

**COSMOLOGY AND THE CYCLE OF LIFE : HMONG VIEWS OF  
BIRTH, DEATH AND GENDER IN A MOUNTAIN VILLAGE  
IN NORTHERN THAILAND**

**แนวคิด วัฒนธรรม และวงจรชีวิต : ทักษะที่มีต่อการเกิด  
การตาย และบทบาทของชายหญิงในสังคมชาวเขาเผ่าม้ง**

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**ABSTRACT**

*All birthing systems convey meaning and purpose specific to the cultures in which they are practiced. From conception to parturition, the various roles played by different family members symbolize and reinforce cultural notions of the life cycle, gender, and spirituality. An understanding of how these factors interact not only enhances knowledge of a culture in whole, but from a practical perspective, can also aid in providing adequate and appropriate health care for expectant parents and their gestating children. More broadly, a study of birth also allows insight into the integration of biology and culture.*

*These points are illustrated in this ethnographic study in a Hmong village in the hills of northern Thailand. Through participant observation and both informal and structured interviews, the conceptions of birth of the Hmong--an ethnic minority in Thailand--are elicited and discussed in context of Hmong ideas of gender and the cycle of life.*

**บทคัดย่อ**

กำเนิดของมนุษย์เป็นเรื่องราวที่เต็มไปด้วยความหมายและมีจุดมุ่งหมายที่แสดงลักษณะเฉพาะทางวัฒนธรรมของกลุ่มชนที่ได้ปฏิบัติสืบทอดกันมา นับจากเริ่มตั้งครรภ์จนกระทั่งคลอด บทบาทต่าง ๆ ของสมาชิกในครอบครัวที่แตกต่างกันจะเป็นสัญลักษณ์และเป็นความแข็งแกร่งของวัฒนธรรมที่เกี่ยวกับวงจรชีวิตความเป็นชายหญิง และจิตวิญญาณ ซึ่งความเข้าใจในองค์ประกอบเหล่านี้ ไม่ได้เกิดจากการเรียนรู้วัฒนธรรมทั้งหมดเพียงอย่างเดียว แต่ต้องเกิดจากการปฏิบัติด้วย ซึ่งได้แก่การจัดเตรียมดูแลสุขภาพของชายหญิงที่ต้องการมี

บุตรและประคับประคองการตั้งครรภ์ให้ผ่านพ้นไปด้วยดี ยิ่งกว่านั้นการศึกษาระบวนการของการเกิดยังชี้ให้เห็นความสัมพันธ์ที่เป็นอันหนึ่งอันเดียวกันของชีวศาสตร์กับวัฒนธรรมอีกด้วย

สิ่งต่าง ๆ เหล่านี้จะเห็นได้อย่างชัดเจนจากการศึกษาเรื่องชาติพันธุ์ของชาวเขาเผ่าม้งซึ่งเป็นชนกลุ่มน้อยในภาคเหนือของประเทศไทยด้วยวิธีการสังเกตแบบมีส่วนร่วม รวมทั้งการสัมภาษณ์แบบมีโครงสร้างและไม่มีโครงสร้าง ซึ่งจะทำให้ทราบถึงทัศนคติของชาวเขาเผ่าม้งที่มีต่อวงจรชีวิต ตลอดจนบทบาทของชายหญิงในสังคมของตน

## INTRODUCTION

A study of childbirth in any society illuminates an understanding of other areas of life, for although the physiological aspects of birth are universal, cultural and social customs determine how it is handled. Increased comprehension of the cultural and social variabilities, which occur throughout the process of parturition, allows insight into the integration of biology--the physiological aspects of birth, and culture-- the beliefs, perceptions, and actions accompanying birth. This article explores Hmong cosmology, or understanding of the universe\* through a study of the cultural constructions of birth in a village in northern Thailand.

While both men and women are involved in the birthing process, women are the central figures. Therefore, by investigating childbirth, it is possible to learn about the issues which women consider important as well as how they cope with these issues. In addition, it can gain insight into the social relationships between men and women, and between women as well. From the study of birth, it is possible to learn about the world view of a group of people; for example, it can be discerned how they view other aspects of existence such as continuity and death, and how these aspects connect and relate to concepts of an afterlife or rebirth.

For this analysis, world view (*Weltanschauung*), from Dilthey, will be defined as a complex of ideas and sentiments comprising: (a) beliefs and convictions about the nature of life and the world; (b) emotions, habits, and tendencies based on these; and (c) a system of purpose, preferences, and principles governing action and giving life unity and meaning.

