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The University of San Francisco

**APPROPRIATING THE UNSPOKEN TEXT:  
DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE AND HMONG WOMEN IN LAO PEOPLE'S  
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC**

A Dissertation Presented

to

The Faculty of the School of Education  
The Department of Organization and Leadership

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

By  
Kimberly C. Mendonca  
San Francisco  
May 2009

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Kimberly Mendonca

4/21/2009

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4/21/2009

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Dissertation Abstract

Appropriating the Unspoken Text:

Development Discourse and Hmong Women in Lao People's Democratic Republic

Development, from a broad perspective, is neither new nor uncommon. As a result of media attention, Westerners are becoming more versed on global development challenges to reduce poverty, hunger and disease. Some of the world's most famous actors have become activists and now serve as spokespeople for organizations that promote development. However, missing from these efforts is clear understanding of the unique needs and desires of various people of the world and, as a result, the best way to assist them in the fulfillment of those needs often remains unexplored.

This research investigated development in Laos. More specifically, it studied the concepts of development through an interpretive approach as they affect the women in the Hmong community. This research was conducted from the perspective of interpretive anthropology with selected theories drawn from a critical hermeneutic orientation. The specific process and protocols were appropriated from Herda's (1999: 85-138) orientation to participatory hermeneutic inquiry. Ricoeur's (1984, 1985, 1988) theories of narrative identity, mimesis and action provided the framework for exploration of the research inquiry and helped to give voice a place in identity. The findings of this research focus on changing the lens from which leadership is viewed; shifting the way development from being seen as a linear process to one that is understood as an interpretative process, and refocusing on the essential goals of development.

The significance of this research is the creation of a public space to give voice to Hmong women, a marginalized group both because of their ethnicity and their gender. The project broadens the dialogue about strategies and shapes new ideas of development. The stories of the Hmong women serve as a catalyst for further discourse about development as well as empowering and fundamentally improving the status of the Hmong women, their families and their communities.

Kimberly Mendonca, Author

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Dr. Ellen Herda, Ph.D  
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE RESEARCH FOCUS**

#### **Introduction**

Development, from a broad perspective, is neither new nor uncommon. As a result of media attention, Westerners are becoming more versed on global development challenges to reduce poverty, hunger and disease. Some of the world's most famous actors have become activists and now serve as spokespeople for organizations that promote development. However, missing from these efforts is clear understanding of the unique needs and desires of various people of the world and, as a result, the best way to assist them in the fulfillment of those needs often remains unexplored. Too often, those in positions of political and economic privilege rely on their own values to prescribe to others what they should be doing or what items of importance they need for a good life, failing to offer these people either their own voice or initiative in creating a higher quality of life. Such disenfranchisement occurs not only here in the United States, but the world over, in many cultures, societies, and governments. Unfortunately, this paradigm prevails in development efforts and as a result, no matter the good intention behind a project, people targeted for "help" are often affected negatively.

My research investigates development in Laos. More specifically, I study the concepts of development through an interpretive approach as they affect the women in the Hmong community, an ethnic minority among the hill people of Laos. I became interested in this topic during the first of two trips to Southeast Asia. The findings of this research focus on changing the lens from which leadership is viewed; shifting the way development from being seen as a linear process to one that is understood as an

interpretative process, and refocusing on the essential goals of development.

The Hmong have lived a turbulent life in Laos due to their role as soldiers on the side of the United States in the Vietnam War. The United States supported the Hmong until the end of the war and then left this community to fend for themselves with broken promises and a future of mistreatment from the Laos government. Today, the Hmong community inhabits one of the lowest statuses in Laos and their great need makes them often a targeted population for international development efforts. Unfortunately, little has been written about their experiences, so these efforts occur with little historical knowledge to aid understanding.

Through this research project, I explore ways of seeing development through a critical hermeneutic lens by considering what development means to me, to those developing theory, and to the women living in a developing area. I intend that this research will contribute to new and shared understandings of the ways in which development affects those whom it is designed to help.

I adopted as a critical guiding question my concern about how the western motifs inherent in organizations and development curricula could better include an authentic orientation toward the other in development paradigms. To do this, I adopted an ontological approach to development. As a result, this exploration carries a tone of gender inclusivity and utilizes an interpretive set of boundaries in both the data collection and the data analysis. The significance for practice is described below.

### **Restatement and Background of the Issue**

The United Nations declared the decade from 1975 to 1985 as the Decade for Women. During that time, it investigated every development body, including United

Nations agencies, national governments, and private organizations that developed programs and projects with the goal of improving the economic and social position of women all over the world. This project allowed researchers, activists, and policymakers to create a common pool of knowledge from diverse sources about women's experiences within the development process. The UN discovered that most of the projects under its scrutiny implicitly assumed that the primary problem faced by women in developing countries was "insufficient participation in an otherwise benevolent process of growth and development," and that increasing their participation and "improving their shares in resources, land, employment, and income relative to men were seen as both necessary and sufficient to effect dramatic improvements in their living conditions" (Sen and Grown 1987: 15). The studies that came out of the UN Decade showed that, rather than improvement in those ten years, the socioeconomic status of a large majority of the women living in developing countries had worsened. Women's access to economic resources, income, and employment had decreased, but their burdens of work had increased. In addition, there had been a significant decline in their health, nutritional and educational status. According to Sen and Grown (1987: 16), "the limited success of the integrationist approach is due in part to the difficulties of overcoming traditional cultural attitudes and prejudices regarding women's participation in economic and social life." Even more important was a mostly overlooked factor; a concern that "the nature of the development process into which women were to be integrated" was inherently flawed

In 1975, women's issues were first formally addressed by the national government of Laos when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) came into power. Earlier, the new communist regime had promised to "realize equality between

men and women in all fields, political, economic, cultural and social, and to do away with all acts of contempt or oppression toward women” (Brown and Zasloff 1986: Appendix A).

The United Nation's findings addressed the status of women in many different countries; however, their concerns did not apply to the challenges faces by the Hmong in Laos. The country of Laos has made progress with regard to Lao women, but Hmong women’s social status and political representation has not improved, largely because they belong to one of the most alienated ethnic minorities in Laos. Furthermore, the dire economic situation faced by the country has imposed an increasing demand on the time and energy of Hmong women. In general, Hmong women work on farms and within the household and are involved in the informal small-scale earning activities that supplement the family income. At a familial level, Hmong women provide security through their income-generating activities, handicrafts production, and agricultural production (Donnelly 1994).

Viewing development from the perspective of poor and oppressed women in the Hmong communities of Laos has provided a unique and powerful vantage point from which to examine development programs and strategies, both on the local government level and globally. The goals of development, such as those of the UN with the Millennium Goals, are to improve standards of living, to remove poverty from a given area, and to reduce inequality; women offer a natural starting point from which to offer a critique of development’s approach to such goals and their insights in this project reveal the vital nature of women’s work to the survival and ongoing reproduction of all human beings.

Through this research, I gained a better understanding of the Hmong women and the struggles they face through the stories they told. The Hmong women's voices are important, as are their thoughts about what is working and what is not; this process creates a space for innovation to thrive. The exploration of development in Laos through the eyes and stories of the Hmong women ensures that the voices of these women are heard. Too often women's anonymous struggles are the building blocks of a new society and it is my hope that this text ensures that their voices will resonate more clearly so that the future manifests their hopes rather than perpetuates their struggles.

### **Significance**

The significance of this research is the creation of a public space to give voice to Hmong women, a marginalized group both because of their ethnicity and their gender. The project broadens the dialogue about strategies and shapes new ideas of development. The stories of the Hmong women serve as a catalyst for further discourse about development as well as empowering and fundamentally improving the status of the Hmong women, their families and their communities.

### **Summary**

This research seeks to explore development through the stories of Hmong women living in Laos. Chapter One is an introduction the background of the topic at hand and the significance of this research. In Chapter Two, the backgrounds of Laos and the Hmong people are discussed in order to provide the historical, political, economic and cultural context of this research. Chapter Three is an extensive review of literature using the theoretical themes of identity, mimesis and action as categories to guide the research. Chapter Four of this dissertation sets forth the research protocol, which is guided by the

critical hermeneutic tradition from the discussion of theoretical background to the design of the research process. Chapter Five presents the data along with preliminary analysis, and Chapter Six follows with a secondary analysis using the research categories of identity, mimesis and action. Chapter Seven concludes the dissertation with a summary of the research findings, recommendation for future research, and personal reflections.

## CHAPTER TWO

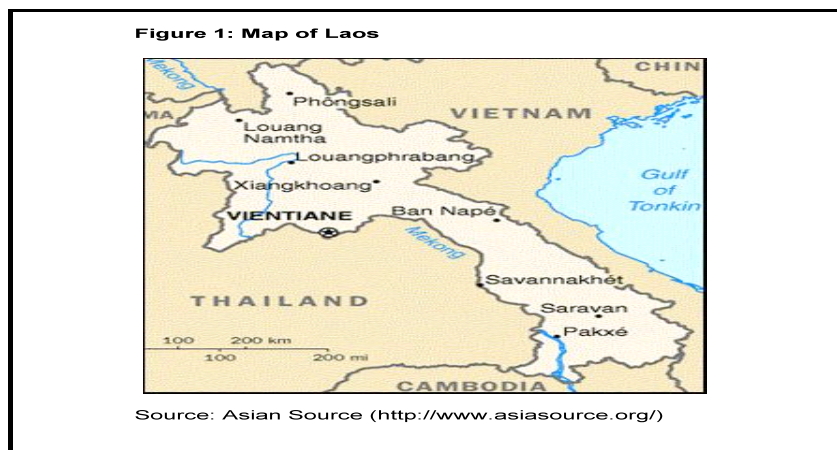
### BACKGROUND OF LAO PDR AND THE HMONG

#### Introduction

The lived experiences of the people in Laos not only influence their understanding of and prejudices about their future work but also their identities. The background stories of this country and the Hmong communities comprise what Ricoeur calls prefigured worlds, that is, the world that preceded the present. This chapter portrays the prefigured world through several facets including the history, population, education, and health of Laos and also the economy, social organization, family and clan, gender, belief system, and the treatment of the Hmong communities by the Lao government.

#### Lao PDR at a Glance

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is a small country in mainland Southeast Asia that is located between China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west, and Myanmar (Burma) to the northeast, as shown in Figure 1. Laos's population is small; about five million people occupy a land area roughly the size of Oregon—236,800 square kilometers (Economist Intelligence Unit 2007a).





Laos is one of the world's poorest countries: the World Bank puts the annual average per capita income in 2003 at US\$380. According to the national census (Economist Intelligence Unit 2007a), only about 21.6 percent of the population lives in an urban area, making Laos an overwhelmingly rural society.

The capital city, Vientiane, contains slightly more than half a million people. Though the Laotian experience of urban life is far different from those in other countries who live in their nation's capital, those living in the city do lead a very different life from those in the country for they have access to electricity, television, a vibrant economy, and social, health, and educational services (Ireson-Doolittle 2004: 10).

The whole of the country survives on a predominantly agricultural economy that is largely at subsistence level. The main crops are rice, fruits, sugar cane, tobacco, and coffee. Industry in Laos is based primarily on textiles, basic consumer goods, and processing raw materials. The tourism industry has developed since the late 1990s and is now one of the largest sources of income in Laos (Economist Intelligence Unit 2007b).

### **History**

The story of modern Laos starts about six hundred years ago with the migrations of a large number of people, more than likely from southern China (See Table 1). In the fourteenth century, the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang was established and endured for more than 350 years, but throughout its reign, parts of the country were controlled by Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. After the fall of Lan Xang, the country was broken into various smaller kingdoms, river towns, and isolated villages (Ireson-Doolittle 2004: 11).

