg mixed in it. Herbal experts are often consulted before a shaman is resorted to, or while a course of shamanic treatment is being undergone. Many of the remedies are specifically for womens' complaints, such as breastpains during pregnancy, or menstrual problems. If another woman wishes to learn the art of herbalism, the older woman, for example her aunt, will collect a great bunch of different types of herb. Laying these on the floor before the altar in her own house, she will light incense, burn spirit-paper, and chant propitiatory words before her spirits of medicine (*dab tshuaj*), before dividing the heap of herbs into two piles for herself and her niece. In this way the spirits of medicine are symbolically divided

between the two women, and after this time she can teach and guide the younger woman, having *faib dab tshuaj*, or divided the herbal spirits with her.

Magic (*ua khawokoob*) is not regarded as particularly Hmong, although many Hmong know a few magical rites to avert misfortune caused by an enemy, or assure possession of a lover. Often the words of magic rites are in other languages, such as Chinese, Thai, and Karen, and Hmong who claim to know about magic may boast that they learned their knowledge from one of these. The Karen, the oldest inhabitants of the Thai hills where the Hmong now live, are reputed to be excellent magicians, and sometimes sell pieces of elephant's foot to the Hmong as a love-charm. Misfortune, such as a wife's miscarriage, may be blamed on the magical spell of an enemy, which can only be countered by killing the enemy or by another magical spell. Often minor and informal rituals are associated with these spells—a child's ears may be lightly blown into three times while a few words are whispered, to rid him of a headache in the evening, after the day's work, a winnowing tray full of burning embers may be circled around the head of a sick person, or paper effigies hung up above the fire with holes pierced in their noses to cure a child's cold. And sometimes magic can be associated together with massage, which itself often goes with the use of herbal medicine; a man with backache may be laid upon a table while his great-aunt lightly scratches his back with a continuous, downwards motion, having lit incense before and muttering a few words under her breath as she does so. A whole range of informal and unsystematic knowledge of this kind is associated with love-charms and protective spells, incorporating herbs which are good for the stomach, and the kind of light massage a wife may request from her husband, or a child from its father, before the family retire to sleep in the evenings.

But, apart from the rituals of death, the two most effective means of communicating with the Otherworld are *ua dab* and *ua neeb*, and in what follows we deal with each in turn. Magic and medicine form part of the rhythm and tempo of everyday life. *Ua dab* and *ua neeb* create a rhythm and a tempo of their own: properly speaking, they take place outside time, in a changeless world.

UA DAB (PROPITIATING THE SPIRITS)

It is sometimes said that, while the Hmong have learned many things from other people in the course of their history, and have had many of their customs altered by contact with other societies, particularly the Chinese, the two oldest *kevcai*, or customs, which the Hmong have, which have always been Hmong, have never changed, and are spoken

in Hmong, are the rituals of *hu plig* and *laig dab*, and so we start with these.

Laig dab is the custom of feeding the ancestral spirits. Rice and pork are used. Very slowly a spoonful of each is ladled onto a heap in the center of the table, before the altar of the *dab xwm kab*, or onto the eating place where no table is used, by the male head of the household, who invites the spirits of his immediate ancestors to come and share in the feast, and to protect him and his family against the spirits of accident and disease, as he does so. He is seated alone, while the rest of the family may carry on their household business as usual. This is like a thanksgiving, for it is performed as soon as the first rice is cut, as soon the first maize is harvested, and by some clans as soon as the first of a particular kind of gourd (*dib*) has been reaped, and again on the last day of the old year, before the New Year celebrations begin. It may take half an hour or so, and when it is over the family will sit down to eat, together with close clan and affinal relatives from the village who must be invited as each household performs its *laig dab*.

Hu plig is the ritual for calling or summoning the *tus plig* (the soul or self), which is often performed for a sick person, and always for a newly born child. It is believed that among the *plig* (selves) which every human possesses, there is one in particular (referred to as the 'chicken self') which is easily alarmed, playful, and likes to wander. Such *plig* leave the body during sleep, and go off to play like children, with other *plig*. Like children, they may wander too far, and get lost, or they may suffer an accident, such as falling into the otherworld through a deep hole, and be unable to return to their 'house,' the human body, or they may be ambushed and captured by hungry and malevolent *dab qus*. They may also leave the body at other times, particularly during long and arduous journeys, or in cases of sudden shock or grief. In such cases the self is said to have 'fallen' (*tus plig poob*), and special means must be employed to recall it to its owner, who will fall sick without it, and may even eventually die unless it is recalled in time.¹³ The purpose of the silver necklets, or *xauv*, worn by children and Hmong who have been seriously ill, is to 'bind' this *plig* more firmly to its 'tsev', or house, the human body (*cev*). These, or a particular necklet made of three intertwined metals—silver, copper, and iron, may be prescribed after serious illness. It is of course the shaman's business to travel to the otherworld to bargain with the spirits who may have trapped such a *tus plig*, but in less serious cases a *hu plig* ritual is often resorted to, in cases of sickness or mental distress.

At birth a child does not possess this *tus plig*, and if the child survives for three days after birth, a *hu plig* ritual must be conducted to summon

the self into its body. After this a prohibition is placed on the house for a period of one lunar month (30 days). The ritual may be performed by anybody who knows the appropriate words and formulae, but in practice it is usually a man of some standing who is asked, who may also be a shaman, although he does not have to be. This is like a christening, since it is at this time that the child's first name is given by the caller of the soul; he will receive an 'elder,' or mature, name, after the birth of one or more children, and these names, like clan names, can be changed to avert continued sickness or misfortune. The ritual to call the *tus plig* is performed just inside the house, on the front porch. Four sprigs of maple are planted in the ground at the four corners of the porch, bound together by a string of hemp. Holding a chicken and burning paper made from bamboo which symbolises money in the other-world (for as heavenly money is earthly paper, so tears on earth are laughter in the otherworld, and cattle here are people there), and burning incense before a saucer of rice with an egg on a stool, the person who is calling the soul of the child stands facing the valley and sings a very sweet and beautiful song to invite the wandering *tus plig* into the body of the new-born child. Afterwards he will eat with the family and ties hempen thread as a protective bond around the wrists of all present.

The ritual of thread-tying (*khi hluas*) is often performed on other occasions as well, before a long journey for example, when a family must be parted, or when a shaman has diagnosed that the *plig* of a particular family have wandered in different directions, when *khi hluas* must be performed to bind the *plig* more firmly to the household, so preventing future 'discord' between them.

Hu plig is often performed at the actual site, usually outside the house, where it is diagnosed that the *tus plig* of a patient has 'fallen,' in which case the soul-caller will go to that site with a chicken and incense, spirit-money to burn, and a bottle of rice-wine, and squatting by the site will quietly summon the *tus plig* to return to its abode. He will take back with him an insect from the site which symbolises the returning *tus plig*. On other occasions the ritual is performed at the open door, where a chicken is released to search for the insect before it itself is sacrificed.¹⁴ A special *hu plig* ritual is performed by each household at the New Year, when the selves not only of the inhabitants of the house, but also of their domestic animals and crops (*plig qoob plig loo*) are summoned back to remain within the household compound, and all the farming tools and domestic utensils are ritually blessed.