This study is a contribution to the ethnographic record on the Hmong, childbirth, and gender, particularly women. It explores and describes the connections that the Hmong perceive between cultural experiences of birth and death, and how these connections relate to issues of gender.

The Hmong believe in the concept of reincarnation, that the soul of a person will be reborn after death to a new body here on earth. Thus, investigating birth, and the meanings inherent in this experience

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\*Cosmology is used in the sense as presented and quoted from the Encyclopedia Britannica by Tambiah:

Cosmology is that branch of learning which treats of the universe as an ordered system.....Cosmology is that framework of concepts and relations which man erects...for the purpose of bringing descriptive order into the world as a whole, including himself as one of its elements (1970:34).

to family, clan, and society, provides, will be argued, an insight into how Hmong perceive the world. The fundamental questions which will be addressed herein are: (1) How is birth conceptualized in Hmong society? (2) What implications does the Hmong view of birth have for women in the patrilineal kinship system? and (3) What is the relation of birth to reincarnation? Answers to these fundamental questions will not only illuminate Hmong views of the world, but are relevant to our understanding of other issues of importance such as decisions concerning family planning and child survival.

### **The Hmong**

For hundreds of years the Miao people have lived in China. Because they do not belong to the majority Han nationality, the 7,660,000 Miao people are designated a "national minority". Beginning in the mid 17th century, sub-groups within this ethnic population have been forced out of China, either by political pressures or need for land to cultivate. Descendants of these sub-groups have moved into the mountainous areas of Laos, northern Vietnam, northern Myanmar and, since the mid-nineteenth century, Thailand. As a marginal peripheral group in Thailand, they are called Meo\*.

There are two distinct groups of Meo in Thailand, and they are distinguishable from each other by different dialects\*\*, customs, and patterns of women's clothing and hairstyles. They call themselves Green Mong (*Mong Ntsaub*) and White Hmong (*Hmong Dawb*). The author uses these terms for the two groups unless quoting an author who uses the terms Miao or Meo. The Tribal Research Institute in Chiang Mai estimates the combined population of these two groups of Hmong in Thailand at 82,310 people living in 230 villages (1988). The village in which this research was conducted, which will be called "Flower Village", is populated with White Hmong and is situated in the northern-most Province of Chiang Rai. It sits at an altitude of 4,000 feet above sea level, at the top of the mountain ridge.

"Flower Village" was chosen because, first, it is relatively traditional, being located 20 km from the main road, with few outside contacts; and secondly, because it is relatively large-- at the beginning of the study there were 58 households with several pregnant women, and by the end there were 64 households with 487 people (114 women of childbearing age).

## **METHODS**

The fieldwork took place between January 1987 and May 1988. All data was collected in a tape recorder and involved participant observation, informal ethnographic interviews, a formal questionnaire and structured interviews.

## **RESULTS**

### **Hmong Views of the Cosmos**

The Hmong divide the universe into two different worlds: the World of Light (*Yajceeb*) and the

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\* See Alting for a discussion of this term.

\*\* Tapp asserts that the two dialects, White and Green Hmong found in Southeast Asia, should not be considered dialects but, rather, sub-dialects of the main Chuanquiandian dialect of Hmong in China.

World of Darkness (*Yeebceeb*). The former is the material world of the living, while the latter is the metaphysical spirit world. All things that live in the light land of the living are interconnected (i.e. trees and plants, water and stones, and animals of all sorts including human beings). Wild and dangerous spirits of the outside (the forest), as well as tame, caring and cared-for spirits of the inside (the house) are included also. All of these animated beings are connected to the dark land of the ancestors, supernatural spirits, and gods - the land where souls (*tus plig*) come from when they are called to enter the body of a new born infant and where souls return after they leave the mortal body of a dead person. These souls return again when called to a new body in a continuous and never-ending cycle of rebirth. This is unlike the cosmology of Thai Buddhists who live in the valley. They aim for an end to the cycle so that the transmigration of souls will terminate. This liberation from sentient existence is attained by reaching *nirvana*, otherworldliness. For the Hmong, the two worlds are connected by the ancestors which Hmong say are "souls still held in the memory of their descendants." These ungendered or dual gender souls - motherfather, grandmothergrandfather - must be fed at specific times and honored often for as long as they are remembered in the minds of those left behind. If ancestors are cared for in the prescribed manner, all will be well. If they are neglected, however, they will be wrathful and cause sickness and calamity to their errant children. If a family forgets to sacrifice the animal promised when a good crop is produced, or feed ancestors when the first rice harvested, and sickness results, a shaman must be called to diagnose the problem (*ua neeb sai*). If the shaman deems it necessary, the boundaries between the two worlds will be crossed in order for negotiations to take place (*ua neeb kho*). The shaman will assemble the necessary paraphernalia and summon his spirit helpers which live on the shamanic household altar. Together they will cross the hempen cloth with "iron and copper girders," the spiritual bridges, to find a solution to the calamity.