**Table 1: Time Line of Lao History**

<b>Key Events</b>	
1353	Foundation of the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang By Fa Ngum
1707, 1713	Division of Lan Xang into the three kingdoms of Laung Prabang, Viang Chan (Vientiane, and Champassak
1899	Administrative reorganization of Laos under French colonial rule
1950	Pathet Lao resistance government forms
1954	French surrender at Dien Bien Phu
1955	Formation of Lao People's Party
1957	First coalition government is established
1958	Lao women are accorded the right to vote and be elected to national office
1960	Neutralist coup d'etat of Captain Konglae
1962-1963	Formation and collapse of second coalition government
1964	U.S. Boming of communist targets in Laos begins
1965-1973	Bombing and battles continue
1973	Cease-fire goes into effect
1974	Third coalition government takes office
1975	National Assembly dissolves; Lao People's Democratic republic is established
1976	Lao People's Revolutionary Party embarks on socialist phase of revolution
1978	Campaign to form agricultural cooperatives begins
1985	First nationwide population census
1986	Fourth Congress of Lao People's Revolutionary Party meets; the congress endorses the New Economic Mechanism and adopts a "no-swidden" policy
1988	Investment Code is decreased
1989	First elections for Supreme People's Assembly
1991	Supreme People's Assembly endorses constitution
1992	Government temporarily bans logging
1993	Further economic reforms are made and environmental protection law is passed
1994	First bridge spanning the Mekong opens
1997	Lao PDR joins Association of Southeast Asian nations
1997-2000	Asian economic crisis: markets for key Lao exports (timber, textiles and garments, electricity) decline sharply
1998	New, large hydroelectric project, the Nam Theun-Hin Boun, begins operation
1999	First antigovernment public protest since 1975 is quickly quelled by police

Source: Doolittle, Carol Ireson and Geraldine Moreno-Black. 2004 the Lao: Gender, Power, and Livelihood. Colorado: West View Press.

In the 1800s, the French began to colonize parts of Southeast Asia, including Laos. French rule of Laos lasted from 1899-1954. Their control weakened considerably during World War II, and French forces were finally defeated in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu in the mountains of Vietnam near Laos. After Laos gained independence, many political

factions struggled for power; during that time, what the United States referred to as “the Vietnam War” and what Laos referred to as “the American war” was occurring (Ireson-Doolittle 2004: 11).

After the chaos resulting from French colonization and the wars that disrupted Laotian social life during the early decades of the twentieth century, a radically different political system came to power in Laos during the last quarter of the century. In 1975, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR) was established, and the country’s government began to be dominated by the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) - the Communist party - which remains the case today (Economist Intelligence Unit 2007a).

### **Population**

The Laos government recognizes the existence of 49 distinct ethnic groups that co-exist in the country. These groups fall into four broad language families: Tai-Kadai, Mon Khmer, Hmong-Mien, and Tibeto-Burmese (Gender 2004). All of the ethnic groups are categorized by the region in which they live within the county. Around 65 percent of the population consists of Lao Lum (lowland Lao) groups, which are the politically dominant majority; 25 percent are Lao Theung (midland Lao); and 10 percent are Lao Sung (upland Lao), where the heaviest population of Hmong is located (Economist Intelligence Unit 2007a).

### **Education**

Laos suffers from a shortage of schools, a lack of textbooks, poorly qualified teachers, and low school enrollment and completion levels. Approximately 68.7 percent of the adult population was literate in 2004, and according to the UNDP, an average of

21.5 percent of young people aged 15-24 are illiterate. The government promised in 2006 to devote more resources and energy to the improvements of the educational systems of the country, but lack of education remains a major constraint on development.

Despite their essential contributions to the development of Laos, gender-disaggregated data on education, health, and political representation show that women still lack access to basic services and political power (Thomson and Baden 1993; Economist Intelligence Unit 2007a). Currently, approximately 60 percent of women in Laos are illiterate, which is much higher than the national average in 2003 of approximately 36 percent, due to access (Gender 2004).

### **Health**

Health standards in Laos are lower than other countries in the region with a similar level of income per head. In 2005, the life expectancy was below 55 years, as compared to 70 years in Thailand and Vietnam. In 2000, the maternal mortality rate was 65 per 10,000 live births, considered high for a low-income country (Country Profile 2007). UNICEF prioritizes the continuing major health concerns among Laotian children to be malnutrition and iodine inefficiency (Altorfer-Ong 2004).

At the heart of the health issues in Laos is an inadequately maintained public health system that is inaccessible to a large percentage of the population. Just as with the educational system, the Laos government has made promises to develop a more efficient primary healthcare system, but it has been slow in coming to fruition. Information on health issues specifically to Hmong women in Laos has not been readily available.

### **The Story of the Hmong in Laos**

Hmong society in Laos has been shaped by life in the mountains, slash-and-burn

agriculture, the practice of animism and ancestral worship, and a patriarchal family and clan system. Their status as an oppressed minority in Laos, along with war and dislocation, has altered the Hmong way of life, and yet cultural traditions continue among the Hmong.

The origins of the Hmong are obscure and the subject of much speculation and debate. Because the Hmong retain cultural traces of the earliest forms of Chinese social organizations, experts consider the Hmong to be among the earliest known inhabitants of China (Chan 1994: 1). Hmong began fleeing from China into Southeast Asia around 1800 and began to occupy villages in the mountainous regions of Vietnam and Laos (Quincy 1995: 15). Since then, the mountains of Laos have provided the Hmong with forests full of game, land for farming, security from outsiders, and the relative freedom to run their lives as they choose.

Like most things, life in the mountains comes at a price. The Hmong do not have access to the modern resources enjoyed by others in Laos, such as education, economic opportunities and technology. The life the Hmong have chosen in the highlands of Laos provides them with a measure of independence, but it can also trap them in lives of poverty and isolation.

### **Economy**

The Hmong practice slash-and-burn agriculture, which is the reason for their semi-migratory way of life. In slash-and-burn agriculture, farmers clear a piece of land, burn the vegetation, and then plant crops. After several years, they move to a new field to allow the old fields to reforest. In most cases, they move back and forth between areas, recycling the fields they left many years earlier so that their environment can be kept in

balance and deforestation kept to a minimum.

Not all Hmong in Laos practice this type of cultivation. There are some who trek down to lower lands to irrigate rice farms. While rice is one of the main staples in the Hmong household, they also grow a variety of other crops such as corn, sweet potatoes, yams, taro, cabbage, broccoli, parsley, tomatoes, squash, bitter-melon, radishes, cucumbers, and sugar cane. They also raise pigs, chickens, horse and cattle (Donnelly 1994: 21 & 28; Quincy 1995: 75-77).

The Hmong are largely sustenance farmers, but a major cash crop for them is the opium poppy. In the 19th century, the French colonial government encouraged the Hmong to grow opium to pay taxes, as well as to make a profit by selling to the government. Since most Hmong live in the highlands, located far from towns and cities, it is difficult for them to transport their produce and animals to market; they depend on opium for support because it can be easily carried to an opium trader in town to sell for cash to buy much needed supplies such as salt, tools, and cloth (Donnelly 1994: 21 & 48; Chan 1994: 11-16). Opium is also used among the Hmong as medicine for the ill and a painkiller for the elderly. Without access to modern medicines, Hmong have traditionally used opium to treat ailments for all ages in the community (Quincy 1995: 79).

### **Social Organization**

A typical Hmong village sits on a ridge crest of a mountain, not too far from a waterway. A village usually consists of about 20 to 40 households. Villages are small enough to be in harmony with the environment and large enough to be self-sufficient. For generations, village problems and disputes are settled by village elders, who are considered the most knowledgeable members of the society (Donnelly 1994: 22-30).

## **Family and Clan**

The Hmong are group-oriented. For the Hmong, the survival of an individual depends solely on the survival of the group; thus, the interest of the group comes before the interests of the individual. A Hmong person belongs to a family, the family belongs to a clan, and the clan belongs to the Hmong people (Quincy 1995: 50). According to Ranard (2004), the Hmong often use the term “we” to refer to their families, their clan, and their identity as a people, and it is common to hear them say *peb tsev neeg* (our family), *peb lub xeem* (our clan), and *peb Hmoob* (our Hmong people).

The family is the basic unit in Hmong society and serves as the unit of production, consumption, socialization, and mutual assistance. While a Hmong household may vary in size from a married couple to more than 20 people, a typical household consists of an extended family made up of many generations living under one roof. The family is often centered on the sons while the daughters marry out (Donnelly 1994: 24-27).

Ranard (2004) states that there are about 19 Hmong clans in Laos, and within these clans there are several sub-clans. Clan membership is obtained by birth, marriage for women, and adoption. When a woman marries into her husband's family she is allowed to continue to identify herself by her birth family's clan name, but for practical purposes she becomes a member of her husband's clan. Members of a clan consider each other brothers and sisters. They are obligated to help each other both socially and culturally (Donnelly 1994: 26).

## **Gender**

The Hmong have a patriarchal system in which the family is under the authority of the male head of the household, usually the oldest male or the oldest adult married son. Traditionally the Hmong marry at a young age—as young as 14 years of age for boys and

16 years of age for girls (Quincy 1995: 101). The young Hmong learn what they need to know from their parents and other adult members in their household because there is rarely enough money to send children to school. A son learns from his father and uncles the skills he needs to survive, lead effectively, and perform traditional rituals. A daughter learns from her mother, grandmother, and aunts how to be a mother, wife, and farm helper. She is also expected to master skills such as needlework, midwifery, and music (Donnelly 1994: 32). A married woman has limited rights and little voice in her parents' household, and she must work hard to earn her place in her husband's household (Donnelly 1994: 33).

### **Belief System**

Since the 1950s, many Hmong have converted to Christianity (Donnelly 1994:49). It is estimated that half of the Hmong population are currently Christians (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2008). Those Hmong who have not converted maintain a traditional belief that is based on animism and ancestral worship (Donnelly 1994: 49). Animism is the belief that forces and spirits—domestic and protective as well as wild—inhabit the natural universe. Since ordinary human beings cannot see or communicate with spirits, it is up to the village shaman to act as the ambassador between one world and the other. Animism encourages the Hmong to respect animals and nature; the Hmong strive to be in harmony with their environment (Faderman and Xiong 1998: 27).

Ancestor worship—the belief that deceased ancestors and their living descendants exist interdependently—is also important in Hmong society. The Hmong believe that the spirits of their ancestors continue to influence their daily lives and welfare. On the basis of this belief, the youth of the Hmong community depend on the old and the old rely on



the young. It is believed that in helping each other to remember their ancestors and their roots, the Hmong identity is strengthened (Corlin 2001: 109-114).

### **The Jungle is Home**

The Hmong lead what many would consider a simple life and have what are often times referred to as a poor standard of living. They reside in the jungles of Laos and are treated like traitors in their own country (Hmong Times 2008). “There’s a kind of fault line which separates the Hmong from the rest of the population” (McGeown 2003). The Hmong people are blamed for siding with foreign imperialists. During the Vietnam War, many of them sided with the United States to fight communism in Laos and became an integral part of a secret CIA-trained militia. As indicated above, the United States Government left Laos in 1973 and ended their support of the Hmong, leaving them to their fate, which at that time looked especially grim, as epitomized by a communist newspaper that declared that the government would hunt down the “American collaborators” and their families “to the last root” (Perrin 2003).

Over 30 years later, the Hmong soldiers, their children, and grandchildren are still being persecuted by the Lao PDR because of their loyal support of the United States. This persecution takes the form marginalization, overt discrimination and sometime violence (Xiong 2003). Those Hmong that could escape have relocated to the United States, France, Australia, Vietnam and Thailand (McGeown 2003). On March 13, 2008, a rally was held at the Minnesota State Capital. ChuPhen Lee (Hmong Times 2008), chairman of Hmong Stand for Humanity, called to every person in the crowd:

to imagine yourself in the death jungle of Laos...running, hiding [with people] chasing you for their own personal reward, gain trophy. [These people] are your brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, elders and friends...for 32 years they are dying and suffering for your sins so you can live.

This call to conscience reminds those who have escaped of the ongoing suffering of those who remain.

### **Summary**

Chapter Two presents a description of the country of Laos with a discussion of history, population education and health along with the prefigured world of the Hmong through the social organization, family and clan, gender and their belief system. The story of Laos and the story of the Hmong show the deep historical connection between the country and the people. This chapter also introduces the status of the Hmong amidst the challenges facing Laos. What follows in Chapter Three, the Review of Literature, is a description of the challenges of development and the implications of these efforts, along with a description of the philosophical and theoretical foundations underpinning the research inquiry.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Introduction

Within the history of the Hmong in Laos, as with other people in other regions, each person involved bears witness and it is how this occurs that matters most. Every person has the choice either to bear witness in ethical action that is grounded in care and solicitude, or, in the words of Farmer (2005: 26), “scratching at this surface silence, to trigger that painful eloquence” with the other and for the other. Although using terms such as “bearing witness” might seem passé, such terminology is fitting for this research, which draws on the personal experience of both the self and the other. The review of literature explores the philosophical and theoretical foundations to allow the researcher to bear witness on behalf of others. “*Bearing witness*, like *solidarity* and *compassion*, is a term worth rehabilitating...no matter how great the pain of bearing witness, it will never be as great as the pain of those who endure, whether in silence or with cries” (Farmer 2005: 28).

The literature review is divided into six sections: economics and development; development and the Hmong in Laos with a further dive into literature relating to Hmong women and development. This literature is followed by sections on the critical hermeneutic orientation; the interpretive anthropological approach; and the interpretive orientation toward development. These sections establish a framework for the research inquiry and analysis moving into an interpretive orientation toward development.