Several methods of *ua dab* are performed. Many take place for the household gods (*dab qhuas*), and must be carried out by the male

head of the household during the course of the New Year celebrations, which last a minimum of three days. For example, this is the time when the Txhiaj Meej spirit, which guards the front door and therefore all the benign or evil, influences which enter that way, must be repaired and re-established (*tsa txhiaj meej*). On the first day of the New Year a small altar is set up beneath the lintel of the front door, on a bench containing a candle and a bowl of water, a bottle of wine, two cups of wine, and a cooked chicken. The head of the household and his assistant will stand inside the house, and hold a short but cheerful dialogue with two men outside, with whom they exchange a piece of chicken in return for their alcohol. The two men outside are seen as the 'messengers of heaven,' and during the course of the ritual they will symbolically raise and wash the sides of the door, pinning up new coins beneath the red tissue over the lintel of the door which forms the altar of Txhiaj Meej and daubing it with chicken's blood. The messengers throw paper money into the house, and the old decorations of the altar are burned. Finally a cock held inside the house is released, and its behaviour carefully watched as an omen for the New Year. This bird is considered a mascot and is not killed. After the messengers of heaven, invited into the house, have taken five steps towards the *dab xwm kab* altar, representing a plenty of children, chicken and pigs, horses and cattle, rice and corn, and gold for the household, the door is ceremonially closed behind them to illness and misfortune, and the ritual concluded.¹⁵

This is also the time when the *dab xwm kab* spirit must be honored, likewise by the sacrifice of a chicken and renovation of its altar. On the last day of the old year, beneath the altar of the *dab xwm kab* is set up another altar on a bench, containing a light, spirit-paper, puffed maize, three cups of alcohol, and a bowl of rice, an egg and incense. Firstly a live cock is proffered to the altar while holding incense before the divination horns are consulted, and the bird sacrificed. After it has been cooked it is again offered, together with cooked rice, soup and an egg, to the accompaniment of a lengthy prayer to the *dab xwm kab*. The blood of the sacrificed chicken is also daubed on the paper altar of the *dab xwm kab*.

Other rituals are also performed at particular times of the year which vary according to clan or descent group (or 'those who share the same household spirits; *ib tus dab qhuas*). One of these is the special *ua npuas tai* ritual, performed by certain Hmong descent groups at irregular intervals, but ideally every three years, indoors and at night, in honour of 'those ancestors of long ago, of whom we know neither the voice nor the name', and the spirit which guided them in their flight across the great water from China. No women may witness this

ritual.

The *dab roog*, or spirit of the marital bedroom, resides in a dried gourd resembling a water-carrier which is kept inside the bedroom. A ritual for this spirit, which looks after marital harmony, is performed by the husband for his wife, at least every three years. Offerings of sacrifice (*txi dab*) may also be made to the spirits in return for a favour granted; for example, one may promise to sacrifice a chicken, or a pig, if a certain crop does not fail, and then the sacrifice must be made (*fiw yeem*). Most of the *ua dab* rituals have as their aim that of assuring the peace and prosperity of the household or its individual members, they usually involve the sacrifice of a number of chickens or pigs, or a combination of both, they generally must be performed by the male household head, they all necessitate the burning of spirit-money and at least three sticks of incense. Very often the bones of the sacrificed chickens must be inspected after the sacrifice as an omen of the success of the ritual. In consulting the omens from a sacrificed chicken, the color and positions of its claws, eyes, thigh-bones, skull and bones of the tongue are all examined for signs of good or bad fortune, and whether a particular spirit is evilly intentioned or not. Eggs can also be dissected and examined as a form of oracle. For a similar reason the ritual of *ntaus kuam* is employed, that is, throwing the divination horns, two half-pieces of buffalo horn, which are thrown several times before and after rituals by the person conducting them who will tell, according to their pattern of falling, whether the time is propitious for such-and-such a ritual to be performed, or whether such-and-such a ritual has been successful (whether a god has accepted a sacrifice, for example). This is probably the most common ritual to be observed in any ordinary Hmong house, and like many others, it is Taoist in origin.

The pair of horns form a couple which are referred to as male or female; *yaj kuam yeeb kuam*, or the *kuam* (from the Chinese 'Pa Koua' or 'Eight Trigrams') of *yin* and the *kuam* of *yang*. They are also called 'Lady and Lord Kuam' or 'Mother and Father Kuam.' Because these two horns are cut from and represent the two sides of the original horn, they both have a convex and a flat side, and in addition when they are thrown to the ground, as they will be after their holder has clicked them together in his hand several times, they can fall pointing towards each other to the left or to the right, or pointing away from each other. Thus a range of possible combinations and permutations become possible, which correspond to different situations in the world of *yin* and the world of *yang*.

If a single horn lands on its flat side, it is said to be in a *yaj* (*yang*) position; on the convex side it is *yeeb* (*yin*). Dialogue between the

world of men and the world of spirits is established if the two horns land in opposite positions. In this way, at the simplest level, it can be discovered whether a soul has left or returned to the human world, and whether the shaman's *neeb* are or are not powerful enough to deal with a particular situation. But the system is more complex than this, and although individual interpretations may vary, more exact positions in which the horns fall may be used to determine whether, for example, a malady is the result of an escaped soul or an ancestral soul in difficulties in the otherworld, and whether *ua neeb* or *ua dab* will be the most appropriate remedy.

UA NEEB: SHAMANISM

In possessive shamanism the shaman's head is covered with a dark hood. His eyes are covered in trance, symbolising that he possess an inner vision which allows him to see deep into the otherworld, where the self of his patient is trapped. A typical ritual performed by a non-possessive, *muag dawb* (*yin*) shaman, whom it is known has learnt his art from another human being, is that of the protective ritual performed in the case of continued misfortune by the members of a household, which takes place in the house in daylight. This is a particularly dramatic performance, for its climax involves a trussed dog being led and chased three times around the house, led by a child and followed by the sick patient, while the shaman himself leads the procession, chanting in a loud voice, his assistant behind him beating his gong, and with outstretched motions of his arm before him, creating what appear to be rings of fire thrown out into the air from a burning brand held by his other hand. In fact he is throwing handfuls of millet powder from a pouch concealed at his waist through the flames of the torch, which blaze fiercely as they travel through the air, creating the illusion of fire-throwing. The children love this ceremony and become very excited, although some do not like it much when at the end the dog is led out of the house and sacrificed by the young men of the house, so that the self of the dog may 'bar the way' of the malevolent spirits who have been attacking the household. The dog's head is buried beneath a gate set up at the entrance of the village to further bar the way, while the two front paws are hung up as a warning to spiritual intruders, to *quas dab*, or block the way of the spirits.

Becoming a Shaman

Shamanism is sometimes distinguished from spirit-mediumship because the shaman always remains in control of his familiar spirits, and is not strictly possessed by them. The Hmong shaman is called a *txiv neeb*, or

father of the *neeb* spirits, who serve as his allies. However, in the early days of becoming a *txiv neeb muag dub*, the shaman may be more controlled by than in control of his *neeb*. For the Hmong always deny that it is possible to learn this sort of shamanism from a human agency. It is the *neeb* spirits themselves who choose a particular person to become a vehicle for their healing of others and ceaseless battle with Ntxwj Nyug. These people may be either male or female, although nowadays male shamans seem to be more common than they were. The *neeb* will reveal themselves to such a person through dreams of a special kind, and if that person still refuses to accept that he or she is a shaman the *neeb* spirits will trouble them in other ways, haunting them so that they become strangely ill, with fevers and headaches and weaknesses which no ordinary remedies can cure. If the person still does not realise what is the matter he is sure to consult a shaman himself, or more than one shaman, and if the complaint still does not clear up, eventually a shaman is sure to diagnose that the patient's illness is caused by the *neeb* who are seeking to serve him. It is then the future shaman's business to seek help in controlling the experience of the *neeb* from a Master Shaman, a *Xib Hwm*.

But this Master need not be the shaman who diagnosed the apprentice shaman's complaint, and need not even be a member of the apprentice shaman's family. And, as the Hmong see it, he does not *teach* the future shaman shamanism, since nobody can do that but the shaman's familiar spirits or *neeb* themselves. What the Master does is teach him to control and organise the experience of encountering these *neeb*. The future shaman may already be suffering the trembling and paroxysms characteristic of shamanic trance. Indeed, as the Hmong say, if shamanism could be learnt, one would expect old shamans to be much better than young ones, since they would have had so much time to practise. But on the contrary, it is readily observable that young and new shamans are much clearer and stronger in their words and movements than those who have been shamans for some time. This is because they are closer to their original encounter with the *neeb*.