Bridges, ladders and doors are the ways to enter and leave the two connected worlds. In the beginning of time, spirits and humans came and went as they pleased but due to adverse actions on the part of both, this is no longer possible. Now only the shaman, with his/her helpers, can cross and return as the same person in the same body. Other reasons for sickness, besides the wrath of ancestors, include soul loss. The human body is the site for souls or life essences. It is a difficult Hmong concept to describe, especially some people, in different places and of different clans, give conflicting information. The number of souls is ambiguous but the theme behind the concept of soul and soul loss is similar. In "Flower Village" a death chant was collected in which the ritual specialist said:

One person, three souls, and seven shadows. Since you have gone, your body is dead but not your souls.

Therefore, in this paper three souls will be the number discussed. If all souls are centered in the body, a person is well. If, for various reasons, a soul is frightened away a person is unwell. To restore a person to wellness, a soul calling ceremony (*hu plig*) is enacted and often the shaman will "travel to the other world" is an effort to bring the soul back.

The souls are also perceived as being transferred from one social order to another. This soul transference occurs at birth, when one of the souls travels from the world of darkness to the world of light to be incorporated into the family, the lineage, and the clan. It also occurs at marriage, when a woman's souls change their allegiance and residence from one family, lineage, and clan to another. Finally, souls are

transferred at death, when they leave the body and travel back to the land of darkness, one soul to be incorporated into the community of ancestors and one to await the opportunity for rebirth.

In the beginning of time nobody died. When a person reached 120 years, the ideal age to have lived, she would change her skin and get up again at the end of 13 days. Because two of the first human males killed a frog, and also because there were too many people on earth humans were caused to die. If their souls found their way back to the land of darkness, and all rituals were performed correctly, and they collected their "skin" or shirt (placenta), the souls could return again.

### Gender Cosmology

In most Hmong stories, and in everyday life, all objects are composed of two elements. Ideally, people are always portrayed as couples. Objects, such as the mortar and pestles, or the buffalo horns which are cast as divination tools, always have one part that is female and the other male. When Hmong patrilineal ancestors are called upon to be ritually fed at New Year, or called upon to provide good fortune for the family, they are called as a couple, motherfather or grandmotherfather, not as single people. In addition, if a woman or man is suffering from soul loss and a shaman goes off to find the errant soul, both the sick person and the spouse are treated, fed, and honored together by their offspring. Curing one half of a couple does not constitute wellness for all. Many deities, such as the beneficent *Saub*, are described by Hmong as having wives, and many spirits are composed of two gender elements, such as *Kab Yeeb*, the bringer of the soul of the newborn to earth. This reflects the opposition/complementarity theme which is central to Hmong cosmological thinking, especially with regard to gender. Gender is an important organizing principal in that female/male are arranged as parts of binary contrasting wholes. Other examples of this gender differentiation are earth and sun as female, the nurturing aspect of life and, sky and moon who wanders at night, as male.

Perceptions of birth and death, which are inextricably linked in Hmong cosmology, are also viewed as complementary. The prototypical gender image of man and woman in Hmong culture is mother and father. Spinsterhood is feared by Hmong women. If a woman should be so unfortunate as not to marry she is considered unlucky. Upon her death she is buried quickly and without much ceremony in case her soul will come back and be unlucky again, thus causing her family loss of face, money for bringing her up, and social relationships between other clans. Marriage, although valued for the above reasons, is the vehicle for parenthood and continuation of the family, lineage, and clan are the most important aims for all Hmong men and women. Thus, birth and fertility, which are the provision of a vessel for the soul of a departed ancestor, are highly valued.

Complementarity - which unites - is one aspect of Hmong gender contrast, opposition - which separates - is the other\*. Men are said to be stronger than women. Thus the left side, the strongest, is associated with men. Up is more valued than down. Roots of the tree, symbolic of males, are more valued than flowers, symbolic of females.

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\* This is similar to the complementarity of the Tetum discussed by Hicks in his work.

