



Hmong Culture

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Houses

Each time a village moved, families had to build new houses. A traditional Hmong village had about 20 houses. There were no ceremonial or public buildings or shops of any kind.

Each house was built on the ground with a dirt floor and no windows. A stove or open fire pit sat in the middle of the main room. Family bedrooms were along the wall and guests slept on a simple bamboo platform located at the end of the main room.

The Hmong followed strict rules when building their houses. Every house was built so that the family living in it could see a distant mountain from either the front or back door. Before a house was built, a small hole was dug. Grains of rice were placed in the hole, one grain for each member of the family. The hole was covered for the night. If spirits moved the rice grains during the night, another location had to be found for the house.

Four spirits were important to each household. Xwm Kab (Sou Kah) was the protective house spirit. At each New Year Festival a special ceremony was held to honor this spirit who protected members of the household from illness and bad luck. Xwm Kab also helped the families' animals. The spirit of the door was honored each year, especially when a new house was built. Bad luck might come upon a family who ignored this spirit. The central post spirit was also honored with a special ceremony held every three years. This spirit protected the Hmong from bad luck or bad health. The spirit of the fireplace was honored when a house was being abandoned and a new one was being built.

The walls and roof of the house were made of bamboo poles and tall grass. The tough, flexible poles gave the home strength. The thick grass kept out the wind and rain. Chickens, cows, and pigs were kept in a nearby pen to protect them from the wild animals living in the surrounding forests.

Holidays and Celebrations

Traditionally, the Hmong do not have free weekends, vacation time, or days off.

Ceremonies are held to honor birth, death, and spirits, but the only holiday was New Year, which celebrated the harvest.

Hmong New Year

In Laos, the New Year festival was the longest and most popular of the Hmong holidays. It lasted about two weeks and was celebrated in December when the moon was darkest and the rice had been harvested. The celebration was held to thank all the gods and ancestors who had helped throughout the year. Everyone in the village, from the youngest to the oldest, was involved. There were games, dances, and plenty of food. Top spinning and stick and sword dances were favorite activities of the boys.

The Hmong ball toss game was one of the most colorful New Year activities. It was played by older boys and girls who were planning to be married. The boys and girls lined up in two rows facing each other. The lines were from 20 to 50 feet apart. The players threw a soft black ball back and forth to each other. The ball was thrown so that the other player could catch it with one hand. If the throw was good and the other player dropped the ball, he or she had to sing a traditional Hmong song or give up a piece of silver or a belt from his or her costume.

Every unmarried girl tried to make a new dress, especially for the ball game. During their spare moments from working at home or in the fields, the girls embroidered special designs on their costumes. The boys, too, wore their best new clothes. Each player wore at least one silver collar.

The New Year festival remains one of the principal Hmong celebrations. Dances, ball toss games, beautiful clothes, bull fights, cock fights, and special foods continue to make the Hmong New Year a colorful and exciting celebration. It continues to be celebrated in St. Paul, Minnesota at the River Centre on Thanksgiving weekend.

Education and Language

The Hmong language is tonal and related to the Sino-Tibetan language family. The various dialects of Hmong are: Stripe Hmong, Green or Blue Hmong and White Hmong. The dialects are mutually intelligible but do differ considerably.

The Hmong language, folktales, and traditions were passed along to each generation by word of mouth for thousands of years. The Hmong language was not written down until the late 20th century. There were no schools in the mountains of Laos. The elders taught the children what they needed to know. Those who lived in larger villages had few schools. Some mountain Hmong children were sent to live in town so they could get a formal education. They learned to speak, read and write other languages such as Lao, Thai and French.

The Hmong alphabet was designed in the early 1950s by Catholic and Protestant missionaries using the Roman alphabet. Most of the Hmong Catholics and a few of the young Hmong may be able to read and write Hmong. Those who are between 25 and 50 years of age may also read and write Lao. A movement has begun to develop a specific Hmong alphabet and teach basic literacy skills to Hmong Americans in their native language.

Many Hmong had their first educational experience here in the U.S. That is, their first attempt at writing or reading is in a language with which they have no familiarity. Many of the adults who enter our English Education program have never before seen a calendar, read time off a clock, or made and kept appointments. Most of them have never before held a pencil or kept a paper for later reference. One Hmong leader stated that the distance between life in Laos and Minnesota is comparable to Minnesotans adjusting to life on the moon. All the rules for living, indeed for survival, are changed.

Here are a few Hmong phrases for handy reference.

They are presented English | Hmong | Phonetic

Hello, Hi | Nyob zoo | Nyah zhong

What's your name? | Koj lub npe hu li cas? | Gaw loo bay hoo lee jah?

Thank you | Ua tsaug | Wah chow

1,2,3,4,5 | ib, ob, peb, plaub, tsib |ee, ab, bay, blao, chi

See you later | Sib ntsib dua | Shee njee doo-ah

Good bye | Mus zoo | moo zhong

Religion and Medicine

In Laos, most Hmong were animists with a strong belief in spirits and the supernatural world. Today many Hmong living in America have become Christians. However, traditional beliefs and practices remain important to both the animists and the Christians. Practices and ceremonies are changing fast for Hmong living in American society.

Traditional Hmong belief holds that a person has several souls, usually four. Sometimes one of the souls becomes separated from a person.

The Hmong believe that the souls of the dead live in the world of the supernatural. These spirits decide just how long a person will live on earth. When that time runs out, the person will die. These same spirits are also the souls of the Hmong people still waiting to be born. Someday these souls will reenter the earth. Many Hmong also believe that they have a twin spirit, similar to a guardian angel. This spirit often helps them with events on earth.

For Hmong, the supernatural or spirit world cannot be seen by human eyes. Contact with the spirit world is made through a shaman, a religious and medical leader.

The main work of the shaman is in connection with illness. Their job is to heal sick people and prevent illness by communicating with the spirit world. Chanting is done to dismiss the evil spirits and a circle is drawn around the patient and shaman to claim shamanic power within it.

The shaman is one of the most important people in a Hmong village. He/she gives hope to people in crisis. The shaman is a spiritual healer who guides a person in difficult situations. In Laos, a village with a good shaman attracted new families. The important role of the shaman continues today in America. Although most Hmong are adapting to American medical customs, they still respect and visit a shaman.

In addition to consulting the shaman, the Hmong traditionally used many herbs and plants which grow wild in the mountains to heal themselves. From these plants, they made salves and ointments to help heal injuries and to make the sick feel better. An expert in the use of medicinal plants was much like a doctor. As the Hmong adapt to western medicine, many continue to use