When the new shaman feels strong enough to control the *neeb*, he will sit on the same bench (or on two different ones side by side) as his Master in his own house, and together the two of them will conduct a shamanic rite, invoking the *neeb* spirits and riding off together into the Otherworld for the first time. Afterwards, water from the Master's bowl will be put into the bowl of the new shaman, which he will keep on his own altar to the *neeb* which the Master helps him to put up in the new shaman's house. It is in this house that the *neeb* have to reside, and so from henceforth the *neeb* will be divided between them. The

young shaman, however, unless he specially commissions them, must receive the ritual paraphernalia of shamanism from a member of his own descent group, some of whose own *neeb* will come with their equipment. Often this person will be his own father or a paternal uncle, or paternal grandfather or greatuncle. So that to some extent *ua neeb*, shamanism, is hereditary, since that person must also have been a shaman to have such equipment.¹⁶ But there is no contradiction between this and finding a Master outside one's own family. The price paid for training by a Master, where a Master is not nearly related to his acolyte, is fixed in silver rupees. Instruction generally takes place in the forest, except when the two practise together in the house.

Although shamanism can afflict a person at any time of life, it is usually the relatively well-established males, often with a wife and family, who tend to become shamans. While shamanism can be a vocation for the nervous, imaginative or mystically inclined, or those who have suffered some sort of emotional disturbance, it is also an occupation which carries considerable prestige within the community. And although by no means everyone becomes a shaman, shamanism can be relatively common in a community. In one village of 25 households, for example, there were 9 *txiv neeb muag dub*, although these were not all in separate households, and several were father and son. The shaman remains a farmer and cultivator like all other members of the village. While his practice of shamanism should normally add to his status in the community, it does not always do so (in the case of lazy or indulgent men, for example), and the shaman must tend to his family and fields like all other villagers. The shaman will keep the lower jaws of all the pigs sacrificed in rituals he has conducted during the course of the year hanging from the central pillar of his house until the New Year celebrations when, as he is despatching the *neeb* for a few days to their home in the cave of Siv Yis, he will burn them and allow their *plig* to proceed on its normal course towards transmigration, having served the purpose for which he ordered them sacrificed in the otherworld.

The accessories of a shaman are all-important. They include the hood of black or dark blue cloth which covers his eyes, a cutlass which he plants before the altar when he performs a service, bellrings placed upon his left index finger, a gong which his assistant will beat behind him to summon the *neeb* as he enters trance and again during and at the end of the service, and a rattle made of an iron hoop with pieces of round metal through it which he shakes regularly as he goes into trance and throughout proceedings. This rattle is seen as the 'harness' of the shaman's 'horse': a long bench must be provided for the shaman by the family of the household which has invited him which is referred to

as his 'winged horse,' and symbolically represents the legendary winged horse of Siv Yis. On the shaman's altar, in his house, are the bowl of water, called a *lub pas zaj*, a dragon's pool which corresponds to the pool beneath the cave of Siv Yis. There also must be a porkfat candle to light the way into the beyond. There should be a saucer of husked rice in the centre of which an egg is placed, representing the *leej nkaub* or parakeet which is the special spirit of the shaman, and into which three sticks of incense are stuck as food-offerings to the *neeb*. Three small bamboo, wood or china containers should also contain respectively water, tea, and rice-wine for the spirits (actually filled with warm water, sometimes with some grains of rice and rice-wine). Unhusked rice or corn may also be offered as fodder for the shaman's horse on his altar, and there is always a container full of puffed corn, into which many pieces of incense are stuck, which the shaman uses when, at the beginning and ends of his trance, he throws them over his shoulders shouting 'Phaib!' to command his *neeb*. Other equipment used by the shaman include the pairs of divination horns, which are also used by most heads of of households.

Consulting a Shaman.

If a member of one's family falls ill, and one decides to consult a shaman, it is usually a member of one's own clan who is chosen, and preferably a member of ones' own descent group. Inevitably some shamans have better reputations than others, but potential jealousy between shamans is averted through a divination ritual which families can use to decide which particular shamans should be consulted. This entails balancing an egg on a bottle or on the back of the hand, while repeating the name of the shaman one has in mind. If it stays on, that is the shaman to consult. When some one wishes to consult a shaman, he will visit the shaman's house, and prostrate himself on the ground, three times before him, *kowtowing* (*pe*) with his head and knuckles to the ground. He will mention that such-and-such a person is sick, and beg the shaman to intercede with the spirit world for him. Without further ado, the shaman will usually throw his divination horns upon the ground to see what kind of illness is in question, and whether his auxiliary spirits, the *neeb*, are sufficiently strong to be able to deal with the situation. A delay is then usually fixed for a period of three days and nights, during which it will be seen whether the patient shows any signs of improvement. If the sickness worsens, it will be clear to everyone that the shaman's auxiliary spirits did not feel sufficiently powerful to deal with the situation, and another shaman may then be consulted.

If, however, the patient shows signs of improvement in those three

days—by an improved appetite, for example, or increased facial color—then it is clear that the shaman's intervention has proved timely, and he will be invited to proceed to the diagnostic and healing services proper.¹⁷ Up to this time, the shaman has not met his patient: all his encounter has been in the spiritual world. However, a shaman may, if he is a practitioner of another form of healing, diagnose that the illness is not serious enough for shamanism, and proceed to the patient's house to examine the three pulses of the patient on each of his wrists. This is an alternative form of diagnosis to throwing the divination horns. The shaman's concern throughout, as with the traditional practitioners of Chinese medicine, is with the health, rather than the illness, of the patient.

If the patient's health shows some signs of improving, it is obvious that it is worth the shaman's while to try to hasten the process by himself proceeding into the otherworld and bargaining, intimidating or pleading with the *dab qus* who may have trapped the wandering *plig*, with the help of the shaman's auxiliary troops, or descending into a hole to retrieve it, or even to retrieve it from the bottom of the ocean, or in other cases bargaining directly with Ntxwj Nug, the Lord of the Otherworld, for an extension of the patient's licence for life on earth. For all these situations, and many others, different services are employed.

The commonest means of dealing with the forces of the otherworld is for the shaman to bargain for the patient's *plig* with the *plig* of an animal, which is why pigs and chickens are sacrificed during shamanic sessions. Their *plig* may be substituted by the shaman for the *plig* of the afflicted person, or it may be used to bar the passage of the evil spirits to this world, as a kind of decoy. On rare occasions the shaman may even substitute his own *plig*, his own life-substance, for the self of the patient, in which case the shaman is said to have already died, but to have been restored again to life with a shortened life-span.¹⁸ Some gossip that shamans are men who have already died, but are living on with a special extension of their life-licence through the grace of old Saub.

Recalling the Soul

The shaman, like a modern psychotherapist, restores the balance of the psyche by first identifying, then retrieving, the absent or lost parts of the self; shamans divide the self into five parts: the chicken self (*ntsuj qaib ntsuj noo*), the self of the bamboo (*ntsuj xyooj ntsuj ntoo*), the self of the bull (*ntsuj nyuj rag ntsuj nyuj rhi*), of the reindeer (*ntsuj nyuj cab ntsuj nyuj kawv*), and of the shadow (*ntsuj duab ntsuj hlavv*).¹⁹ More usually it is the chicken, bamboo and bull selves which are spoken of, although the 'shadow' self is also often referred to, and serves as a general metaphor for the *plig*. This division of the self into animal, vegetable, and

images of the human, parallels the division of the Hmong natural world.