Division of labor for the Hmong follows divisions in ideology. The clearing of large trees for planting a field is carried out by men because they are said to be stronger, but men and women together participate in the slashing and burning of fields. In the planting of rice, men break the earth with a dibble stick while women drop in the seeds. Women do most of the weeding, but men and women together harvest the rice. Women feed pigs, men hunt. Women give life and nurture, men kill animals. Women make cloth and sew and embroider clothing, men make baskets, work silver for jewelry and iron for tools. Men talk through problems and make decisions, women listen and acquiesce. Men travel to visit other houses and villages, while women seldom leave their own home or village to visit except in order to go to the field to work, or more recently to take children to a health clinic or hospital. Women are responsible for all of the household work; cleaning, caring for children, preparing rice for cooking, preparing food for feeding animals, cooking for family members, making clothing and many other similar duties. Men sacrifice animals to the patriliney and they clean and cook the animals. Women do not kill animals, except chickens.

In addition to this division of labor, women are excluded from the highly valued aspects of rituals. Although women can be shamans they are not allowed to participate in any rituals that are concerned with the patriliney. They cannot call in the souls of newborns nor guide them back to the other world. They cannot feed ancestors at New Year nor visit grave sites. When animals are sacrificed on ritual occasions, men prepare and cook the animal which has been killed.

### **Birth, Rebirth, and Gender Among the Hmong**

Birth among the Hmong cannot be understood separate from ideas about gender and the life cycle. Birth, especially of the first child, presents the greatest life transition for Hmong women and men. The respective roles played by each gender in the birth process illustrate cultural notions of gender roles. In spite of the perceived cyclical nature of Hmong life, there is little written on Hmong perceptions regarding birth.

### **Birth, Journey to the Land of Light**

Birth, especially of the first child, signals a major transition for a young woman. She has proven that she is fertile and is capable of fulfilling her most important role. She links the ancestors with the future generations of Hmong and has earned herself a place within her new family. It is interesting to note a great change in the woman herself. She is no longer a lonely, new young bride but a woman in the truest sense of the word for the Hmong, that is a "mother".

Childbirth, the domain of women, is inherently filled with tension, unpredictability, and danger. Yet, in contrast to all other events in Hmong life, there is no "noise" accompanying it. Childbirth ideally takes place in silence. The mother makes no sounds, there are no drums or wind instruments as at death, no gongs nor bells as in shamanic rituals, nor there is loud and raucous behavior as at weddings and funerals.

Birth, especially of the first child, presents the greatest life transition for Hmong women and men. Men, so visible in all other areas of women's lives, are almost always absent during the actual biological event - although the husband enters the scene immediately afterwards to carry out certain specific and limited duties. He is responsible, for example, for the burial of the placenta. The disposal of

the placenta for many societies is itself a ritual event in the Turnerian sense of "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers". In many instances, the infant is thought to stay connected to the placenta for life. In some Southeast Asian cultures, it is believed to be a twin of the child; in others it is thought to have sympathetic magical powers. For the Hmong there are several issues connected to the placenta and its disposal.

When a child is developing in the uterus, it does so in an amniotic sac. This sac, the Hmong say, is analogous to the shell on a chicken's egg. After a child is born, the sac is buried along with the placenta, which has gradually grown around the child. The placenta is attached to the mother by the *txoj hlab ntawv*. This is the umbilical cord, or as the Hmong say, the "life line". It literally translates as the encircling paper. One is tempted to connect this to the paper "mandate for life" which the soul must collect before returning to this earth. Together, the sac, the placenta and the small piece of umbilical cord which remains attached when the cord is cut at birth are known as *lub tsov tus menyuam*, glossed as "birth shirt". If the infant is a male, the birth shirt is buried under the main post of the house. Cosmologically, this is the connection between the earth and the ancestors. The son stays with the family for all of his life, taking on the spiritual duties and responsibilities of the lineage. The daughter eventually moves out, her birth shirt is buried under the bed of her parents.

Only on the third day after the birth is the child named and introduced into Hmong society as a social being, by a male of the household. On the third day, a ritual called "Calling in the Soul of the Child: The Journey to the Land of Light" was performed by the grandfather of the newborn. This rite, which reaffirms connections of generations in the family, involves calls for protection and prosperity, and augury using buffalo horns.