## **Economics and Development**

Economy and development was first linked in the 1930s when economists began to realize that most of the world did not live in an advanced capitalist economic system. Decolonization at this time became a catalyst that highlighted societies whose standard of living was not to the standards of those in western societies. It was throughout this time that economists started to work in earnest to analyse institutions which could induce, sustain and accelerate growth in these societies and economic development became a distinct area of study (Nunn 2008).

By the early 1950s, development began to mean restructuring the world to look and act like mainstream Western societies. Over time, this vision of what the world should look like has been "viewed as an altruistic dream, a matter of planning, and, most recently, a highly visible context for critique and debate" and the "power elites and academics hold tight to their idea of helping what came to be known as the Third World" (Herda 2007: 4). The help given to the other societies is issued through various economic models that are altered when things do not go right (Herda 2007: 4). It was in the 1960s, when development was given the spotlight and the Development Decade was initiated by the United Nations. This decade grew out of previous decades where issues such as human rights, decolonization and increasing the standard of living among the world's poorest took center stage (Rist 2002: 80-92). From this decade, international and local development agencies began to emerge and most development projects that are funded by these agencies today can be characterized as providing temporary aid. One of the largest agencies that provides this type of aid for the poor is the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP) with a mission that is based on a vision of success couched in economic progress in poor countries and communities (Herda 2007: 5).

In spite of the lack of evidence to show that economic gain in poor countries is the key to successful development (Easterly 2006a; Rajan and Subramanian 2005; Rist 2002), there are still markers of development that are based in the traditional economic paradigms that play heavily in the decisions to continue with expensive projects which measure progress in economic terms. An example that is known worldwide is the plan to produce "The End of Poverty" which is derived from the United Nations Millennium Promise that accompanies the Millennium Project (United Nations 2000). This is a project that asserts, "we can make a difference. Our generation can end poverty now" and that highlights a trend in development that creates a worldwide plan to reduce poverty along with promoting health and human rights (Herda 2007: 6). According to Herda (2007: 6) this "idea is more than a goal; it has become today's mantra to end world poverty" and includes famous endorsers such as Bono and Angelina Jolie. There is little doubt that the world's leading actors bring important issues such as poverty to the stage of awareness, but it also begs the question if these endorsements are to assuage the guilt of the rich.

It is clear that over the past several generations, socioeconomic development efforts have not improved the living conditions of those living in poverty. For the majority of the poor, the gap between the have and the have-nots has widened instead of closed (Escobar 1995; Easterly 2006b; Landes 1998; Rist 2002; Sachs 2005; Sharma 2004). Echoing Easterly (2001), Sharma, an economist, writes (2004:51) that in "this 'elusive quest for growth,' there have been a few unexpected achievements, and a great

many failures." Some of the reasons that have been put forth to explain the lack of success in development include "insufficient data, inadequate funds to carry out the plans, inappropriate distribution, corrupt governments, a dearth of markets and trade channels, and an increase in populations" (Herda 2007: 7). All of these reasons find a place in economists' discussions from which a shift in approach becomes apparent, but after approximately \$2.5 trillion have been spent by the industrialized people on development efforts, the question becomes: Does the amount of money spent by the wealthy match up with the testimonies of the poor living in rural villages? According to Herda (2007: 7), as we know from our own experiences, "the growing literature elucidating problems in the development arenas, as well as the research and reports by the contributors...all point to *no*." Herda furthers this answer by posing a new question: "How can we begin to think in a different vein, in which unkept promises can be refigured to set the stage for development in a new key?"

Laos is a country that is considered to be Third World and as such its government is a recipient of economic aid from western countries to assist in the process of improving the life of its residents. Success is hard to see, especially when taking into account one of the most alienated groups in Laos, the Hmong. What follows is a discussion of development and the Hmong in Laos and furthered with a discussion focused on Hmong women and development.

### **Development and the Hmong in Laos**

According to the 2007 Country Report, the Hmong are one of the most alienated groups in Laos. Many efforts have been made to raise the living standards of this community, such as a joint effort of the United Nations Development Programme and

United States Agency for International Development opium replacement projects to develop a viable economic alternative to opium production, UN projects aimed at encouraging better health care and education, and the building of hydro-electric dams by the World Bank. In fact, a great deal of development work is currently being conducted in Laos by the international community.

The most well-publicized of these efforts are those of the UN regarding the Millennium Goals. These goals are a collective commitment to overcome poverty through a set of eight goals that are mutually reinforced on interrelated time-bound goals with linked targets. These are the synthesis of the goals from global UN conferences held in the 1990s that developed a global partnership aimed at eradicating poverty by 2015 by the international communities (United Nations 2000). These eight goals, which are to guide all international development work done in developing countries, follow below.:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV-AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

On a local level, the Lao government has focused its efforts on the resettlement of the “ethnic minorities” or “hill tribes,” social groups that are culturally and geographically separated from the main national group, in an effort to establish new settlements that are strategically placed from both a political and economic point of view. The Hmong have been displaced within the “context of rural development policies, which aim to ‘settle’ or stabilize their agricultural practices and to accelerate their social and cultural integration” (Evrard and Goudineau 2004: 938). Evrard and Goudineau (2004:

938) believe that these planned resettlements are also a “way of enabling the national authorities to exercise better control over the population” allowing the government to “exploit the natural resources of the highlands.”

For the past ten years, the government has moved and resettled a majority of the highland villages to lower lands (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). These resettlement efforts are not a part of traditional patterns of mobility among various groups nor are they migrations that have occurred throughout history due to armed conflicts. The Hmong lifestyle has been greatly affected by these resettlements. The Hmong have been resettled from their hilltop villages, where they practice slash-and-burn agriculture and grow opium poppies to land where they can supposedly practice permanent agriculture and have better road access. There has been considerable criticism of this internal resettlement program even though its stated purpose is to preserve forest resources and improve government services to ethnic minorities such as the Hmong. Resettlement is supposed to be voluntary, but coercion has been used and promised government services have not materialized. These resettlements have also caused an increase in poverty and have yet to raise the level of living standards above those of sustainability (Stuart-Fox 2007).

It is my hope that through this research may contribute to the idea that development should become a process that no longer involves prescribing what the other should be doing and instead become a process of discovering how the self and the other can work toward what ought to be done to help all participants. Habermas (1998: 5) states that “communicative reason is not an immediate source of prescription.” He offers a new theory of communicative action that would replace “practical reason with a



communicative one” (Habermas 1998: 3). This is more than just a change in terminology: this process of communicative action, as he frames it, is no longer housed in an individual as previously thought, but instead takes place in many participants through “which interactions are woven together and forms of life are structured” (Habermas 1998: 3-4). There is a call for action in this statement that needs to be recognized among those working with the Hmong in Laos, for their interactions to date have been marginalized and their own imagination about their future subverted to another’s “strategy” or vision of what is best.

Ricoeur’s (1984) theory of the threefold mimesis helps us understand how Hmong communities and the Laotian government can begin to move beyond the events of their shared past to imagine a future containing utopian elements, a future that will allow them to live in a present that meets their needs. Mimesis<sub>1</sub> offers a theoretical model for the interpretation of past understandings (memory, history, traditions) so that a future, mimesis<sub>3</sub>, can be imagined. With this imagining, a present is created through emplotment and configuration between the past and the future, mimesis<sub>2</sub>. Both parties can move from a pre-understanding to a new understanding by distancing themselves from their prejudice and pre-understandings through reflection. We all belong to history, but “if we cannot imagine how our organizations could improve, we can never live in a world different from the current conditions” (Herda 1999: 77).

### **Hmong Women and Development**

The focus of this research is not just to the Hmong community, but specifically the community of Hmong women living in Laos. Gender thus becomes a specific concern as it relates to the development policies of Laos. What follows is a brief description of

women in development (WID) and gender and development (GAD).

Interest in gender and development emerged through the feminist theoretical framework to understand the complexities of women's subordination. The two main competing feminist development frameworks are women in development, WID, and gender and development, GAD (Parpart, Connelly and Barriteau 2000: 50; Young 1997). Both of these theoretical frameworks discuss the importance of thinking about the social world to create social change. In the 1960s and 1970s, two international concerns began to emerge: women's movements for equal rights and criticisms of development processes. The convergence of women's issues and development led to the growth of the theories of WID (Parpart, Connelly and Barriteau 2000: 56-57). These theories are concerned with issues such as the benefits of development not reaching women in need; women's positions being undermined in some economic sectors; and the integration of women into the design and implementation of development programs through legal and administrative changes. The concepts of WID and the goal of improving development efforts by incorporating women quickly won acceptance and was incorporated into policy statements by U.N. agencies and national governments (Parpart, Connelly and Barriteau 2000: 57-61). Although WID was gaining popularity, there were inherent limitations to it, including the assumptions that all women had common problems and interests; the supposition that women were not already integrated into economic production; and the influence of American feminism, which sought solutions that were too often inconsistent with cultural values and priorities. From WID, a new approach emerged called gender and development (GAD), which argued that women have always been integrated into development processes, but that those processes essentially were flawed; men, as well as

women, are hurt by development programs that do not alter repressive class, ethnic and racial structures; and that successful development does not “target” women, but instead empowers them (Reddock 2000; Parpart, Connelly and Barriteau 2000: 61- 64; Young 1997). While the tension between the two approaches provides some room for discussion, both are incomplete without entering into a relationship between the researcher and the individual, developing a shared vision grounded in trust and respect that allows a reciprocal exchange of values.

The Lao government has stated that they are committed to gender equality and the protection of women within the country. In 2004, the Lao National Assembly passed the Law on the Development and Protection of Women (Stuart-Fox 2007: 14). This law enshrines the leading role of the Lao Women's Union (LWU) in promoting both goals and resulted in the Gender Resource Information and Development Center, created in November 2005. This project published the first Lao PDR Gender Profile in 2006, which serves to bring together a comprehensive report of all the literature that covers topics relevant to women in Laos in the hope of enabling gender equality, an equitable economic place for women, attention to women's health, and provisions for women's education, along with women's involvement in decision making (GRID 2005). According to Stuart-Fox (2007: 14), this report will offer a baseline for all future policies with respect to gender and enable a better understanding of the roles of women and men, consequently leading to programs that address gender imbalances or disparities.

The government of Laos has begun to acknowledge the important role of women in society through their targeted development efforts but the process of development can "benefit women only if and when it addresses the double burdens of production and

reproduction carried by women” (Afshar 1991: 2). There is still a long road ahead of the Lao government and the people of Laos before a true understanding of what can and should exist (Asher 1991). The plans developed at a national government’s level are inherently bureaucratic and thus often define their "output as money disbursed rather than service delivered," produce "many low-return observable outputs like glossy reports and 'frameworks' and few high-return," engage in "obfuscation, spin control and amnesia (like always describing aid efforts as 'new and improved')" and put enormous demands on scarce administrative skills in poor countries" (Easterly 2002). This type of governance carries limitations in terms of individual involvement and effectiveness. In order for the plans developed at this level to have their intended effect, the people of Laos, visitors to Laos, or researchers and development workers should learn to exist with the Hmong in a shared space where the hierarchical imbalance is negated (Afshar 1991: 2).

This research is informed by the relevant literature, adopting an approach that views women as active agents rather than passive recipients of development. There are no assumptions that the women I spoke with had a perfect knowledge or understanding of the social situations in which they find themselves. Also, there was no assumption that men are aware of the social bases of male dominance or they are actively promoting male dominance.

What follows are sections on the critical hermeneutic orientation, the interpretive anthropological approach, and the interpretive orientation toward development establishing a framework for an interpretive orientation toward this project.

### **Critical Hermeneutic Orientation**

Critical hermeneutics gives an individual the ability to break out of the rigid boundaries that social norms and scientific discourse have created. It allows each person to speak from a different place but helps each of us recognize the others around us as coming from legitimate places rather than merely foreign ones. Gadamer (1988) introduced the concept of “fusion of horizons” as a means to expand and enrich one’s own horizon in conjunction with horizons not one’s own. Through the act of fusing horizons or different points of view, a person can risk and test their prejudices. This process begins in the opposite direction from relativism, moving away from the idea that there are no absolutes. The criteria for judgments, ethics, and concepts of truth and morals vary from person to person, and their validity depends on the situation in which those criteria are applied. Gadamer’s concept of fusion of horizons explains that we learn from others and also learn about ourselves. He states “only through others do we gain true knowledge of ourselves” (Bernstein 1983: 144). The concept of fusion of horizons allows for a person to leave a situation understanding someone and themselves differently than when they came to the situation. Through this research, with the help of Hmong women and the stories that they shared with me, development work can be viewed differently if the reader is orientated toward shifting the development paradigm to include an interpretative model.