Yet these selfs are not necessarily singular, and each part of the body may possess *plig* which can wander and encounter misfortune. It is strongly prohibited to watch animals, or other humans, copulate, for in that case the *plig* may be literally absorbed by the sight, and leave one's own body in order to enter into the observed womb, to be reborn as a dog, a chameleon, another human child, or whatever. On its journeys from the body the *plig* is pictured as taking the form of a tiny winged insect. It is for this reason that during the *hu plig* ritual, of calling the soul, the person performing the rite will dig and scrape at the spot where it is supposed that the *plig* has fallen in order to retrieve a small insect which he will return to the home of the patient. The souls of the dead are believed to take on the form of the cicadas which sing in the seventh lunar month of the year, after the rains have come, to remind their descendants to plant their crops, and this is the time when, it is believed, the ancestors return to the earth to visit their living relatives, as the Chinese also believe; the cicada is particularly venerated not only for its longevity, like the toad (seventeen years in comparison to the toad's forty), but also because, spending its first four years under ground, and then emerging in the form of a mobile pupa, it splits down the back and emerges a perfect insect. So it is the perfect emblem of resurrection from the grave.

The Shamanic Session: Diagnosis and Healing

The shamanic session itself usually has two parts, known as *ua neeb saib* (to see) (or *ua neeb qhua*) and *ua neeb kho* (to heal). For if the divination horns and other means of divination such as consulting the pulses, do not suffice to determine the cause of the illness, the shaman will proceed directly to the first part of the shamanic session, *ua neeb saib*, for his diagnosis, which requires no sacrifice and can be performed at any time. It is after this that the healing session (which does require a sacrificed animal) can take place, sometimes again after a delay of some days, or weeks, in order to determine the progress of the patient, or to allow the family to obtain the requisite animal. The diagnostic shamanic session, like the healing one, must take place in the house of the patient.

For the *ua neeb saib*, the shaman will proceed to the house of the patient with his equipment, usually carried by an assistant or the consultant. In the house a small altar will have been set up for him against the wall facing the ceremonial porch, with a long bench before it which will function as his steed. After throwing the horns, lighting spirit paper and burning three sticks of incense, the shaman, seated on the bench before the altar, with his face covered by the veil which descends from

his head like a turban, fastened with a head-band, will begin to jerk and tremble. The tremors will run through his body, and soon it will be observed that they are most violent in his feet and hands, which begin to take on a rhythm of their own, until the whole body of the shaman is steadily bounding up and down upon the bench, exactly as though he were a rider on a cantering horse, while the assistant stands behind him beating the gong, whose sounds mingle with those of the shaman's fingerbell and the rattle which he holds in his right hand. These sounds, the smell of the burning incense, and the rhythmic motions of his body, all aid the shaman to enter into the trance which overtakes him as his auxiliary spirits, the *neeb*, descend and accompany him on his journey into the otherworld in search of the afflicted self. This may continue for some two hours, or longer. On his return to the world of mortals, the shaman will be exhausted, and after he has been given some time to recover, will be anxiously questioned by the family of the patient. Women often join in these discussions, in the course of which the shaman will communicate his diagnosis, and in many ways these form the most important part of his diagnosis. It may be that an ancestral spirit, on its journey in the otherworld towards rebirth for whom the appropriate postmortuary ritual has not yet been performed has encountered difficulties or hunger. In this case the shaman's services will no longer be required; it is the business of the family to ensure that the appropriate rites are performed as soon as possible. It may be that the self of the patient has become entwined with a neighboring foetus, in which case a special shamanic ritual to separate the two (*faib thiab*) will have to be performed. More usually, the wandering self has fallen into a pit or hole, and the shaman must proceed to the shamanic session proper, *ua neeb kho*, to heal the patient.

The external form of the healing session resembles the form of the diagnostic session very closely, but its purpose is entirely different.²⁰ In both the shaman is seated on his wooden horse, enters into the otherworld in trance with the help of his *neeb*, and returns to the world of humans. In both the various stages of his passage are marked by the chant which the shaman sings throughout his trance, calling on the *neeb* and invoking all his spiritual helpers to aid and assist him in various ways. Many of the words of these chants are as unintelligible to the average Hmong as Latin church services are to the average Christian, but add to the power and mystery of the occasion in much the same way, for Chinese words and phrases are used which hark back to the Taoist influences upon Hmong shamanism. It is sometimes said that the spirits are 'frightened' when they hear a man speaking in different tongues, and it is the shaman's business to frighten off the spirits which may have

afflicted the fallen self of his patients.

If, after a certain term has elapsed, the patient shows some signs of recovery, it is clear that the shaman's diagnosis has been correct, for the very identification of the illness causes the illness to lessen. In this case, it is obvious that the shaman who has been able to conduct such a correct diagnosis is uniquely qualified to proceed to its actual cure, and thus it is to him that the family will turn to perform the healing ritual. While there is a great variety of different healing rituals for different circumstances, the sessions themselves can be divided into five main parts. The first part is formed by the entrance of the shaman into trance, and his invocation of his auxiliary helpers. The second part is formed by the procession of the shaman and all his troops to the house of the patient to search there for his lost self. The third part is formed by the hunt of the shaman and his spiritual army after the lost self, and the rescue of the self. The fourth part is formed by the return of the cavalcade, with the fugitive self, carried on the back of a female spirit just as Hmong women carry their children, back to its proper home. The fifth and final part is formed by the return of the *neeb* to their altar, and the shaman's return to normal consciousness.²¹

Such has been the intensity of his experience that the shaman may remember very little of what has passed. Some even say that they do not 'see' in the otherworld at all, but they 'feel' for the afflicted self there, in their 'livers' (hearts).

During the healing session a combination of pigs or chickens or both will have been sacrificed behind the shaman's bench by the men of the house—whatever has been specified by the shaman after his preliminary diagnosis. Usually spirit paper is burnt at the throat of the pig when it is sacrificed, and the shaman may address the self of the pig with a few words of exhortation as to its conduct in the otherworld, where it may be exchanged or substituted for the afflicted human self. The paper is burned as a means of sending money to the otherworld to aid the stricken self, and often the back and clothes of the patient who during *ua neeb kho* is seated behind the shaman on a low stool, will be daubed with the blood of the sacrifice so that, it is said, the *dab* will recognise the patient. The men will skin and clean the pig at the nearest watering place to the house, and the woman will cook it while the shaman concludes his service. Afterwards there will be a great feast in the house, to which the shaman is invited as the guest of honor, and before returning to his house he will receive the head and a fore-leg of the animal in tribute for his services. It is only rarely that Hmong households can afford to sacrifice animals and eat meat, so that it is very appropriate that such sacrifices should be performed at times of sickness and disease.

In the course of the session, the shaman may perform other actions. Often he leaps backwards onto his bench with a great shout, his assistant catching him or supporting him as he does so, before landing again on his seat to continue bounding rhythmically as before. He may shout 'Phaib!' as an invocation to his auxiliary spirits, and scatter puffed corn over his shoulders around the house, or blow sprays of water by a special technique from the corners of his mouth into the 'four branches of heaven'—the four directions. Sometimes his possession will be so extreme that he will seem to lose all control of his instruments, in particular his rattle, which will be thrown with great vigor by an involuntary movement of the arm over his shoulder. His assistant will run to retrieve it and place it tenderly back in his still shaking hand, but it may happen again.

There are very many variations and many rites which may be practiced during, before, or after the shamanic session proper. At the New Year, for example, a special ritual must be performed by all shamans to *xa qhua neeb*, or send the *neeb* off from the altar where they normally reside to celebrate their own New Year in their world of spirit. Various presents are made to the shaman for his *neeb* by those he has treated, and several chickens must be sacrificed for the *neeb*. It is also at this time that the altar and its strings, the bridge of the *neeb*, must be cleaned and remade. After the New Year celebrations the shaman must again perform a service to invite the *neeb* back to their customary home in the house.²²

Specific rituals are performed by the shaman to block the route of the self to death and reincarnation, to renew or extend its term for life on earth (*fab ntawv*), to detach it from a foetus it may seek to be reborn in, to raise a fallen self or plug a hole in which a straying self has fallen, to change an unfortunate year into a fortunate one (*ntxeev nyeej*), or to exorcise the spirits of accident and catastrophe (*sau sub*). Others include a rare ritual to rescue the self from the bottom of the ocean, during which the shaman may fall insensible to the floor by the central pillar for as long as an hour,²³ and *ua neeb koos plig* (to surround the self), a solidary rite performed for the entire family, after the New Year and before new fields are cut, with the purpose of encircling and retaining the selfs of the family within the family compound, when a thread from the neck of the sacrificial pig is wound slowly around the seated family by the shaman, (as it also is in other contexts).