A significant part of this transition on the third day consists of noise, as opposed to the silence observed by women. This supports Needham's proposition that there is a prevalence of percussive noise in rites of passage. The contrast in Hmong birth customs between the silence of women and the "noise" created by men can be viewed in these terms. While women physically produce the child, it is the men who are seen as the producers of fully human life in Hmong society. Women and men, however, have complementary roles in the biological, social and cosmological process of birth. Without the female and her physical ability to carry and nourish her offspring with her fat, blood and strength, there would be no receptacle in which the soul of a lineage member can be born. Without the male, who provides the seed and has the task of performing sacrificial acts - thereby preserving the patriliney - and who also has the knowledge to call in the soul, thus making the infant a member of the social group, there can be no continuity of the lineage, the clan, or, ultimately the Hmong people themselves. Because Hmong are a patrilineal descent group who have exogamous marriage rules, the society is thus dependent upon "outside" women for survival and continuity. It can be seen that women are responsible for the biological aspects of the event while men are responsible for the social aspects; the woman produced the child, but the man who called in the soul made the child a full-fledged social human Hmong.

### **Death, Journey to the Land of Darkness**

Hmong death rituals are performed to guide the soul from the human body to the land of

darkness, where it returns to the ancestral mass. There, it is decided whether it may return to the world and if so, in what form. The ideal return, which will be granted if all obligations have been met by the deceased and her or his associates, is as a human being of the opposite gender. If the rituals performed do not meet these specifications, then an "offensive" reincarnation will take place, resulting in a stillbirth or in the death of an infant before the three-day naming ritual can occur.

Death rituals have been described as being the most significant of all rituals for the Hmong. In particular, reports have cited the importance of the Showing the Way chant, the Urtext of the Hmong, which instructs the dead person on journey to the ancestors. These accounts have been presented by different researchers in different locations and about different groups of Miao/Hmong.

Death for the Hmong is perceived of as the journey of a soul, which lives beyond the body, to another existence. The goal of this journey is to reach the village, and in particular, the house of one's ancestors, thus continuing, the clan, the lineage and the family. After reaching this goal, the soul finds the sources of life and can return to this world, ideally, through a Hmong woman. This return comes about when the infant body is introduced into the uterus of a pregnant woman after which the soul is "manipulated" to return.

Death rituals for the Hmong occur in two stages. The first involves the disaggregation of the individual from the social group, and culminates in the burial. The second part occurs later, sometimes as much as six months later, and is done to free the soul (*tso plig*). This final ritual regroups the community for solidarity and continuity, and is a final sending-off of the soul.

The rituals which took place after the death of an elder and respected Hmong man in "Flower Village", prior to burial, elaborate preparations are made. At death, the deceased's son fires shots from a rifle both to notify other villagers and to scare off malevolent spirits. Afterwards, the body is carefully washed and prepared for burial, then it is laid on the ground on the auspicious upslope side of the house, with the head facing West. The male members of the household visit neighbors for courtesy, respect, to invite them to the funeral, and to ask for help. Several key people are recruited for the mortuary ritual: a chanter (*tus ghuab ke*), drum and reed-pipe players (*tus txiv ntuas* and *tus txiv geej*), a manager (*tus kav xwm*, literally "important man"), a man to provide food for attenders (*tus tshwj kab*), and a "father of words," (*txiv xaiiv*), whose role is to lead in singing songs after the chanting is completed. Women are also asked to cook rice. These people play very important roles, because for thirteen days all customary daily activities are proscribed for family members of the deceased.

Material preparations are made before the chanting of the Showing the Way chant begins. Some of the goods involved include paper money, a chicken, rice liquor, a boiled egg, a split gourd, two small pieces of bamboo, red cloth, a cross-bow, and a small paper umbrella. These are used ceremoniously during the chanting.

After the chanting is completed, spirits are propitiated, and further guidance of the soul occurs through music, as the drum is beaten and the reed-pipes played by musicians who dance around the deceased's prepared body. A pig is sacrificed. These ceremonies continue over the next seven days, during which time it is customary for neighbors to visit.



With the arrival of affines on the eighth day, and conclusively with the arrival of the deceased's sister, after it is verified that debts have been paid by the deceased and family members, the burial can take place, at a gravesite chosen through geomancy. The entire process is a noisy one with the chanting, instrument-playing, talk of visitors and the customary wailing and keening of women. This first part of the death ritual concludes on the thirteenth day, *xi plig*, when a pointer is thrown to see if the deceased's soul is present at the meal. This is repeated until the family is satisfied that the soul has departed. Afterwards, the pointer is burned, and family activity can return to normal.

The second part of the death ritual (*tso plig*), which, can take place as many as six months later (due to financial expense), is similar in structure to the first part, except that it is shorter in duration and requires the attendance of fewer visitors. The ceremony revolves around a representation constructed of bamboo wearing an item of clothing of the deceased. At the end of this ceremony a pig is sacrificed, so that its soul can take the place of the deceased's. That this has taken place is once again ascertained with a pointer. Unlike in the mournful first ceremony, however, all of these actions take place amid joyful shouts, laughter and applause. Everyone enjoys this final ritual and both men and women drink a great deal of rice liquor.