Hermeneutics reaches for a different plane of thinking, understanding, and conversing. Bernstein (1983: 2) explains that a new “conversation” has emerged about human rationality and that this conversation permits an open dialogue that “presupposes a background of intersubjective agreements and a tacit sense of relevance.” Hermeneutics

is about acknowledging the other and the other's reasoning. Not everything is understandable or utterable; however, interpretation is the means by which further understanding comes about. It is interpretation that allows us to confront the incomprehensibility involved in life. One of the common themes explored in hermeneutics is how we come to know ourselves and those surrounding us. By existing with others in the horizon of a common world, the self is transformed. Hermeneutics allows a person to explore who and what they are in the course of becoming a self.

For this research, two primary theoretical orientations establish the foundation of my research: the ontological theory of Ricoeur and the social-critical theory of Habermas. A critical hermeneutic orientation is relevant to this research because it enables the exploration of the nature of our being in the complex societal contexts in which international development unfolds. The interpretive and critical orientation reveals the underlying influences and connections women make that enable them to aim their lifework toward improving living conditions for themselves and their family, along with their communities. This orientation permits a better understanding of how Hmong women are experiencing and making development meaningful and beneficial in Laos.

### **Ricoeur: An Ontological Orientation to Hermeneutics**

An ontological orientation establishes development as the possibility of being. Ricoeur has three primary concepts in the ontological orientation to hermeneutics that are relevant to this research: narrative identity, the condition of possibilities, and the temporal character of human experience.

Ricoeur's (1982) theory of narrative identity is the way a person creates their personal identity in both a permanent and temporal form. The narrative identity concept

offers a basic understanding of the notion of a person and allows one to think through the question of personal identity in a new way. Much like an autopoietic system, the narrative identity strives to maintain internal stability while remaining open to the external environment and all of its fluctuations (Maturana and Varela 1980). Ricoeur theorized that we have narrative identities making up our personal identity and revealing our interconnectedness to others. Every narrative constructed involves the intersection of at least two human lives; for example, every fault or crime that is committed includes at least two people, one of whom bears some responsibility for the loss of someone else's well-being. Even the most basic of actions are always performed in reference to another person. Whole sections of a person's life are part of the history of others' lives, as is the case with family members, coworkers, and acquaintances. Such interrelation demands mutual recognition of shared humanity. The character of a person remains the same throughout life's transitions, and yet, merely by interacting with others, our character allows us to "create newness that houses [the] future" (Herda 1997: 37).

Herda (1997) further explains that the identity cannot be known only through our self and our relations to others; rather, identity formation requires narrative. Humans think, relate, and communicate through storytelling. Herda asserts that humans use stories to "mediate the past and future to the present, to bring into one plot many inconsistencies in our lives" (1997: 37). Likewise, Ricoeur states, "we speak of the story of a life to characterize the interval between birth and death" (1991: 425).

Every person has a story. Through the narrative identity, a person makes sense of who she is and grasps her own personal characteristics, much as a character in a story. A person begins to understand herself through the plot of her life narrative: what happens to

her, how she adapts to certain situations, and the courses of action she pursues. A person interprets her actions and the actions of others in relation to narrative to make them intelligible. It is through a person's stories that others can know them. To learn about each other, we all share stories about ourselves in relation to our family, our childhood, the years we spent in school, and other things that have happened to us. These stories are told and retold, imagined and re-imagined, worked and reworked, much like the draft of a novel, through time.

Ricoeur's concept of mimesis (1984) provides the link between his theory of narrative and time: unless we reclaim, understand, and reinterpret our past, we cannot create a new future (Shahideh 2004: 55). Mimesis has three domains: present-past (mimesis<sub>1</sub>), present-present (mimesis<sub>2</sub>), and present-future (mimesis<sub>3</sub>). All these stages of mimesis are interrelated and contain creative actions, but the most important state is mimesis<sub>3</sub>. Mimesis<sub>3</sub> gives a person a new possibility for living that exists in reference to mimesis<sub>1</sub>. Ricoeur refers to the three stages of mimesis as the "circle of *mimesis*: the end point seems to lead back to the starting point or, worse, the end point seems anticipated in the starting point" (Shahideh 2004: 35). It is the interplay between mimesis<sub>1</sub> and mimesis<sub>3</sub> that creates mimesis<sub>2</sub>. Our present understanding of the past and present hopes for the future informing our understanding of ourselves. Further, it is through the meaning of time that the meaning of one's being is understood. Shahideh (2004) further states that, without time, there is no structure to a person's story of their life—and a life with no structure is a story with neither beginning nor end.

The past can be subject to change through reinterpretation and the future is unopened and undetermined. Each person has the ability to undo what has been done



because, according to Ricoeur (2004: 381), “what has happened is not fixed” but is instead “tied to the relation of debt with respect to the past” and “can be increased or lightened,” where debt moves beyond guilt and belongs to the character of “*charge*, of *weight*, of burden.” Ricoeur explains this, saying that “the historian has the opportunity to carry herself in imagination back to a given moment of the past as having been present, and so as having been lived by people of the past as the present of their past and as the present of their future” (2004: 382) This repetition becomes the power of the possible because there is an opportunity each time the past is revised in the present to remember it differently due to the distance. This distance allows for reflection and change. It is, then, possible to create a meaningful place in which to share a dialogue that takes into account the voices of all those influenced by development efforts in Laos through the past and present to imagine a future that aims at what Ricoeur (1992: 172) states is the “good life” for all.

In addressing the condition of possibilities, Ricoeur claims that the first function is to understand the possibility of being. Closely related to the concept of narrative identity, Ricoeur (1981: 62) proposes the possibility of being as a fusion of understanding that excludes the idea of a total and unique knowledge and “implies a tension between what is one’s own and what is alien, between the near and the far...hence the play of difference is included in the process of convergence.” Ricoeur references Gadamer’s (1988) description of the historicity of understanding, fusion of horizon. Gadamer’s fusion of horizon is an essential ingredient in the understanding of the story, as well as the understanding of self. “A life *examined*, in a sense borrowed from Socrates, is a life *narrated*” (Ricoeur 1991: 435). This orientation to understanding and history suggests

that language as a place in development reveals a tension in possibilities, which for Hmong women in Laos means....

Lastly, Ricoeur (1984: 52-54) claims that there is a temporal character to human experience, in which “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it become a condition of temporal existence.” He further asserts that human action displays a possible world and thereby opens up the real toward the possible. This is relevant because, according to Ricoeur, “being able to act...calls for the same kind of complement as does self-designation in the dimension of being able to speak” (Ricoeur 2005: 253). This research gives voice to the stories that create the identities of Hmong women in Laos, opening up a dialogue on development revealing the place of the real, the challenges, and the possibilities. I note that I spoke with others then Hmong women, but these women are my primary interest.

### **Interpretive Anthropological Approach**

The theories of Ricoeur approaching the critical hermeneutic orientation suggest that improving living conditions is a matter of aiming our intentions, discourse, and actions. These theories create a balanced philosophical exploration, which is important given the complex cultural, social, economic, and political realities of development within Laos and among Hmong women. It is important to note, though, that the interpretive anthropological approach complements the above theories, providing a more nuanced space within which to explore development

In this review of literature, I provide a particular historical context, from which some anthropologists view their discipline as being particularly relevant to my topic.

Geertz (1988: 130-131) reflects on the need for an interpretive anthropological approach that is relevant to the people who live in developing countries. He states that the “end of colonialism alters radically the nature of the social relationship between those who ask and look and those who are asked and looked at.” Geertz also suggests that new scientific knowledge and technological advances challenge our understanding of our place in the world. Herzfeld (2001: 13) agrees with Geertz, stating that a more textual turn in anthropology has forced attention onto meaning rather than onto an objectified form of “analysis of culture” that is not an “experimental science in search of law,” but is instead “an interpretive one in search of meaning.”

The interpretive turn in anthropology represents an attempt to balance the historical context through which anthropology emerges. Geertz (1988: 136-137) describes the significance of an “evoking” in the field of anthropology, over and against “representing.” He further asserts that interpretive anthropology enlarges the possibility of discourse between people “quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth and power, and yet contained in a world where...it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other’s way” (1988: 147). Geertz (1973: 5, 18) also describes culture as “webs of significance” and opines that conversations as narrative are one way to analyze such significance. It is the narratives of the Hmong women that emerge through conversations and it is those narratives which create a text to evoke a new way of viewing development practices instead of just representing them.

This turn in anthropology is worthy because it recognizes reflection as an important action in research. Geertz observes that continuous learning is inherent to anthropology because “at each stage, in each place, on each occasion, one is presented

with a wild multiplicity of individuals, groups, and groups of groups trying to hold their lives together in the face of change, circumstance, and...one another” and one must “‘examine’ ... ‘investigate’ it, or even ‘research’ it,” not to become part of it so much “as [to] circumambulate it” (2005: 13). It is expected that that in research, each person is present and no longer an observer. Fabian (2001: 6, 8, 29) alludes to the importance of the theory of ethnography in the revealing and creation of knowledge that reflects on the “time” of place, “on moments in production of knowledge...in which we must take positions...what drives and moves us when we produce and communicate knowledge.” To acknowledge the importance of the other, the self must see them self in relation to the other and understand that the position they take is as important as is the position that the other takes. We are always in relation with other people.

Herda (1999: 9-10) describes more specifically the implication of the critical turn in the anthropological approach to research. She states that “as researchers, we are always already in relationship with the people with whom we carry out our inquiry” and that to “recognize the summons is to recognize the nature of critical hermeneutic participatory research.” This recognition transforms the approach to the issues investigated, as well as the position of the researcher in that investigation. “The researcher moves from a position of neutral observer or social advocate to a position of being within a transformative act with others.” Herda’s viewpoint establishes the critical hermeneutic orientation of the participatory approach of this study in that “our being in the world is revealed historically in and through language as discourse.”

Through the interpretive anthropological approach to research, language is no longer a tool or structure in which to bind us to “designated acts outside of our being and

apart from our history.” Instead, language becomes a medium through which we can connect to others in historical and current communities that have a future (Herda 1999: 10). Through the course of this research, language does not create a place in which to find a voice, but instead creates a place that is culturally intertwined, socially constructed, and contested in practice-- a place that is dynamic, a place that matters to both the participants and the researcher.

### **Interpretive Orientation toward Development**

The current situation in Laos lends itself to a dyadic relationship between the government, both local and international, and the people of the country. The bifurcated relationship between the government and the people permit no mutual respect for the self and the other and “using such narrow channels, one can hardly succeed in the new paradigm of reaching understanding” (Habermas 1998: 6). Escobar (1995: 44) postulates that “development was—and continues to be for the most part—a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of ‘progress.’” Development was not a concept born with culture in mind but was instead designed as a system “of more or less universally applicable technical interventions intended to deliver some ‘badly needed’ goods to a ‘target’ population.” According to de Rivero, the “myth of development” is the Darwinist view that, with evolutionary certainty, change will occur and underdeveloped areas will find their potential and begin to live as a “society with high living standards” (2001: 117).

Theories of development continue to exist today because development represents an ideal of justice and equality and a representation of a materially better life. Those who

share this view of development do not realize how damaging it is, nor do they realize that development is not just about the struggle or fight against poverty. Such a viewpoint limits the view to dealing with day-to-day crises and refusing to face this reality damages the intended recipients of such efforts. The critique of development is more urgent than ever, and it is not a matter of “prettying” it up or portraying it as “the management of the environment” or the “struggle against poverty” (Rist 2002: 257), which are two commonly presented paradigms used to justify one-sided efforts. The goal of the critique must be to look at the fundamentals and basic premises that undergird the theories of development in question. According to Rist, “human motivations are too diverse to be reduced to some ‘one size fits all’ rationality” (2002: 258).

Taking an interpretive orientation toward development requires a paradigm shift in order to view development as a way of working, thinking, and communicating in a community. The significance of such a shift challenges our sense of place. In this sense, development centers around culturally shaping new understandings and knowledge rather than presenting an objective form of knowledge or effecting a one-way transfer of knowledge from giver to receiver. According to Verhelst, many indigenous cultures have been degraded by “models of social change based on consumption, competition, acquisition, and on the manipulation of human aspirations” (1990: 19). He argues that “the real tragedy of ‘underdevelopment’ is that of the gradual destruction of consciousness, by forcing people into dependency. The resulting disintegration or destruction of society may go as far as an internalized negation of one’s self and thus of one’s real vitality” (1990: 61).