Hmong shamanism is in effect a psychodrama of great subtlety and power. Its ultimate aim, however, is not religious, in the sense we ordinarily understand that term, so much as medical (as LEMOINE 1986 has pointed out): to heal an afflicted person, whether that affliction be

physical, mental or coincidental, and to restore to the patient a damaged part of their own self. For this reason it should *not* be seen as forming a threat to other religions which Hmong may adopt, but be regarded as coterminous with them.²⁴

Shamanism does not preclude the use of other forms of medicine, in particular herbal medicine, which is often used in conjunction with medicine. Indeed, I have been told that the best cures are those where one first consults a shaman, then obtains medical attention from a clinic or hospital, and then returns again to the shaman. However, there is no doubt that the recognisable effectiveness of modern medicine can and does cause considerable problems to a traditional belief system based on shamanism as a form of healing. In any case shamanism is considered not to be fully effective, since not only are Siv Yis' instruments never so effective as when he had used them but also knowledge is thought to deteriorate inevitably over the course of time. Thus shamanism and other techniques of healing and technology are never as they were in the 'roots' (*hauvpaus*) of time, of things, and we exist in a time of flowering and (so) decay.

But it is this conflict of new and traditional medical systems which has been instrumental in fostering the conversion of many Hmong individuals and whole villages to Christianity taught by the missionaries who have been working constantly in sections of the Hmong world over the past hundred years. Conversion to Christianity causes particular problems in the kinship system which is so strongly associated with funeral and burial systems, since different descent lines are distinguished largely according to mortuary practice. Christians may often only marry other Christians since traditional customs such as the payment of bridewealth are often rejected by Hmong converts to Christianity, while burials for Christians in some cases cannot be performed by their clan members because the converts have rejected their original mortuary customs. Often, however, even Hmong Christians retain considerable faith in their traditional beliefs, and particularly in shamans, and may consult shamans while also attending Christian services.²⁵

II. THE WAY OF DEATH

The shaman, who deals in life, is quite distinct from the ritual experts who conduct funeral and post-mortuary rites. It may be that shamans do perform such rites, but if so, it is not in their capacity as shamans that they do so. Apart from the lengthy and elaborate ceremonies connected with wedding (*kab tshoob kev kos*),²⁶ the Hmong have no other customs to rival in depth and complexity those associated with the 'way of death'

(*kev mob kev tuag*), which have as their ultimate aim the safe despatch of the soul of the deceased to the otherworld and its reincarnation as a member of the same clan.

Full mortuary rites are not performed for everyone. The souls of those killed evilly or violently are thought to assume the shape of hungry ghosts, and their bodies are disposed of as swiftly as possible, with the barest of preliminaries possible. If there is a funeral for them, their bodies may not be carried out of the house through the door: a special opening must be made in the side of the house. The same is done with the bodies of stillborn children, or those who die within the first three days of life. Properly speaking, these lack souls since they have not yet been called through the appropriate rituals, and so funeral rites cannot be performed for them. It should also be noted that there is at all normal times a ritual prohibition on speaking about death or the deceased, or mentioning the name of the deceased, particularly inside the house, where it may invite death to fall upon its inhabitants. For this reason, great tact should be observed when discussing death with the Hmong.

THE FUNERAL

The funeral of an older man, the father of a family, will begin among most clans with the firing of a salvo of shots from guns by his closest male lineage relatives around the house and around the village. It is said that this is to frighten away evil *dab qus* who may seek to attack the household at this time, and that it may be a relic of the days when the Hmong fought the Chinese in battle. It also serves to notify the village that a death has taken place.²⁷

The sons and male relatives of the house will be sent out immediately with whisky to invite guests from the neighboring houses, and a master of ceremonies, to the funeral; all the near male kin of the deceased should attend before the funeral rites can begin, and some may come from villages a days' march away or more. Meanwhile the body is being washed with warm water by the sons of the house, and is then dressed in the colorful and elaborate clothing which the Hmong make specially for the occasion of death. The deceased must wear all new clothes before undertaking the long journey to his ancestors' village.

As soon as possible, a person must be found who can sing the *qhuab ke* (called *tawv ke* by the Green Hmong), the song of the opening of the way, to the soul of the deceased. The purpose of this song is to guide the reincarnating self through the many hazards and ordeals of the otherworld back to the village of his ancestors, where he will dwell for a while before being reincarnated. On the way he must pick up his 'coat,' that is, the placenta which is buried beneath the central pillar of the house

at the birth of male children, and near the place of birth for a girl child, which he will wear during his long journey. The poetic geography of this song parallels the long historical journey of the Hmong from a country probably to the North of China.²⁸ The song describes the creation of the world and the first couple, the deluge and the first drought, and represents a historical journey backwards through time to the origins of humanity, to which the deceased must return before being reborn . . .

‘ Now, ah, your ghost, my brother richly dressed
 Appears on the other side—tall like you, your spitting image
 Is it you or not? Cock your ears, turn your head
 Look: that man, the stranger, he sings you a spirit song
 Your ghost takes you by the hand, you cross your arms, you cross
 your legs
 You rise up with your ghosts, is that not so, Neng Chu?
 You can no longer talk with men,
 You have glided into the Beyond, you can talk with spirits—
 Let your feet glide and follow the spirits ’ . . .

(LEMOINE 1983, 11–12)

More shots are fired to announce the ending of the preparation of the body, and a variety of ritual experts will be appointed from among the village or surrounding villages. Very often these experts will be found to be younger men, as fathers usually prefer their sons to attend so that they may learn how to perform the rites properly, and considerable discussion on exact procedure may take place while the rituals are being performed, with advice being heeded from older men.²⁹ Thus, besides its overt purposes, the funeral is also an occasion for learning, and an occasion when kinship structure is ritually enacted. For funeral customs and differences of ritual are one of the main means whereby different descent groups within clans are distinguished. A funeral can only take place in the house of the same descent group (*dab qhuas*) as the deceased, because only they will perform rituals in the same way: similarly, births should always take place in the house of the same descent group as the father of the child. Where an accident occurs, and a birth occurs, for example in the house of the child’s mother (of a different clan altogether to its father), two *hu plig* rituals may have to be conducted, one at each house, and two different names given to the child.

Ideally the ritual officiants are the two pipers, the two drummers, the two men in charge of cutting and supplying the firewood, the two coffin-makers, the two in charge of carrying water to the house, two masters of ceremonies, the two gunners, and the singer of the *qhuab ke*, as

well as two women to set the table and girls to husk the rice. For the purposes of the funeral, normal sex-roles are reversed: women are not supposed to take part in most of the ritual proceedings. So men take charge of serving the food and supplying wood and water to the house, although they do not actually cook the food, and women are invited to eat first on the day of the burial. There should be two of each kind of helper, not only because single, odd, numbers are usually inauspicious, but also because such work as the constant beating of the drum and blowing of the pipes, which continues throughout the funeral, is extremely arduous, and one man alone could not do it. Indeed, the Hmong are not always very strict about this, and other assistants may stand in too.