It is important to understand that this is not a second burial, but does play a similar function of setting the soul free so that society can reintegrate safely. As described above, the Hmong believe that humans have three souls. In relation to death, one soul stays at the grave, the second, the one involved in *tso plig*, is reborn into a new child, and the third remains in the land of the ancestors.

## CONCLUSION

For Hmong, all birthing systems have meaning and purpose. It is not perceived as a medical event but a natural one, albeit fraught with danger from spirits of the "outside". It is not merely a physiological event but one in which views of the cosmos are deeply involved. The Hmong birth event can be divided into two complementary segments, the first being the actual physiological event (*tus menyuam yug*) and the second being the calling in the soul (*hu plig*) held three days later.

Ideally, a woman gives birth extremely privately in the home of her husband's patriline, alone and without any "noise". If she is unable, or prefers not to deliver alone, her mother-in-law or another female relative will attend her. The biological birth is a powerful female phenomenon. Men are absent, since it is a dangerous and liminal period when a woman and her child are between "here" and "there". They are part of a natural in-between world. Women in this liminal phase, as with all transitional persons, must be separated from the society at large. Birth for Hmong women then, is private, silent, and female oriented.

After the actual physiological birth, the structural pairing of the birth process into complementary male/female action is demonstrated. This second segment is carried out in the domain of Hmong males. This is when the newborn is symbolically enculturated into Hmong society as a human being. It is done with the appropriate ritual chanting and banging of the buffalo horns on the threshold of the house in order to call in the soul of the child and to give it a name. Household and lineage members participate in the ritual and a chicken of the opposite sex to the child is sacrificed. This segment, the making of a human being, is public, noisy and male oriented.

Needham proposed, "There is a connection between percussion and transition". Thus, ritual noise according to this proposal, symbolizes movement through transitions from one stage to another. In Hmong life, noise does indeed accompany transitions. The ritual songs and negotiations, which are characteristic of the Hmong wedding ceremonies, mark the transfer of a woman's spiritual life essence from her lineage to that of her husband's. In the Hmong mortuary rituals, the noise of the reed-pipe, which guides the deceased person's souls back to the Otherworld, and the beating of the drum which accompanies the reed-pipe, is loud and frequent. Along with the important ritual chanting of the "showing the way" verses, this ritual noise serves to symbolize the crossing of the boundary between life in this world, "here", and the journey to "there", the Otherworld.

If this is taken a step further and an investigation into the use of noise during the birth event is made, it can be seen that the boundary between the two worlds is not crossed during the first segment of the event when a woman, in silence and privacy, delivers the child, but rather during the second event, when a man performs a public and noisy ritual. The transition from the Otherworld takes place, then, not at the biological birth but when the soul is called to cross the boundary between the two worlds and take the journey into the vessel three days later. The woman and the child during the three day period are neither "here" nor "there" but betwixt and between.

The Hmong also use noise, although not always percussive, to establish contact with the other world and to activate divine power. The first segment of the birthing event sets into motion the noisy ritual process which takes place three days later. During the second segment of the birth event, the noise signals to the Spirit parents that the vessel is ready - it has survived - and guides the soul on the return journey from the Otherworld. The noise, however, is not a gift. The gift is, instead, the soul of a pig, which was sacrificed during the "freeing of the soul" ceremony performed months after a funeral and the soul of a chicken, of the opposite sex to the child, sacrificed when the soul is perceived to have arrived.

Traube, in her research with the Mambai of East Timor, investigated the use of noise in ritual performance. She observed that, as in many other cultures, the Mambai use percussion to get in touch with the Otherworld and that percussive sounds are both messages and gifts offered to the cosmos. Traube writes, "Mambai regard this noise, not as an evocation of representation of divine power, but rather as a mechanism for activating that power".

Thus, birth for Hmong is perceived as a structural pairing of events between a man and a woman encompassing physical and cosmological aspects.

What implications does this perception of birth have to the perceived roles of women in the Hmong patrilineal kinship system? The most important aspect is shown in the first segment of the birthing process. This expresses a dominant theme in the whole of Hmong society. Women's role is to be private and quiet rather than public and vocal as men are. As demonstrated above through their own words, women are quiet and acquiescent to the male voice in the public domain. They do not participate in the public arena in the judgements and decision-making processes which affect Hmong life. In the private sphere of the home, older women exert influence and power but this is over other, younger, women and not over men. During birth, women produce the vessel for the spirit to enter, but it is men who are perceived to have actually provided the vessel through their seed.