## Summary

The literature review indicates that throughout history, no matter how challenging development has been for both the country of Laos and the Hmong community that live within its borders, sustainability has always been possible. A paradigm shift, however, could offer Laos and the Hmong a world beyond sustainability. The review of philosophical and theoretical literature suggests that a study of language and voice as a place in development offers possibilities that can improve living conditions for communities of people where individuals have the knowledge, capabilities, and opportunities to live and work in new ways. This study is not about identifying or establishing one voice, one place, one story, or even one means for development in Laos. This research, grounded in a critical hermeneutic orientations using an interpretive anthropological approach allows individual voices to be revealed, voices that identify emerging meaningful places to create and shape development.

While the critical hermeneutic orientation establishes the aim and possibilities for development, an interpretive anthropological approach focuses more on what happens to that goal in the social-cultural, economic, and political realities. Chapter Four proceeds with an overview that is a culmination of both this orientation and approach in the research process and protocols.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE RESEARCH PROCESS

#### Introduction

This research was conducted from the perspective of interpretive anthropology with selected theories drawn from a critical hermeneutic orientation. The specific process and protocols were appropriated from Herda's (1999: 85-138) orientation to participatory hermeneutic inquiry. The following section describes the process that I used for this study, covering: theoretical framework-research orientation; research protocol; pilot field study; learning and implications; timeline and research journal; and the background of the researcher.

#### Theoretical Framework - Research Orientation

This research derived its theoretical orientation from critical hermeneutics, utilizing an interpretive anthropological approach through participatory inquiry. The balance between this orientation and approach established a theoretical framework that focuses on revealing theory in practice. For example, the stories of the Hmong women who are living in Laos emerged in conversations and formed the primary basis for reflection through the theoretical categories of identity, mimesis and action.

The following are key concepts related to the process and protocols of participatory inquiry. Herda (1999: 55) explains that the ontological thread woven through the theories of Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Habermas provide an opening for the practical application of field-based hermeneutic research and the development of community. She further (1999: 57, 60) describes understanding as not an achievement but an unfolding in time through possibilities, through which the potential of a person is



disclosed. A better understanding of the self and others in their tradition and culture thus enables a new understanding about an issue, problem, or question. When reaching for new understandings, learning is “associated with critique, recognizing mistakes and choosing another way of thinking about or doing something” (Herda 1999: 67). This learning guides critical social research toward meaning that opens future possibilities.

By solely “relying on analytic or objective reasoning [the research] neutralizes anything that appears meaningful” (Herda 1999: 80). In the hermeneutic orientation, inquiry requires that we “learn a deeper understating of one’s own interests and purposes as another’s interpretation is revealed,” and that “we...[use] our knowledge and understandings to aid in shaping the future and interpreting the past with a preorientation that we will use this knowledge to create new possibilities for the future” (Herda 1999: 81-82).

### **Research Protocol**

The purpose of participatory research is to “create conditions whereby people can engage in discourse so that truth can be recognized and a new reality can be brought into being” (Herda 1999: 82). The beginning part of the research protocol involves entrée to the research site, research categories and language. The next section describes the research site, research conversation guidelines and questions, and the research conversation participants. The last portion of the research protocol discusses the data collection and text creation along with the data presentation and analysis.

### **Entrée to the Research Site**

This research took place in Laos and Thailand. The participants of this research were identified through electronic searches on the Internet and referrals to me by

professional colleagues. The initial contact with participants was in person to conduct the research inquiry. It was not possible to follow-up with the participants due to restraints on communications as a result of geography and language.

In May and June of 2008, I took a trip to Laos and Thailand from my home in the United States. This was my second trip to Southeast Asia. My first trip to Thailand took place in May and June of 2007 to establish contacts and to explore a potential site for research. On the most recent trip, I had formal research conversation in three locations: one conversation took place in Thailand with a Hmong woman whose family was originally from Laos; one conversation took place in the United States with a Hmong woman who was in the country visiting family members for a few months; and the rest of the conversations took place in Lao PDR.

In anthropological fieldwork, it is not always possible to know all formal participants at the beginning of work. I arranged formal conversations prior to my departure for Laos and Thailand. Each formal participant received the following communications in the sequence of our interactions:

- A letter of invitation, which described the research focus and what is required, and offer possible guiding questions and topic themes, as shown in Appendix A.
- A letter of confirmation once the research conversation date and time had been established, as shown in Appendix B.
- A consent form to be signed by each research participant, as shown in Appendix C.
- A follow-up letter of appreciation and thanks followed the research conversation, shown in Appendix D, along with the transcription of our conversation.
- A summary of research findings at the completion of analysis and writing.

In addition to the formal conversations, I anticipated and later experienced that a number of informal conversations would provide additional valuable data. I used my journal to record these and this experience and subsequent record provided further text for analysis.

## **Research Categories**

Based on my readings of theoretical and development literature prior to my research conversations, I chose three categories that I felt would guide my research. The categories that served as data collection boundaries for my research became identity, care and action. After transcribing my research conversations, only two of the three categories seemed to fit my data. I then changed the category of care to mimesis because mimesis allowed for a more full analysis. I subsequently analyzed the data from the perspective of the research categories of identity, mimesis and action. Each of these categories explored a particular inquiry into the research topic. Conversation texts were specifically analyzed to discern how Hmong women created and sustained their life work of improving the living conditions for themselves and others through the telling and retelling of their stories and how action influenced possibilities in building development capabilities. From this perspective, I analyzed conversation texts for the possibility of creating a public space in which to broaden the dialogue on development processes. These three categories thus created a critical and interpretive framework through which to reveal Hmong women's voices through their stories, and create a place through which to hold a discourse on development that incorporates the self and the other.

### **Identity**

Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity provided the framework for exploration of the research inquiry and helped to give voice a place in identity. This study focused on two descriptions within Ricoeur's theories of selfhood: reciprocal relations and deliberations. He suggests that in our reciprocal relationships and in our deliberations in our work, we reveal a place for voice in our identity. The significance of voice having a

place in identity lies in the selection of the aim of our work, for in that process we also give voice to the “other.” In the work of development, the other is essential to the self in the affirmation of an identity and in reading the actual and future possibilities of a community.

Ricoeur (1992) developed his theory of selfhood in the a priori of the other over the self in the context of Heidegger’s condition of possibility. His theory is largely based on an ontological orientation to language in which identity emerges and develops in what he calls the reflective nature of selfhood. He notes that people live in changing environments and his theory on narrative identity consequently has two parts: *idem*-identity (sameness) and *ipse*-identity (selfhood). Ricoeur (1992: 35-38) suggests that it is within language that identity emerges, in the narrated threefold figuring of time, of being always situated in a history, and of the present in the light of future possibilities. The *ipse*-identity is not dependent on something permanent for its existence and allows for change in the identity through time, while the *idem*-identity is thought to be dependent on consistency that can be repeated and re-identified through time. Herda (1997: 37) explains that sameness is the part of the identity that is uninterrupted and remains stable in time; it is a “set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized.” Selfhood, on the other hand, is the part of the identity that refers to the relationship between the dyad of self as the same and selfhood. Selfhood is defined as the self and the other, where “other” does not necessarily mean another person, even though that is and can be part of it. It also includes the relation of the self to one’s body and to the conscience, along with a relationship to and sense of those other than our self. The two identities overlap in the narrative, suggesting that the self is constant and yet also dynamic, changing through

time and yet always in reference to the past and present. To imagine a future, one's identity must be able mediate the past and future. It is through mimesis, guiding category two, that identity is revealed in the act of narrating.

### **Mimesis**

Ricoeur 1991 explains that humans, in a sense, are characters in a plot of their creation. The plot, or more precisely, the emplotment, is not static in structure, moving through order and disorder. It is dynamic and draws a meaningful story from events, brings together factors of similarity, and reveals a glimpse of one's story as a whole so that it can be followed. The emplotment of a person comes to fruition only in the living receiver of the story. It contains scattered events and when looked at as a whole, can create a new paradigm in which a person can imagine or re-imagine a new way of being. It is through the living receiver that the story and plot can be listened to, retold, and changed. The story is either reinvented over and over again or it will die, as is human nature. A story is always complex and understanding only comes from following the story and gradually making adjustments as it unfolds until its conclusion. Thus there are two ways in which others are related to the self: first, in the way in which narrative identity is refigured in the variation of imagination and, second, in how histories are intertwined between one's self and others.

Because stories are told and life is lived, Ricoeur (1991) points out that a bridge needs to be made to close the gap in the paradox. He does this by explaining that the text does not control the composition and reconfiguration, but that the reader does and in life it is the living receiver of the narrative that makes reconfiguration possible. "It seems that our life, enveloped in a single glance, appears to us as the field of a constructive activity,

deriving from the narrative intelligence through which we attempt to recover (rather than impose from without) *the narrative identity which constitutes us*" (Ricoeur 1991: 436).

The narrative identity is subjective and the composition of it alone allows for creativity. It permits innovation and re-interpretations so that a person can become the narrator of their own story without becoming the author of their lives (Ricoeur 1991).

Humans make sense of their identities through their past and future to understand their present. Ricoeur's (1984, 1985, 1988) concept of mimesis creates links between narrative and time; unless a person reclaims their past to understand and re-imagine it, they cannot create a new future. Mimesis is three-fold: present-past (mimesis<sub>1</sub>), present-present (mimesis<sub>2</sub>), and present-future (mimesis<sub>3</sub>). Mimesis<sub>1</sub> is a past. It contains a pre-figured life where a person's traditions, assumptions, goals and motives exist. Mimesis<sub>1</sub> is "the world of everyday action already characterized by a meaningful conceptual network that makes narrative possible" (Herda 1999:76). It represents a pre-understanding for human action in various forms. A past must exist so that it can reconfigured.

Mimesis<sub>2</sub> is the present and opens "the kingdom of the as if" (Ricoeur 1984: 64). It has a mediating function and where learning about what came before and after a person's story happens. Ricoeur explains that mimesis<sub>2</sub> "mediates between the world we already have come to -- already characterized by certain actions and cultural artifacts -- and the world we can imagine ourselves inhabiting" (Herda 1999:77). Mimesis<sub>2</sub> is where a person reflects, understand that they belong to history, and where they distance themselves from it when it is in the narrative form so as to create a new understanding.

Mimesis<sub>3</sub> is the future. This is where the relationship between narrative and time becomes most important. Herda 1999 explains that mimesis<sub>3</sub> is the intersection between

the text, the reader, and an imaginary world that a person might inhabit. Without imagination of a future, a person can never live in a world that differs from their current world.

All three stages of mimesis are interwoven, which contains creative activity. Of the three, the most important stage is mimesis<sub>3</sub> for the simple fact that it gives a person a new possibility for living that is in reference to mimesis<sub>1</sub>. Ricoeur (1984) refers to the three stages of mimesis as the "circle of mimesis" in which the end point seems to lead back to the beginning.

With interpretation and reinterpretation of past experience, a person can disconnect from their past so that a new future can be created and they can have action, guiding category three, in the present. The telling of a story creates a gap between the person and the story, which allow for time for reflection and new stories that speak of our past, present and future. Life can only be understood properly by being retold.

### **Action**

Ricoeur (2005: 253) states that being able to act calls "for the same kind of complement as does self-designation in the dimension of being able to speak." In the mere telling of a story, an individual acts. Narrative has power, and by weaving together events and characters, it calls for an ear, "a power to hear, a reception." By exercising the power to recount events, the individual causes those events to happen in a new physical and social world, creating an interactive setting for others in which they can take on "the role of obstacle, helper, or fellow actor, as in meetings where it is sometimes impossible to isolate each person's contribution."

Through the telling of the story, "an action depends on its agent;" it can then be

said in an equivalent fashion that the story is “in the agent’s power” (Ricoeur 1992: 101). The Hmong women are given security in an opportunity to participate, think, and reason with others, which will allow for sincere interpersonal relationships within an intersubjective social space, as well as offering new understandings and new possibilities for a transformed meaning of the world to unfold. Acts of non-acting, such as not telling the stories of development, are still acts of power, though Ricoeur (2004: 502), calls these the “tragic nature of action.” The recounting of events gives rise to “retribution, reparation, absolution” and through non-actions, “forgetting develops enduring situations.” The tragedy of failing to bear witness to the stories of the Hmong women is that their voice will not find a place in the discourse of development.