A bottle of alcohol and a cooked chicken in the two halves of a gourd, together with a boiled egg, a crossbow, a knife and a paper umbrella, will be placed by the head of the corpse. Meanwhile a piece of bamboo has been split into two to serve as divination horns during the duration of the funeral. These may not be used again afterwards, and are added to the other objects by the dead man's head. The cock will serve as a guide under whose wings the reincarnating self will shelter on its flight to the otherworld. The whisky will be symbolically presented to the corpse during the recitation of the *qhuab ke*. As each guest arrives, he will present some paper money to the master of ceremonies, as well as incense, spirit-paper, and some rice. Then he will make his way to the corpse and, taking hold of the corpse's hand, will shade the eyes of the dead man and begin to lament. Although these 'keens' fall into a set, singsong form, their content is entirely spontaneous and can be very moving. They may last for a long or a short time. It is the business of the women of the house to keep constant watch by the corpse, fanning away any flies or insects which may gather there as the days of the funeral proceed. Incense is frequently burned, at the feet and head of the corpse, both as an offering in the world of spirits and to fumigate the stench of putrefaction. The more important the dead man is, the longer will be his funeral, and the more days his body is kept in the house. As at least one pig must be sacrificed by his family for each day of the funeral, a funeral must be expensive. The guests—there may be a hundred or more of them—will stay in and around the house throughout the funeral, although some may visit other houses or their own houses in the village to sleep for a few hours at night. Most funerals last a minimum of three days and ideally for twelve.

Each day of the funeral is based around the eating of the morning, noon, and evening meals. Before each meal the pipes are played, a different song for each time of day, and the drum is beaten. Various songs

may also be sung by those who know them, alternating with the music of the pipes and drum. These *nkauj tuag* have something in common with the special songs which are sung at weddings.³⁰ After the *qeej tu siav* song, the song of expiring life, which follows the recitation of the *ghuab ke* has been played, the corpse, dressed in the special clothes of death, is ceremonially raised onto a bier elevated against the uphill wall of the altar, as the *qeej tsa nees* song is played, where it will remain until the day of burial. The wooden drum, which most clans must destroy or throw away after the burial, is suspended from a sapling strapped against the far right pillar of the house, and while it is being beaten, the piper performs a unique dance as he pipes, weaving round and round the house. Every few notes there is a note which corresponds to a word in the tonal language of the Hmong, so that the tunes played on the *qeej* during the funeral are literally songs, the words of which are never spoken on normal occasions, although they may be recited for the purpose of learning. Before each meal, the corpse is ceremonially offered food, as the pipes and drum are played. Also known as *laig dab*, the pork and rice must be symbolically offered to the corpses' mouth by the new household head, often the dead man's son, while the two men play the *rab qeej* in mournful procession around the pillars of the house. In these reed-pipes the entire repository of Hmong custom is said to be contained. Guns are also fired again while the corpse is symbolically offered food.

Before the corpse is buried, all the debts outstanding to the dead man's name must be paid off. This is a highly ritualised procedure, involving frequent offerings of drinks by both parties, the plaintiffs and defendants, in order to minimise all possible tensions. However, the family of the deceased are usually very keen to pay off all outstanding debts of their relative, since debts outstanding in this life will be carried over into the next, and in popular belief may result in rebirth as a pig or other animal in the household of his creditor, which in turn will bring misfortune to his human descendants. On the night before the burial, a special song may also be sung for the deceased known as the *txiv xaiv*. This is a lament for the dead, intended to bring comfort to the living.

BURIAL AND GRAVES

On the day of burial, after the morning meal, the corpse is carried out through the side of the house onto the mountain outside the house, not passing above other houses, where a great crowd will have gathered. As the final *qeej sawv kev* (song of mounting the way) is played on the pipes, the corpse is laid upon a stretcher. A number of bulls or oxen have been tethered to stakes below the house, ideally one for each married son and son-in-law of the deceased, as well as one from his wife on be-

half of her father, and when everybody has gathered together, after the divination horns have been cast, and the deceased invited to accept the cattle, these will be killed by a blow (or several blows) with a mallet to the head by a relative of the donors. The work of skinning, cleaning, washing and cooking these will occupy the next several hours. Then, after everyone has been invited to eat by the masters of ceremony (including villagers who have not been to the funeral) from a high trellis set up beneath the house, and the workers in the funeral rewarded by receiving different parts of the beasts, the funeral procession will set out to the place of burial.

Both the place, and the most auspicious day and time, for burial, will have been carefully determined beforehand, by lengthy discussions with the elders which can take place during the funeral. The funeral procession, usually in the late afternoon, is led by the piper, followed by the master of ceremonies, carrying a chicken, bottle of whisky, rice and half a boiled egg. He is accompanied by a young girl, bearing a burning brand to light the way for the deceased, who will cast it down and return before the first stop, where the piper will stop playing. Many men may carry the bier, and cluster around it. The procession may make several stops along the way, supposedly to confuse the evil spirits which may be pursuing them, but this varies between different descent groups. It is also usual for this reason to start off in one direction, and then reverse towards the west (the direction of death). Death attracts all kinds of evil influences, so many ruses and subterfuges are employed to avert these and ensure that the souls of all those in the procession stay with them and do not follow the deceased into the world of darkness. While the corpse is laid in the coffin, the pipes are again played. Incense and spirit paper are burnt, and a final prayer is said which directs the soul of the deceased on its way. After the coffin has been covered with earth, a cross-bow is fired once, and the stretcher chopped up and placed upon the grave. All metal and synthetic materials must be removed from the corpse before it is buried, since all that is buried in the grave must perish if effective reincarnation is to take place.

Various purification and cleansing rituals are performed by the relatives of the deceased on their way back from the burial, on the day after the burial, and on the third day after burial. Again these differ according to clan and descent group. Usually on the third day after burial the grave is revisited, tidied and swept. According to whether the deceased was a member of a descent group which follows Hmong or Chinese burial practices, branches and leaves are placed over the grave (for a Hmong-style grave), or a cairn of stones built over it (for a Chinese-style grave). There is also an intermediate style, which is fenced. Also

according to whether they follow Hmong or Chinese customs, the corpse will be buried laterally (Chinese-style) to the slope of the mountain, or perpendicularly to it (Hmong-style). It is considered unpropitious for the head of the corpse to be pointing due east or to be facing directly upwards, and sometimes the head will be adjusted in the grave a little to avoid this. 'Blinded by the sun he cannot see, so his sons and daughters will suffer misfortune,' as it may be said.

The geomantic system for the siting of villages and graves which the Hmong share with the Chinese is based upon the belief that the present-day fortunes of humans depend on the welfare of their ancestors in the otherworld. So the lie of the mountains and valleys and rivers is carefully inspected to settle upon an auspicious burial site, which will assure prosperity to the male descendants of the deceased (since it is male descendants who will continue to uphold the customs of his clan). Sighting from the top ridge of a line of mountains, the left-hand mountain is known as the Azure Dragon and the right-hand one as the White Tiger. The left-hand (male) one should be lower than the right-hand (female) one, and in their gulleys two watercourses should ideally lead down towards a pool known as the Dragon's Pool, where reincarnation is thought to begin. The origins of this system date back to the two opposite sides of a mountain which were used by the ancient inhabitants of China to represent the *yin* and the *yang* of things, since rainfall is always greater to the west, which is therefore darker. In the story of the incest between the brother and sister who survived the flood, from which the clans emerged, the same image of the two sides of the mountain is used to recount the ordeal in which they each roll one grindstone of a grain-mill (referred to in normal conversation as the 'father' and 'mother' stones) down opposite sides of a mountain. Their coming to rest at the bottom signifies the union which should take place between them if life was to continue. The image importantly represents kinship rivalry. The entire conflict between the Lis and Lauj clans in Laos, which polarised the Hmong in the struggle between the Pathet Lao, neutralists and royalists, is sometimes attributed to the burial on two sides of the same mountain of Ly Foung of the Lis clan and his father-in-law, Lo Bliayou. The geomantic system has been described as 'the most perfect expression of man's relationship to the cosmos' (M. Freedman 1969). It is not surprising that many elderly Hmong should find it difficult to adjust to an environment which lacks the mountains and rivers appropriate to this system for ordering human society.³¹

RITE AFTER THE BURIAL

Thirteen days after death (*ib tsug*, the Hmong week of thirteen days), a

special ritual must be performed by the immediate family of the deceased which is known as *xi-plig*. The purpose of this ritual is to invite the soul of the deceased back to the house before sending it back finally to the grave. It is not the self which will be reborn which is invited, but the self which stays with the body in its grave at death, associated with its bones, and may become a ghost or evil *dab qus* if not properly appeased and told not to return during this ritual. Thus the purpose of the family's visit to the grave at the *xi plig*, and the ritual held in the house afterwards, is to alleviate the lonely agony of this self which must remain beside the grave.