Women are responsible for the physical substance of life. They produce and reproduce this physical substance through their blood, fat, strength, and breast milk. In everyday life women produce and reproduce food in the fields and it is women who mainly cook food to nourish the family. Women also gather the food, chop and grind it, and feed it to the domestic animals. Men, on the other hand, are perceived as providing for the human, social and spiritual side of Hmong life. They are public and noisy. It is men who symbolically incorporate the child into human Hmong life for it is men who have connections through their maleness and through noise, including ritual chants, to the ancestral spirit world. It is men who sacrifice the lives of the domestic animals, which women feed and nurture, to the ancestors in exchange for good fortune and as exchange for the souls to be reincarnated into the bodies of the newborn. It is men who cook these animals in order to nourish the spiritual aspects of a Hmong person.

The last aspect to be investigated lies in the question of the relationship between birth and the concept of reincarnation. This question is connected to the other two in that the perceptions of birth and the roles of women in Hmong patrilineal society must be looked at in order to provide an answer. A brief summary of Hmong beliefs regarding the soul is also necessary. The Hmong believe that each person has three souls. At death the three souls, which are ungendered, separate and go to different places. One soul goes to the gravesite where it stays to guard the bones of the deceased. This is symbolic of the finality of physical death. The second and third souls are guided to the other world by males of the patriline. One of these two souls stays in the land of the ancestors where it joins with the soul of its spouse and is treated and honored by the descendants as an equal dyad. This dyad is not known as husband and wife but as mother and father, the most important complementary couple for the Hmong. At the ancestral level, then, an equivalence of gender can be seen. This dyad is fed and perpetuated by the descendants as long as they are remembered in the minds of these descendants, as a couple, then they are honored as collective "ancestors" (*cuag poj cuag yawm*). When this soul goes to the land of the ancestors it is admonished and give specific instructions to be sure and find those ancestors from its own lineage so that it can live with them "forever".

The third soul waits in the Otherworld for its "mandate for life" paper which allows rebirth. If all debts on earth from the former life have been paid, this soul will be called into the body of one of its descendants, perhaps a grandchild. The male who "calls the soul" is coaxing into the newborn vessel an appropriate lineage soul thereby completing the infant's Hmongness. This soul appears to maintain its Hmong, lineage identity through time. It is important to note, however, that the returning soul switches gender from reincarnation to reincarnation - a soul is alternatively male or female inhabiting different vessels. Upon death a woman's brother must come to the funeral in order to assure that all her debts are paid. If they are not she will return to her natal lineage and be malicious. If all her debts are paid, her last official action as a member of her natal lineage is to go to the house of her birth and retrieve her birth-shirt which was buried there when she was born. She is then no longer part of her natal lineage and she travels on the instructions of the chanter until she reaches the threshold of the Otherworld, where the chanter tells her "your life thread is cut". The woman's soul now joins her husband's patriline. When this soul is reborn, however, it is ideally reborn into the patriline as a male. The patriline is continued then by souls of former females who come from outside the lineage. Moreover, this also means the same spiritual essence continues to occupy, in the course of cycling through its alternating genders, different lineages, and because of the rule of clan exogamy, different clans. Thus, there is no clan hierarchy among the Hmong. In the course of time, spiritual essences, souls, cycle through the whole of Hmong society.

To be a good Hmong woman, one must work hard in the fields, feed the pigs, cook food, do exquisite embroidery and bear many children in silence. The reward is equality in the land of the ancestors and the opportunity to be reborn in the body of a male in the next reincarnation.

If anthropologists limit their analyses solely to what they themselves see rather than to what the informants see they will conclude that the Hmong patriliney is carried on by males. However, if the perceptions of the Hmong are attended to, they will see that the patriliney is continued by women as well.

It should be clear then, that the particular ways Hmong women respond to Western health practices on birth are closely tied to their social structure, and in particular, to the cosmological system which supports that structure. That system defines marked gender hierarchy in this world supporting male dominance of, among other matters, the forces by which newborn infants become human. Belief in that cosmology identifies a person as Hmong. As long as that cosmology controls who is Hmong, it can expect Hmong women's attitudes toward Western medical birthing and family planning practices to remain highly ambivalent.