The culmination of this research analysis was an interpretive assessment of the development practices in Laos from the perspective of the Hmong women and their stories of the possibilities and challenges of their life and work. "Stories of our lives speak of our character, sense of power, and the capacity to act" (Shahideh 2004: 46). Within this assessment, the theme of utopia emerged. Ricoeur (1988: 213, 215) explains that every person makes their own history but not as each of us pleases. "They do not choose for themselves, but have to work upon circumstances as they find them, have to fashion the material handed down by the past" and thus "it is precisely this tie between the historical action and a received past, which we did not make, that preserves the dialectical relation between our horizon of expectation and our space of experience (1988: 213). Subsequently, utopia enters into the discussion of action and an exploration of the theme of utopia as it relates to the actions of the Hmong women and the development workers is explored and becomes part of the analysis and findings.



## Language

Ricoeur's (1992: 16-17) philosophy of language and philosophy of action toward a hermeneutics of the Self establishes the underlying foundation for my research inquiry into development. Language is a singularly important medium for narrating and interpreting life stories, and as such is a critical component in the development of identity. But using language solely as a tool that designates a world limits its use. Clear boundaries become apparent, and restrictions introduce relativism: "there rages round the earth an unbridled yet clever talking, writing, and broadcasting of spoken words. Man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of man" (Heidegger 1971: 146). We do not just use language, but we instead exist inside of language.

Through the study of hermeneutics, language is no longer just a tool—it becomes a medium. "Language contains specific connecting units that allow us to designate individuals...in speaking of individualization rather than of individual" (Ricoeur 1992: 27). Once language is used as a medium, openness occurs and the fusion of horizons becomes possible; in this context, language allows for interpretation, imagination, and understanding. It opens the world of people to new possibilities and frees them from constraints. Ricoeur (1992: 28) proposes that "we individualize only if we have conceptualized...with a view to describing more" and says that the power of self-designation beyond the physical body "makes the person not merely a unique type of thing but a self." Through the use of language, change in the development arena can happen. It becomes a medium in which ideas can be exchanged from one person to another with flexibility as to create a new world of exploration. It is not longer just used

to convey a message, but instead used as platform in which to spring into action in community with the other.

The use of language encompasses three integrated aspects of the same moment: interpretation, understanding, and application. It is through hermeneutics that a different understanding of the use of language emerges. No longer are conversations seen as happening on a continuum or in a straight line from speaker A to speaker B; rather, they become circular, surrounding the relationship between the two speakers. Each speaker brings to the conversation their cultural maps (traditions, pre-judgments, past experiences, future dreams, etc.); through an orientation toward mutual understanding, each speaker gains comprehension of the other's worlds and creates a world of their own that includes trust, information, and shared values. At that point, acceptance and a fusion of horizon occur (Gadamer 1988).

For this research, Ricoeur's philosophy of language and action intersect as a means of revealing a unique and personal identity in action. He suggests that language is a "reflective character of the self" that corresponds with "the broader concept of the acting and suffering individual" (Ricoeur 1992: 18). Essentially, language creates a place where individuals commit to and make a call for social action. In the lives of the Hmong women, their families, and their communities, a call for action is beginning to be heard. Development efforts in Laos are changing their lives. Language is no longer just a means in which to provide instruction to the Hmong communities in Laos but is instead beginning to move toward a loop where their voices are being heard in response to developers entering into their narratives and becoming part of this communities' identity and thus in the telling of their stories. "Being, as itself, spans its own province, which is

marked off (*temnein, tempus*) by being's being present in the word...language is the precinct (*templum*), that is, the house of being" (Heidegger 1971: 132). Because we exist within language it becomes vital to understand its important and how through it we all experience the world with others. In the context of this research language is an important medium in which to experience the world and to shift the lens through which the paradigm of development is seen in relation to Hmong women.

### **Research Sites**

The research took place in multiple locations in Laos, Thailand, and the United States. In each country, I met women in a variety of places, including their places of work, their homes, and the locations where they come together. Other locations for my research conversations included governmental agencies and university campuses

### **Research Conversation Participants**

This research abides by the Human Subjects regulations of the University of San Francisco (Appendix E). Field based research requires the design of a research protocol and is carried out with people who have agreed to participate. How the data are understood and interpreted by each reader depends on what each reader brings to this text. According to Ricoeur (1982: 56), "understanding is not concerned with grasping a fact but with apprehending a possibility of being...to understand a text, we shall say, is not to find a lifeless sense which is contained therein, but to unfold the possibility of being indicated by the text." The concept of understanding as described by Ricoeur is what informs the process of this research. Most of this research took place in Laos PDR with a few conversations in Thailand and the United States. I had six formal conversations and five informal conversations. The participants in this research included:

1) Hmong women who are living in Laos, 2) a Hmong graduate student, 3) college professors and 4) professionals working in the field of development in Laos. My conversation efforts were focused on the Hmong women.

### **Formal Conversation Partners**

Below are brief descriptions of the formal conversation partners.

#### **Watsana Phrakhunanan**

I was introduced to Watsana Phrakhunanan on May 26, 2008 while I was visiting the Yellow Leaf village outside of Nan, Thailand with my classmates and Dr. Ellen Herda. Watsana is a Hmong woman whose family is originally from Laos and she has been living in the hills of Thailand for several years. She and her husband are farmers by trade, but now work as development workers.

#### **Kia Xiong**

Kia Xiong is the daughter of the Xiong Clan leader, Da. She is a young mother who lives in a low land village along the Mekong River in Laos. Her family moved down the mountain from the highlands approximately 16 years ago when they were relocated by the government to settle in a small village that they share with another clan, the Moua.

#### **Chanhxylue Payeejaluemoua**

Chanhxylue Payeejaluemoua (Juu) works as a tour guide and spends most of the year showing visitors the beauty of Laos. He is Hmong and has spent most of his life living in the highlands. In 2002, he moved down to the lower lands in search of a better life for himself and his family. Over the past six years, he has moved his immediate family and some of his extended family members down to the lower lands to live. He

supports the family on the land he worked hard to purchased just outside of Luang Prabang, Lao PDR.

### **Vanpheng Chanthaphasouk**

Vanpheng Chanthaphasouk is a Thai woman who works for the Lao Women's Union in Luang Prabang, Laos. Vanpheng's job for the union is as a manager for the Gender Resource Information and Development Centre (GRID). According to Vanpheng, the work of her organization is to enhance women's capacity for self-development and to promote the role of women in society. Her job is to focus on promoting gender equality and protecting the interests of women and their children. She works closely with Hmong women in and around Luang Prabang

### **Boua Xue Moua**

Boua Xue Moua is the aunt of Juu. Four years ago the government of Laos relocated her from the highlands to the lower lands near Luan Praban, Laos. She has struggled to make a life for herself and now owns two pieces of property, one she lives on and one she farms, both of which are close to her family.

### **Her Yang**

Her Yang lives in Na Kay, Laos. She is a Hmong woman who was relocated by the government about ten years ago from the highlands to the lower lands. Her family works as farmers on their own land. Her Yang is also a shaman and healer within her community. Before his death, her husband was the leader of her village and today she is considered to be a leader in his absence. Her Yang is the aunt of a classmate of mine, Mai Va-Ya, and I was introduced her to while she was visiting the United States.

### **Informal Conversations**

Throughout my travels in Laos and Thailand, I had informal research conversations that contributed to the data used in this dissertation. The five people that I chose to include as part of the data were ones with whom I had conversations that were significant to either the data collection or to my understanding of the Hmong culture and development efforts in Laos. The first of those conversations was with Phia, a Hmong student from Laos, who was studying at Rajaphat Loei University in Thailand. He grew up in a village in the highlands. The second conversation was with Dr. Prakob Phonngam. He is the Vice President of Loei University. He teaches and works in the development field. Vanxay Chanthadala, the third, is a merchant and student who is studying development theories at Loei University. He is Thai and is interested in changing careers and becoming a development worker. The fourth, Dr. Nathone Soouthalaat, is a medical doctor who works at a government hospital in Luang Prabang, Laos. She was born in Laos, but during the Vietnam War was sent to finish her education and experience a life without war in Thailand by her family. She spent many years in Thailand, but has since returned to Laos. The last informal conversation was with an anonymous Hmong woman merchant who I met at the night market in Luang Prabang. This woman lived in the highlands for most of her life, but had relocated a few years ago to just outside of the city by the government.

**Table 2: Conversation Partners at a Glance**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Formal Conversations</b>					
Watsana Phrakhunanan	35-45	Female	Hmong	Merchant/Farmer	Thailand (family originally from Laos)
Kia Xiong	18-25	Female	Hmong	Mother/Farmer	Laos
Chanhxylue Payeejualuemoua	18-25	Male	Hmong	Travel Guide/ University Student	Laos
Vanpheng Chanthaphasouk	25-35	Female	Thai	Manager of Gender Resource Information and Development Centre	Laos
Boua Xue Moua	75-85	Female	Hmong	Farmer	Laos
Her Yang	45-55	Female	Hmong	Farmer/Shaman	Laos/ United States
<b>Informal Conversations</b>					
Phia	18-25	Male	Hmong	Student	Laos
Prakob Phon-ngam	35-45	Male	Thai/ Cambodian	Vice President of Rajaphat Loei University	Thailand
Vanxay Chanthadala	18-25	Male	Thai	Merchant/Professor	Thailand
Nathone Soouthalaat	45-55	Female	Hmong	Medical Doctor	Laos
Anonymous	55-65	Female	Hmong	Merchant	Laos

### **Research Conversation Guidelines and Questions**

As indicated above, the three theoretical categories of identity, mimesis and action served as guidelines for the research conversations, which enabled me to explore the social-cultural, economic, and political influences on the Hmong women through their stories, thoughts, and ideas about development. The questions below or a variation of them were used to initiate conversation and to encourage the participants to tell their stories about their life in Laos and how they are or were influenced by the development

efforts of both the local and international governments. In every conversation new questions and ideas emerged as a result of the topic at hand and therefore these questions were used to guide the conversation:

Category- Identity:

1. What does development mean to you?
2. How has development touched you and your family?
3. What is different about you and your life in this new place (geographic)? What is the same?

Category- Mimesis:

1. Can you tell me about your past experience with development?
2. How is living in this new place different than your old place?
3. How do you envision your future?

Category- Action:

1. In what ways do you like or dislike your "new" life?
2. When you were first moved down the mountain, what did you think, feel or do? Has that changed over the years?
3. What will you do to see that your vision of the future happens?

### **Data Collection and Text Creation**

I collected data through recorded conversations that were then transcribed. Additionally, I kept a research journal to record observations and reflections throughout the research proceedings, including the documentation of all informal conversations, which became another source of data available for analysis.

Prior to all conversations, permission was secured for both tape-recording and the use of data, along with the participant's name, in the dissertation and subsequent publications. The conversations were held in English, Lao or Hmong depending on the preference of the participant. An interpreter was used if the chosen language was Lao or Hmong. The texts created from the conversations were used for the analysis. Other data were also collected from articles, documents, books, and Internet sites originating in Laos, Thailand, and the United States.



## **Translation**

Communication with all of the conversation partners required the use of translators during my travels to Laos and Thailand and in the United States. Each translator was familiar with my research topic and at times contributed to the conversations.

## **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The data analysis followed the protocol delineated by Herda (1999: 98-100) as outlined below:

- Development of categories and themes that are relevant to the conversations' texts, with the anticipation that some of the initial categories may be altered as new understandings emerge from the research process.
- Transcription of taped conversations to fix the discourse.
- Examination and identification of significant statements in light of the theoretical framework of critical hermeneutics and interpretive anthropology.
- Provision of the opportunity for follow-up conversations with participants and other contacts.
- Review of conversation texts and other data for groupings of themes and sub-themes within each category.
- Identification of learning experiences and new understandings of participants that take place during the research process.
- Review of the data for emerging implications and topics that might merit further research.

Data analysis was divided into three sections: the preliminary analysis, the secondary analysis, and the interpretive assessment and implications. The preliminary analysis of data is descriptive and tells the story, placing greater emphasis on data and less emphasis on theoretical discussion. It reveals the narrative identities of the Hmong women. The second analysis, a critical examination of the text—the women's stories—was from the interpretative perspective. In the last section of the data analysis, research implications, a deeper plot was discovered that allowed new understandings to emerge and new possibilities to be opened to reveal distinct influences and communicative

conditions that encourage and hinder the Hmong women in the development of Laos. The specific recommendations and implications reflect the women's knowledge, experiences, ideas, and their relationships with those in need.