This stems from the belief that the Hmong share with the Chinese, that the self is composed of three parts, one of which, at death, undertakes the long journey towards rebirth, one of which remains at the gravesite, and one of which mounts to Heaven to become an Immortal, a protective ancestor. The Hmong do not give such clear-cut explanations. A few individuals may have formulated their own explanation of exactly what goes on in the otherworld, but most Hmong, if pressed, will answer quite honestly that they do not know, since they have never been there. Thus most Hmong have different ideas about how many selves there are. Some say that there are two, which live in each ear, others that there are seven or thirty-two (a belief probably adopted from Thai or Lao people). According to the shamanic tradition, there are three main selves, although as we have seen, these may be divided into five. Another important self frequently mentioned in household rites is the *ntsuj* (*ntsuj* being the shamanic word for *plig*) *mam ntsuj hlau* (soul of hemp, which particular rituals are said to strengthen). This, or the shadow *plig*, seems the most likely contender for the self which remains at the grave.

At the *xi plig* the head of the household will proceed with his entourage to the tomb, where after making various offerings he will invite the self of the deceased to return with him to the house making a small opening in the covering of the grave. A sword, crossbow, and clothes belonging to the deceased may be placed on the grave. On return to the house, rice and whisky are offered to the deceased. The bamboo divinatory horns which were used during the funeral are burnt at this time, after they have been used to determine whether the self has returned to the home. A chicken is sacrificed, and its boiled blood offered with the rice and wine. Other deceased ancestors are invited to partake of different portions of the chicken. But the self is not expected to remain in the house after this ceremony, and will be told to return to the grave.

Until the *xi plig* is performed, however, the self will remain between

the 'two houses' of the grave and the home, not knowing where to dwell. After the ritual is performed, the self will return to dwell in the grave. No pipes or drum are played during *xi plig*. However, the self of the deceased is represented by a winnowing tray of the type normally used for rice. Three strips of bamboo are used to make a frame above it, and covered with a shirt belonging to the deceased, surmounted by a turban. The offerings are made onto this tray in the house, on which sticky rice cakes are also placed, together with several bamboo cups of wine.

The last of the mortuary rites as such is the great ritual of the *tso plig*, which should be performed within a year if possible after the death. It mimics in many of its rites the actual funeral, in that the pipes and drum are played, while the tray used at the *xi plig* ceremony, which is called the *kaum vaj kaum li*, is also used. The purpose of this ritual is to 'release the self' of the deceased (the literal meaning of *tso plig*) for rebirth and it may last for several days. After this time, the self which has remained tied to the grave and this world (symbolised by the tray) is considered to be liberated from mundane concerns, and should no longer trouble its relatives or descendants. As in the funeral, all the roles of the ritual workers must again be allotted and cattle are sacrificed. And again the younger generation will simultaneously kowtow (*pe*), holding lighted incense and spirit paper, three times, in honour of the self of the departed one, who is represented by the tray and shirt. This ritual may be performed for more than one person, and where a member of the family has not returned home for a long time, and is presumed dead in war, a *tso plig* may be performed for him and those of his clan relatives who accompanied him.

Finally, some years after death, one last mortuary rite should under certain circumstances be performed. However, this differs from the preceding ones, in that it is performed when, after a serious illness has afflicted the members of a family, a shaman who has been consulted judges that such-and-such a deceased ancestor has not yet been honored by a *nyuj dab* ritual, as it is called. It is believed that the ancestor may be lacking material necessities on his long journey in the otherworld. Maybe he has no rice, and is hungry, or a tax has been demanded by some spiritual guardian which he (or she) is unable to pay. In this case the ancestor will return to trouble and 'bite' (*tom*) his descendants, and as many bulls as possible should be sacrificed in order to provide the ancestor with the necessary requisities. Descent groups differ according to whether aunts and uncles are included in the category of ancestors for whom *ua nyuj dab* can be performed, and what level of generation such ancestors should occupy, as also in whether a shamanic ritual, with the

sacrifice of a pig, should accompany *ua nyuj dab* or not.

Again the roles played at the funeral must be re-enacted, and the music of the pipes and drum again played. The sons, sons-in-law, and father-in-law of the deceased should all contribute to the sacrifice. Pigs must be killed for each day of the ritual, and offered like the bulls to the deceased. The way the bull is divided at this ritual is one of the main means whereby different descent groups can be distinguished. After this ritual, which is partly a curing, partly a mortuary rite, is finished, no more mortuary rites for the ancestor concerned need be performed.

THE IMPORTANCE AND MEANING OF 'CUSTOM'

Great importance is attached by the Hmong to their mortuary and funeral rites. Certainly the four major categories of Hmong ritual—New Year and Marriage, Death and Shamanism—account between them for the greater part of the many customs, or *kevcai*, which the Hmong have, and are *rightly* concerned to preserve and transmit. While the importance of both shamanic and death rituals should be recognised, however, it should also be remembered that they are quite clearly very different systems, which cannot be confused. While shamanism is concerned with life, mortuary ritual is appropriately concerned with death. Shamanism is a form of therapy and healing, not properly a 'religion.' However, the funerary rites certainly conform to the Western sense of the word 'religion.'

The Hmong term for all these customs is *kevcai*, which literally refers to taboos of a ritual kind. Thus *kev* refers to 'the way' (both literally and metaphorically), while *caiv* refers to 'prohibitions,' things it is forbidden to do. Another term sometimes used for 'custom' is *kabke*, where the notion of the 'way' has been joined by that of *kab*, which normally refers to straight lines. So that *Kabke* means 'the ways.' In the sense in which *kevcai* refers to prohibitions, however, it includes not only those customs described above, but also many other ritual prohibitions normally observed in Hmong communities. Together with the shamanic and mortuary rituals we have discussed, and the secular ceremonies of marriage and the new year, these all together make up what the Hmong like to call *kevcai Hmoob*: 'Hmong Custom.'

The most common of these ritual prohibitions relate to categories of kinship, and are spatially expressed in the structure of the Hmong house. But they vary widely between different clans, and between different descent groups in the same clan. For example, among Hmong Vaj of the *tshuav-maj* descent group, daughters of the family and in-married women are forbidden to pass between the central fireplace and the housepost which marks the partition where the bedrooms begin

(which can be awkward during cooking). There is usually a low seat there, set against the bedroom partition, which is reserved for the use of men. Similarly, women may not mount up to the hanging loft which is suspended above the fire, nor enter the granary outside the house. These are not prohibitions aimed at women so much as prohibitions aimed at those who have been or are expected to become the members of other clans (through marriage), and yet are living in the household.

Prohibitions between men and their sons' wives are common among many descent groups. It is often forbidden, for this reason, for the head of a household to enter his married son's room (he may enter his unmarried sons' rooms, as may other local male members of the clan who are not living in the same house). Clans and descent groups are further distinguished by dietary prohibitions. For example, the Ham clan cannot take cooked rice with them to the fields in case they turn into snakes; the Lis clan distinguish their two main descent groups according to whether they may or may not eat the spleen of animals, as do the Yaj clan regarding the hearts of animals; the flesh of fully-grown boars used to be forbidden to members of the Tsab clan, and so on. These may be relics of a former totemic system, and interesting origin stories are told to account for most of them.