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## NOTES

### Notes on Orthography

The orthography of the Hmong language used comes from the Barney-Smalley system of Romanized Phonetic Alphabet (RPA). This was developed in collaboration with Bertrais (Bertrais 1964; Heimbach 1979) between June 1952 and April 1953 in Laos.

Hmong is an eight tone language with no final consonants. In written language, consonants signal tones. The following is a list of these consonants and their tonal values:

b .... high level

j ..... high falling

v .... rising

g .... breathy

m ... glottal constriction/low

s .... low

d .... similar to an m' tone but seldom used

- ..... no consonant at the end of a word signals mid-tone

Final nasalization is signaled by double vowels; Hmoob pronounced Hmong or Neeb pronounced Neng.

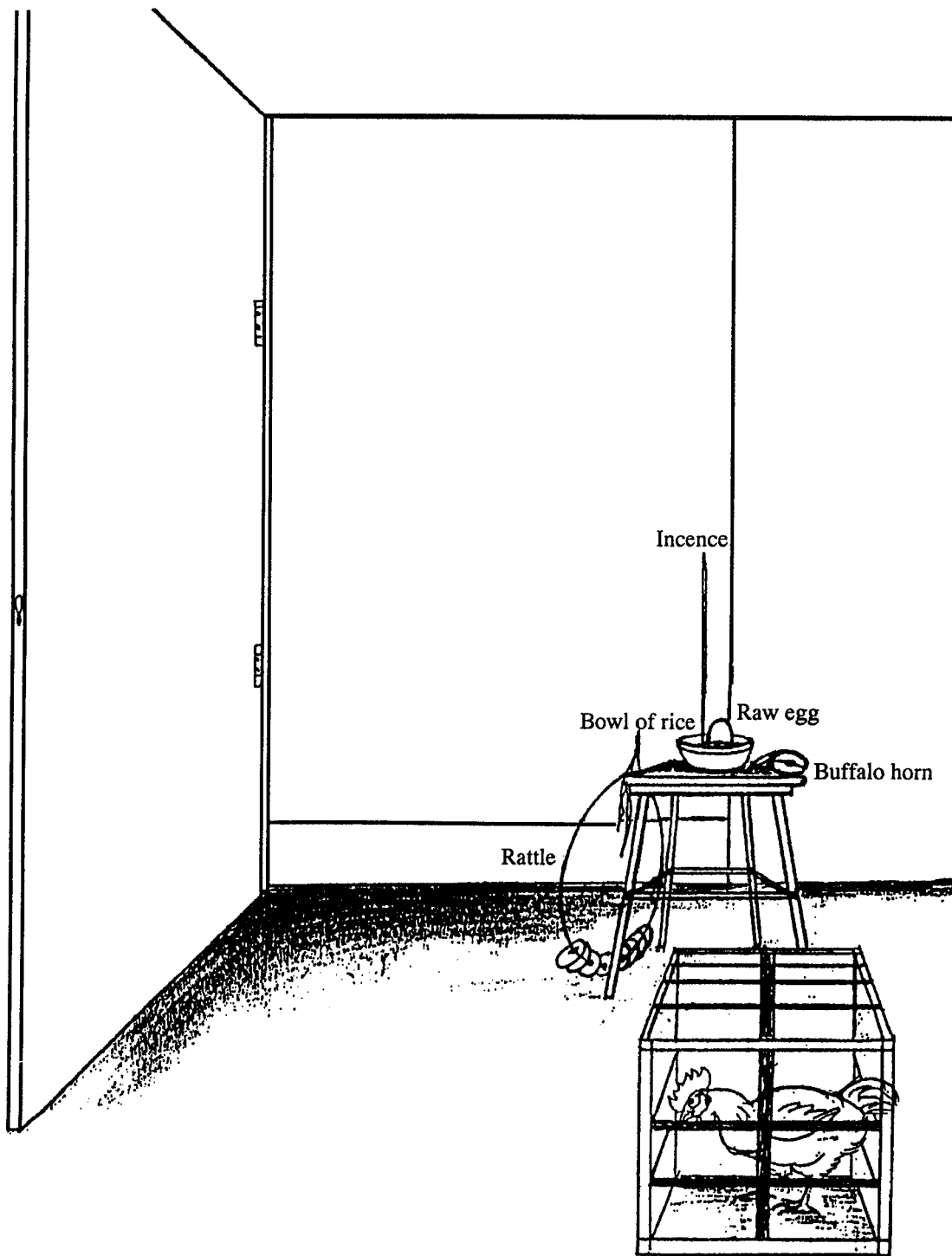


Fig. 1. Soul calling paraphernalia at spirit door