### **Research Journal**

According to Herda (1999: 98), the journal that is kept by the researcher is the “life-source of the data collection process for in it goes the hopes, fears, questions, ideas, humor, observations, and comments of the researcher.” Herda further explains that the journal shows changes over time in the researcher's understanding of both the process and the theory. The challenge in the appropriation of these traditions comes from the need to reveal a “world picture.” Heidegger (1977: 118, 129) states that such a “world picture” does not refer merely to what something is. It is “also a picture of what is set before us, is represented to us, and what stands before us in all that belongs to it and all that stands together in it – as a system.” It is not a picture of the world; instead, it is the world conceived and grasped as picture. “Man will know that which is incalculable, only in creative questioning and shaping out of the power of genuine reflection” (Heidegger 1977: 136). Reflections through the process of this research is “an opening up of possible new actions in the real worlds of our lives and organizations” (Herda 1999: 77).

### **Research Timeline**

I conducted the pilot study, which set the stage for this research, in November of 2007. I successfully defended my proposal in April of 2008. I conducted my literary research and data collection from May 2008 to November 2008 and began the data analysis and dissertation writing in October 2008, concluding it in February 2009. The defense is in April 2009.

### **Pilot Field Study**

For my pilot study, in November 2007, I chose to have a conversation with Chai Xiong, who is Hmong and was born in Northern Laos. To view the full transcripts of this conversation, refer to Appendix F. Chai immigrated to the United States at the age of ten. His immediate family has lived in the United States since about 1985, though his extended family remains in Laos. This initial conversation was intended to test how well the questions engaged Chai in conversation about the topic and analysis categories. This experience created a practical opportunity to see whether the chosen categories provided the right emphases for the research.

The pilot conversation was held on November 3<sup>rd</sup> with Chai, who works as a Senior Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor with the California State Department of Rehabilitation. Chai has many family members still remaining in Laos and is interested in developmental practices there. For many years, he and his father have worked to improve the living conditions of his family and their communities. The questions for the pilot conversation were geared toward general themes to determine whether my choice of country would work for further research, and also to discern whether the current literature was correct regarding the Hmong and the development efforts of the government.

My first goal was to ensure that I was grounded in the realities of the Hmong in Laos. At this point, I was unsure whether I wanted to focus on the Hmong in general or further focus my research on Hmong women. The second goal of this pilot conversation was to practice undertaking an authentic conversation instead of a question-and-answer interview. The ability of the researcher to enter into authentic conversations is crucial in a hermeneutically oriented inquiry. Only through authentic conversations can the research

and conversation partners share values and find a common ground upon which further research conversations can be explored. This kind of conversation is difficult to achieve; it was through this pilot conversation that I realized the importance of knowing my topic, as well as being open to my conversation partner and the conversation's potential trajectories.

When asked about the Hmong women in the communities of the hills of Laos, Chai spoke very little about them; he was more interested in speaking about the men in the communities. I attempted twice to shift the conversation back to the women, but was unsuccessful; the importance of this proposed research was thus confirmed. In those moments in the conversation with Chai, I decided to focus on the Hmong women and their stories of development. The Hmong women are not being heard—nor, in some instances, even acknowledged. It is most crucial to me, as a researcher, to explore the stories of these women and use my research to feature the importance of their experience to development. I am also aware that a Hmong-American conversation partner may not be representative of people in Laos; however, this conversation permitted the opportunity to begin the research process.

### **Background of the Researcher**

The world has been a space for exploration since I was eighteen years old. I started my travels by working as a merchant mariner on commercial cargo vessels; during this time, traveling to Taiwan I was first exposed to the horrific realization that many women outside of the United States are silently crying out for help because their rights are being compromised. I had lived in the naïve bubble of American privilege, and had no idea that outside of my safe life women everywhere were being treated egregiously in

the darkness, where most do not question what is going on.

I have since traveled to many locations throughout the world and discovered that inequality in all forms for both genders and many ethnic groups is taking place everywhere, often in the most beautiful locations. It is through the exploration of what lies beyond the surface that I am given the opportunity to see through the glossy exterior. It was not until I began my study at the University of San Francisco that I was able to explore my identity beyond my pre-figured world and reconfigure that identity by embracing critical and interpretative orientations. This exploration allowed me to imagine new possibilities for action in the world for my self and the other. From the moment I began traveling the world, I have had a desire—or, as Heidegger puts it, a “thrownness,” to help, not through charity but through service. It is my hope that this research will offer entrée into the field of international development where I can contribute toward the creation of a world in which I can put into practice Ricoeur’s concepts of solicitude, in which “the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other” (Ricoeur 1992: 3).

### **Summary**

The research process and protocols emerge from the critical hermeneutic orientation and the interpretive anthropological approach to research. Through this orientation and approach, my research reveals the voices both of select Hmong women and men who helped to shape my understanding of the Hmong women's situation in the development of Laos. Ricoeur (1982: 294) tells us that “the game of telling is included in the reality told” and this was shown through my research, for it is through the process of interaction with these women that their narrative identities were revealed to me; to those

developing theory and practice; and to the women themselves, who are living in developing areas. Herda (1997: 37) explains that the character of the person remains the same throughout life's transitions, yet by the mere act of interacting with others, the character allows us to "create newness that houses the future."

The research gave me, the researcher, an opportunity to enter into a world and create a space to which I had never previously been given access. That experience allowed my research partners, Hmong women, to accomplish something similar, for we held a discourse about changing the development strategies that have thus far excluded important players. This experience was a learning opportunity that led to new understandings and "to understand, just as to act, is always a risk and does not allow the application of general rules...understanding is an adventure and, as such, contains risks" (Kearney 1996: 69). These risks are reminders that the world is not a simple place that can be broken into practical and pragmatic pieces but one that is messy and wondrous, offering many opportunities to change and rewrite.

Kearney (2002: 133) writes that "life is always on the way to narrative, but it does not arrive there until someone hears and tells this life as a story." The stories shared with me by a diverse group of Hmong women, university students, development workers, and businesspersons are presented in Chapter Five with an introduction to the research conversation partners and a presentation of the conversations data. Chapter Six follows with a secondary analysis of the data and Chapter Seven proceeds from the secondary analysis with a findings and implications and the conclusion of this research.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DATA PRESENTATION

#### Introduction

In this Chapter I present the narratives that were shared with me in the field with those whom I partnered with for this research. Mostly located in Laos, these Hmong women, educators, and project workers provided a unique perspective on issues of development, including current projects, government sponsored migrations, and access to education and healthcare, all of which offered a text for interpretation.

#### **A Chance Meeting With Tuu**

During the summer of 2007, I was ending my first trip to Southeast Asia in the small picturesque village of Sapa in Vietnam when I met a six-year-old girl by the name of Tuu. This event marked the beginning of my interest in what became my research journey and my subsequent data collection period.

I came into contact with Tuu two days before I was scheduled to leave Sapa. Wandering through the winding streets of this mountain village, a tiny child came up to me and asked me several times in a row if I would buy something from her. Several streets later, there was Tuu, still posing the same question, "will you buy from me?"

I was intrigued by Tuu and wanted to know more about her. Tuu told me that she lived a few miles outside of Sapa and came into the village for a few days at a time to sell goods that she and her family made to help support themselves. She told me that she did not remember when she started to come into town to sell these goods, but had instead just "always been doing this." We sat on a set of steps leading into a store talking while my friends finished their shopping. Tuu described to me how her family had been asked by

the government to move to lower lands before she was born. She told me that her mom "misses home but that our new home is where we will be forever and we are trying to make a better life." When I asked her if she felt she had a better life, she replied,

I don't know any other life. My family moved down here before I was born so it is a good life to me. My mom is sad sometimes, but we are Hmong and we do what we can. At least here we can sell our goods.

In those few minutes with Tuu I decided I wanted to study the Hmong. I was drawn to this child, her strength, her spirit, and her intelligence. Everything about Tuu was counter to what I had heard about Hmong people while traveling throughout Southeast Asia. When anyone spoke of the Hmong, it was with a tone of distaste, distrust and dismissal.

It was upon my return to the United States that my research topic evolved to be focused on Hmong women living in Laos. What follows is an introduction to the Hmong women and men, development workers, educators, and students that I partnered with in this research along with their voices revealed through the stories they shared with me. It is through their stories that I present a new way of looking and engaging in development efforts and discourse. It is their stories, my story and your story that make our lives worth living...what make our condition *human*" (Kearney 2002: 3).

### **What Does Development Mean to You?**

The one question that I asked each of the research participants in one form or another was "what does development mean to you?" Throughout this research, I have been hard pressed to find a universal meaning of development and it was always interesting to hear the responses to that question because within each response the dynamic, if somewhat overwhelming, nature of the word was revealed. To some participants, development is seen in affirmative ways (an act that is done to others) and to



others it was projective (unfairly distributed). It was through the discussion of what development was that each participant not only shared the stories of how development touched their lives but also how they were different or the same. While I met Tuu, by chance, I sought my conversations with Dr. Prokob Phon-ngam and Vanzay Chanthadala because both work in the development field.

### **Dr. Prakob Phon-ngam and Vanzay Chanthadala**

When I arrived in Thailand I sat down with Dr. Prakob Phon-ngam and Vanzay Chanthadala, both of whom worked at the Rajaphat Loei University, to talk about their work in the development arena. Prokab and Vanzay worked both as educators and development workers for many years. The conversation started with the question of "what does development mean to you?" For Prokab and Vanzay, development is conceptual, an ideal belief in the pursuit of equality and as thus their responses to the question were similar in nature. Dr. Phon-ngam stated, "development means to close the gap and to work toward being equal." Vanzay stated something similar, "development means to give everyone, the ethnic minorities, everyone the chance to be equal. It is development that allows everyone to receive the same type of services in the same manner." When questioned further on the idea of equality and if equality was present in the process of development, Dr. Phon-ngam did admit that there were development was a flawed process but still insisted "that development of the ethnic groups needed to happen with diligence." Vanzay felt similarly but was so blunt as to say that the "ethnic groups in both Thailand and Laos need to live at a certain standard like the rest of the country."

My conversations with Vanzay and Dr. Phon-ngam happened prior to my conversations with Hmong women in their communities. I will admit to being a little

affronted by how whitewashed their descriptions of development were. From what I had read, the development process is anything but equal and instead "assumes the human ability to influence and control the natural and social environment" along with treating it as a linear process rather than cyclical because the notion of development "implies a notion of historical change derived from western European secular and scientific thought" (Charlton 1997: 7). It was but a few days later that I met Watsana Phrakhunana, a Hmong woman, who worked in development at a grass-roots level and Vanpheng Chanthaphasouk, who worked for the Lao Women's Union. I began to see that there were people working in development helping others who saw the importance of flexibility, working in partnership, and who also recognized the importance of culture in the process of development.

### **Watsana Phrakhunana**

Watsana Phrakhunana is a Hmong woman whose family is originally from Laos and she has been living in the hills on the border of Laos; technically, she and her family actually live in Thailand. Watsana works closely with a small group of people called the Yellow Leaf. She and her husband are farmers by trade, but now work as development workers and have been working with the Yellow Leaf for many years. While sitting on a bench in the communal area of the village, Dr. Ellen Herda introduced me to Watsana and her daughter. Watsana refers to the Yellow Leaf People as "her family" and their village as her "second home."

What fascinated me about Watsana was that she is Hmong, a member of an ethnic minority group considered to be low on the cultural and socioeconomic ladders in both Laos and Thailand and often times the focus of development work, and she is a part of

the development arena that has targeted her people for years. She also works with a group of people who are often times mistreated by the government, just as her people were and in some cases still are. When describing her experience of being developed she states;

WP: Yes, it is true. We have been mistreated. In the past we have been really disrespected because the Thai people see themselves as people who are developed and they have no respect for us. They look down at us because they think we do not have an education. They call us “Miao”, which means cats in [the] Hmong [language]. This is very degrading and wrong. But now that the children are going to school and getting degrees, the Thai people are starting to respect us.

KM: Who has mistreated you?

WP: The government and the Thai people. In the past they have treated us very bad.

KM: Where does this disrespect come from?

WP: Because we are not educated. They do not like us.

KM: How do they treat you today?

WP: Today is better. Life with the Thai is better. We get more respect. In the past two years, the children are receiving the knowledge from a good education. The Thai people are starting to see my children and know them. They are gaining the Thai people’s respect and life has gotten better. It has not been too long, but it is better now that the children are going to school.

We continued to discuss whether her people, the Hmong, were still a target of development efforts in the region and what development meant to her personally. For her, development has been a process that both benefits and targets the Hmong. Watsana stated;

WP: They do not help us. We are on our own.

KM: Have they helped you in the past?

WP: When we weren’t quite developed yet, the government helped. But we stand on our own now and they are helping the Yellow Leaf now. We don’t need them anymore and the Yellow Leaf do. We are developed now and we are not their focus. The government gives the Yellow Leaf animals...chickens and a few oxen. Farm animals to help.