Certain sub-clans observe particular days as *hnub caiv* or prohibited days, when it is forbidden to work in the fields or to travel far for fear of attracting *sub*. Quite often these are disregarded, however, and accidents occurring on such days will be attributed to the breaking of this prohibition. Other prohibitions relate to life-crises, and are again spatially expressed, but here the prohibition is placed on the entire household, or even on the village. These are often prescribed by shamans who have been consulted on specific instances of illness or misfortune, but others are statutory. For example, for one month after a child is born, a prohibition is placed on the house where it was born, and all the inhabitants of the house. A rough piece of interwoven latticework, usually made of bamboo or of guava, plastered with the blood and feathers of a sacrificed chicken, on the end of a stick, is placed outside the house to block the route of untoward spiritual essences and to warn strangers that they should not enter the house, even if invited. For this reason it is customary to ask, when visiting a Hmong family, if they are observing any prohibition. If the answer is 'Yes, but come in anyway,' one should not enter. In theory the prohibition applies to all members of the household and anyone visiting it, but in practice members of the household and close friends or relatives may come and go for essential reasons, but should take care to remove anything inessential about their person—bags and shoes, for example—before they do so. A similar,

threeday prohibition is observed after the *lwm qaib* ritual when a new wife has entered the home for the first time, and a rooster has been swung three times around her head to banish the evil influences of her first clan.

Descent groups also differ according to whether prohibitions are placed on the house after the *ua dab roog* ritual, and if so for how many days. In extraordinary circumstances, during epidemics of small pox for example, which are attributed to the work of particular *dab*, a prohibition may be placed on the entire village. There are also other prohibitions of a ritual nature, particularly those against the confusion of wild things with tame things, which have to be kept carefully separate if misfortune is not to result. A bird flying into the house, or a snake or wild animal entering it, or a goat or other animal climbing on its roof, is regarded as an extremely bad omen, which may even presage death, and must be prevented at all costs. When sleeping in the forest, particular precautions must be observed: if a bird should drop a leaf on one, one should decamp quickly and find another place to rest.

CONCLUSION

The natural environment and social order of the Hmong is therefore closely interpenetrated with the supernatural world of historical legend, shamanic ritual and domestic worship. Every point of crisis in the individual's life is marked by rituals of sanctification and protection, as are the major turning-points of the agricultural year, after the harvests and at the New Year. These rituals congregate in the complex cluster of rituals surrounding the decease of the individual and the changing of the years. The Hmong house and its surroundings similarly form a ritual as well as a social space, in which different categories of the supernatural are symbolised by spirits associated with different parts of the house, which must be honored at different times by particular rituals. For the Hmong the two most important cycles of ritual in the individual life are those surrounding the events of marriage, which have not been considered here since they are more secular than sacred, and those of death. Yet the way of death, and the rituals and ritual experts associated with it, are clearly separated from the rituals and ritual experts of shamanism, described as the way of illness and suffering. Although they both involve journeys into the Otherworld, the concern of shamanism is with life, while that of funerary ritual is with death. Similarly we find that shamanism is classified into two major types; possessive shamanism, which involves the use of trance and the flight of the shaman into the Otherworld, and non-possessive shamanism, which does not require the use of trance and does not involve the flight of the shaman

into the Otherworld: or, as the Hmong put it, 'this-worldly' shamanism and 'other-worldly' shamanism. And again, shamanism itself, as *ua neeb*, is sharply distinguished from the work of propitiating ancestors and household gods, which is referred to as *ua dab*. While only specialists, both men and women, may practise shamanism, any normal male household head should propitiate his ancestors and honour the household gods.

The religious world of the Hmong is thus clearly and logically ordered according to a series of oppositions between life and death, men and spirits, this world and the other world, the wild and the tame. These oppositions interact with each other to form new categories of the natural and the supernatural; for example, the category of *ua dab tshuaj*, or herbalism, said to have been taught by the first shaman although it is not considered a form of shamanism; and the haunting category of other ethnic groups, such as the Chinese, who occupy an uneasy position on the borders of the Hmong social world, intermediate between the categories of the natural and the supernatural, as symbolised in the image of the market as a place of exchange, transformation and substitution.

The Hmong worldview is also rooted in a deep pessimism about the human condition in which the inevitability of death and the prevalence of sickness figure prominently. In some senses this is a frightening vision of the world, yet it enables the Hmong to deal with the many vicissitudes of their life with equanimity and fortitude. In this context it is noteworthy that, now that large numbers of the Hmong from Indochina have become refugees overseas, shamanism has not ceased but has on the contrary proved to be essential in the preservation of a sense of identity and dignity in the face of such challenging new conditions.

NOTES

In this article, which is to form part of a UNHCR-commissioned ethnography of the Hmong, I have attempted to present a unified picture of Hmong notions of the supernatural. Since as EVANS-PRITCHARD (1937) puts it, "beliefs are functions of situations," the order of presentation adopted here is not I think one which would immediately occur to most Hmong, who compartmentalise their beliefs to a far greater extent than I have suggested here. Nevertheless I have tried to remain faithful to the very clear distinctions which the Hmong draw between different categories of belief in, for example, the ways of death as opposed to the ways of shamanism, and shamanism as opposed to household ancestral worship. In order to achieve such a coherent presentation, I have necessarily drawn on the ethnographies of earlier writers, and in particular on the work of Jean Mottin, whose extensive contribution to the study of Hmong shamanism deserves some tribute. Unless specifically declared otherwise in the text, however, all descriptions refer to the *White* Hmong with whom I worked in Northern Thailand in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Ph.D. at the School of Oriental and

African Studies in London, under the terms of grants received from the Social Science Research Council and the Central Research Fund of the University of London, for which I am duly grateful.

1. A version of this myth has been published in LEMOINE 1972.
2. Because the Hmong term *plig* can be used countably and uncountably, and may be used to refer to different parts of the body as well as certain animals and plants, it has been found advisable to use the term 'self' instead of the term 'soul' in those instances where the personal aspect is not stressed. *Tus plig* is the singular, *plig* the plural form.
3. LEMOINE (1972) considers this in some detail.
4. I use the Barney-Smalley system for romanizing Hmong terms, in which final consonants indicate tone value, and doubled vowels indicate final nasalisation.
5. MOTTIN (1979, 21) refers to this legend, which most Hmong know.
6. See LEMOINE (1986) for a consideration of these *neeb*.
7. I refer to this in more detail in TAPP 1985, 276.
8. LEMOINE (1972) has drawn attention to the role of the cock as a psychopomp in Hmong funerary ritual.
9. The notion of the tragic catastrophe is important here. The fullest version of this epic can be found, together with an analysis, in TAPP 1985. It is also referred to however by LEMOINE (1972) and in the story of Paj Cai, the Hmong messianic leader in Laos in the 1920s, recorded by Father Bertrais in unpublished form, and translated in MOTTIN n.d., 79–113, but in very abbreviated form.
10. According to CHINDASRI 1976, 26.
11. MOTTIN (1982, 90) describes this belief.
12. This is very widespread belief among the Hmong, which MORÉCHAND (1968) has drawn attention to.
13. See TAPP (1982) for a more detailed consideration of some of the implications of this.
14. MOTTIN (1982, 11) refers to this very common ritual.
15. MOTTIN (1979, 119–213) gives the full text for this ritual, which I draw on here.
16. LEMOINE (1986) argues that shamanism is hereditary.
17. MOTTIN (1982, 107–115) and LEMOINE (1986) provide full accounts of this process which my own fieldwork confirms.
18. MORÉCHAND (1968) refers to this; my own informants in Thailand were not aware of such a ritual.
19. LEMOINE (1986) gives this classification.
20. As MOTTIN (1984) has pointed out.
21. Here I follow MOTTIN (1984).
22. MOTTIN (1979, 241) provides a translation of this service.
23. MORÉCHAND (1968) describes witnessing this.
24. LEMOINE (1986) has powerfully argued this point.
25. I have described this at some length in Tapp 1985.
26. BERTRAIS (1978) provides a comprehensive account of Hmong wedding customs, based on translated texts.
27. LEMOINE (1972) mentions some of these points.
28. According to LEMOINE 1972.
29. The importance of this is considered in TAPP 1985.
30. LEMOINE (1972) provides translations of some *nkauj tuag*.
31. TAPP (1982) makes the same point.

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