KM: What does development mean to you?

WP: For me, I am getting old and this is not a major concern for me, but it means a better life. I worry for my children. This means a better life for them and an education so they can change their way of living and have a better future.

During the conversation, I felt the struggle Watsana had endured through the development efforts targeted at her family due to the mistreatment from the government, both Lao and Thai, and also by locals in each country. She spent several years exposed to others who thought and stated that she was beneath them in status because she was Hmong and as such did not deserve the same opportunities in life as they did. The amazing part of the conversation was to hear that Watsana does not harbor hard feelings toward the government that imposed conditions that ultimately changed the course of her life.

WP: I do not feel angry, but I do feel that I should lead as a good example. I have forgiven them because I feel that they don't know. They don't understand the Hmong people and that is why they treat us that way. There are still other Hmong people that have a lot of angry toward the Thai people, but I forgive them...I feel that there is an opportunity for everyone and it is up to the children to make the choices ...I see a better future for my children.

She spoke of development as making her life better and it was through that same vein that she wanted to help not only the Yellow Leaf People to have a better life, but also her family. Watsana spoke frequently of her children's future, moving forward and telling the stories of the past. She told me that she makes "change for my myself because I want my children to have a better life" and that she is "leading my children into a better life." She genuinely wants to help and knows that the work she does in partnership with the Yellow Leaf People will make a difference and was being done in an ethical way always in relation to the other. For example, she works closely with the chief of the Yellow Leaf People to secure educational opportunities for the children, to determine the land needs of

the community and how to farm said land, along with teaching families to build lasting structures for living.

### **Vanpheng Chanthaphaouk**

In contrast to the work that Watsana does at a grassroots level, Vanpheng Chanthaphasouk, a Thai woman, works for the Lao Women's Union in Luang Prabang, Laos. Vanpheng's job for the union is as a manager for the Gender Resource Information and Development Centre (GRID). According to Vanpheng, the work of her organization is to enhance women's capacity for self-development and to promote the role of women in society. Her job is to focus on promoting gender equality and protecting the interests of women and their children. She works closely with Hmong women in and around Luang Prabang.

I met Vanpheng by accident. Prior to leaving for the trip, I had arranged to meet a woman by the name of Ms. Champheng for a research conversation. Ms. Champheng works for the Lao Disabled Women Development Center in connection with the Lao Women's Union. Upon our arrival in Luang Prabang, I quickly realized there was a miscommunication and Ms. Champheng would not be available to speak to me while I was in Luang Prabang because she was working in Vientiane. Through this discovery, I was introduced to Vanpheng. It was pouring rain outside and she had been in the field working with a group of Hmong women in a nearby village. It was a moment of perfect timing because as soon as I discovered that Ms. Champheng and I had missed each other by a few days, Vanpheng walked in shaking the rain from her umbrella. We sat down and she graciously took time out of her day to tell me about herself, her job and the Union.

While it continued to rain heavily outside, Vanpheng and I shared a cup of coffee together and talked about her work as a manager for the Lao Woman's Union.

Vanphang's approach to development was an interesting mix of viewing development as conceptual just as Prokab and Vanxay did and also as a process that both benefits and targets people. She stated that she was in the business of promoting "unity" and working toward "improving the lives of women, their status." Her work does not focus on one community, but instead all women of ethnic minority groups, teaching them about gender equality. A great number of the women that she works with are Hmong. Her focus is to "make sure that the women are participating in the community." Through her interactions with the women, she teaches them "things to help them with their lives and skills for work" along with teaching them sixteen topics, including "gender equality, gender awareness, labor...gender sensitive planning." The sixteen topics that are taught to the women through the Union are a result of funding awareness. It is the funding that the Union receives that drives their work with the women, so they must at all times be cognizant to ensure these topics are taught to the women. Vanphang stated that "if we have the money" they do the work but there are times when they do not have the money and so cannot do the work. "We need it to do our work and to help the women." Although money is a driving force in the work of development and to keep it they must focus on issues of gender equality, Vanphang is quick to point out that that is not all they focus on and that "we realize the situation is not good for these women and their family. We work closely with them to help them get the things they need...we want to teach them to have a better life and to help them see that they can have one."

The conversation with Vanpheng ended with a discussion of how she viewed her work and her feeling on the field as a whole. She believes in the work she does and sees the benefits of it but also understands that it is not perfect and work is needed to meet the needs of the women she works with.

VC: They are my friends and I do what I can to help them. It took me a long time, but I am happy with the women I know and they are happy with me. I feel that I do good work with them.

As Vanpheng walked me to the door, she told me that the research I was doing was "good and to make sure I do it with the women in my mind and in my heart." At that moment, I smiled and thanked her for her time. Only a few hours later, as I sat down to talk with Boua Xue Moua, did I realize what Vanpheng meant. As Habermas (1984: 100) states, "the interpretative task consists in incorporating the other's interpretation of the situation into one's own in such a way that in the revised version 'his' external world and 'my' external world can --against the background of 'our' lifeworld --be relativized in relation to 'the' world." In that moment I was no longer an observer trying to be a part of it. I was now felt a part of it.

### **The Past and The Future**

In most of the conversations I had with the participants, the importance of the past and the future were revealed. Within each conversation I engaged the participants about, their past experiences with development; how their new place of living differed from the old place; and how they envision their future. For three participants in particular, Chanhxylue Payeejaluemoua, Her Yang, and Dr. Nathone Soouthlalaat, the past and the future were paramount in the conversations.

## **Chanxylue Payeejaluemoua**

Whether we are aware of it or not, every one of us plays a dynamic and crucial role in shaping the structures and processes of our lives. Herda (1999: 25) states "our words are what contribute to creating the world we live in, rather than developing to fit the world." Chanxylue Payeejaluemoua, called Juu for short, was the guide for the group I was traveling with during my trip to SE Asia in 2008. He pointed out on many occasions that no matter where he was in the world or what he was doing, he would always be Hmong and he honored that in his actions and words.

I will never truly be like the city people. What I mean is that I come from a place where I sleep on the dirt ground. No matter where I am, I will always sleep on the ground. That is who I am. I can share my meal with the poor, poor people. I can work besides the poor people. I can go and live in the remote places. That is where I come from and I can and always am a part of that. That will never change about me. I will go to school and live a better life, change, but I will still be from the mountains.

Juu grew up in the highlands of Laos. In 2000 he came down to the city to find work and has been working as a travel guide since then. He wanted to help provide a better life for his family and has worked hard to save money, buy land, and move his family down to live in an area just outside of Luang Prabang. Juu explained to me throughout the conversation that development was a way of life in Laos for more people than just the Hmong. "We need to improve...better education...better health...roads and access to [services]. We are all equal and all need to improve." He further emphasized the importance of receiving an education,

for life. No education, no better life. If you have an education you know how to live, how to stay and how to go bye-bye. If no education, you only know how to stay and your life is on the farm. You stay in the same place all the time. You depend on other things and people for your life. If you have an education and a job, you don't have to work [for others]. Your life is your own to live. Now it is



my job to tell the younger ones to get an education to have a better life. Everyone should go to school no matter if they are boys or girls.

The government is working hard to develop the country and right now the focus is the lower lands, but they will eventually work their way up the mountains. In the meantime, the government is encouraging those that live in the higher lands to move to lower lands for better resources.

Yes, if they are educated anyone in Laos can be president. There is an opportunity to do that. But to develop, in some places it is difficult. Does not always just happen to Hmong people. If the Lao people live in remote areas it is the same for them. They have a hard time getting access to things. Doesn't matter what ethnic group you are, if you are not close to the city it is difficult to be developed. So, some time they are not equal because of their locations. I think that the main thing is that the people who work are not getting a good pay. They have a low check and that makes it hard too. That's the main thing.

Juu spoke of the need to develop certain areas of the country because of the harsh conditions in which people are living without access to certain things that those in the lower lands can take advantage of.

To get an education. There are not roads for all seasons when you live in the mountain. There are only one season that the roads can be traveled on. Only in the dry season. Makes it hard for them to travel and go to school. We do not have schools in the mountains. I see the women going to school, but not all the time. In the wet season the roads are slippery and dangerous. They can not travel down so they miss school. I see it in my generation. They [are allowed to] go to school, but they are not able to make it.

Along with the benefits of development work, Juu is quick to note that nothing is perfect and there is still work to be done.

It is getting better, but not still perfect. Most but not all go to school. It is easier for them because they live on the river. But up in my village it is still not easy. We are high and only one season is it safe to travel down. So, it is still hard for them. There is only one road.

Just as in other conversations I had, Juu speaks of the importance of money and what it does to help, even if not in the exact way that it should.

They start from the city and then work up to the remote area. Maybe in 2020 or 2030 it might be better. Right now not good. It depends on money. If you live in remote area and you get sick you need a van to get to the hospital. If you get in trouble and go to jail, you have money you don't have to stay as long as if you don't have money. It just depends on the situation, but money is what helps. In a bit of time it will get better, hopefully.

Juu said he has always understood the benefits of moving to the lower lands. He has seen improvements in the lives of his family and his friends along with his own. He is what most would consider a supporter of the development of Laos and the Hmong people. Even though a person moves to a new area for better opportunities in life, it is crucial that they realize that they are still the same person who lived in the mountains. The environment might change, but the person will stay the same in the most important ways. Juu's comments were consistent with Gadamer's concepts of the past, for he says that it "has a truly pervasive power in the phenomenon of understanding" (1976: xv) and "...the great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future. History is only present to us in light of our futurity" (Gadamer 1976: 8-9). We must look to our past from our present position before we can begin to look toward the future because without the look back, a look forward may not be realistic.

As we traveled down the Mekong River on an old traditional large boat, toward the end of our conversation on the last day of our river journey, Juu stated that "we are now moving toward the city and will arrive in about an hour. That's me in my life. I am moving forward but still coming from my past and who I am." He knows that there is change ahead of him and the potential for a better life, but he recognizes he will never truly be from the city or like the city people.

## Her Yang

I met Her Yang, a Hmong woman in her late 40's, upon my return to the United States. She was here visiting her family for a few months. Her Yang lives in Nakay, Laos. Her family works as farmers on their own land. Before his death, her husband was the leader of her village and today she is considered to be a leader in his absence. Below is an entry from my research journal, dated June 29th, describing my introduction to Her Yang;

Before I was formally introduced to Her Yang, I was walking up to the door and I was met with the sounds of chanting from inside. With hesitation, I raised my hand to knock on the door but was interrupted in the process by a car door shutting behind me and I turned to see Mai, a classmate and Her Yang's niece, walking up the walk way. She told me to not to worry about the noise, but to go on in. As soon as I entered the house, I saw a very small elderly Hmong woman sitting on a low stool and next to her was another person chanting, waving arms and covered in a red cloth from the top of her head down. I could not make out if it was a man or a woman, but from the voice I assumed it was a woman. I had no idea what I was witnessing and it was so beyond anything I had ever seen before and I stopped in my tracks. It was wondrous and scary and fascinating all at the same time. Mai, standing behind me, started to laugh and told me that was her grandma sitting there on the stool and that the person jumping around was her aunt, the very aunt that I was there to talk with.

Her Yang is a shaman in the Hmong community in Laos. Because she was leaving soon, the family had asked her to perform a blessing and I walked right into the middle of it. Once she finished performing her ceremony, we left for a local park and proceeded to have a conversation regarding her life, being Hmong, and the development of her community.

Ten years ago, Her Yang and her family were relocated by the government from the highlands to the lower lands for development purposes. She describes this, saying

when we were first told to come down, I was a single mother. I moved down. I still had a lot of relatives from my husband's side near me and they come too. We were all forced to move down. I trusted the government and I felt that they were really trying to help me. I kept an open mind. I thought it was for the best. Now,

many of my husband's relatives were upset. They thought that they weren't given enough land. They were not were not happy with what they were given. They wanted to move to find a better place to live. I told them that I would stay where I was because I do not have a husband to help me move. Whatever I get from the government, I will do the best I can and make the best with it. I told them if they wanted to move that was fine because I would stay and live with the other people, the Lao. When they left, I was able to buy their land too, so now I have a lot of land that I own.

Her Yang talked with confidence about her development experiences but did admit that it was not easy and had not been something she wanted.

We like it now. Before when the government told us to move down we were afraid. We had heard that there was a lot of sickness and disease where they wanted us to go. People were dying there and we didn't want to go there. But now we like it. Since we moved there we have not encountered any of that. We have been healthy and lived a good life. The government has also helped us to do rice cropping. They do not want us to do slash-and-burn anymore, so we switched.

The conversation with Her Yang took an unexpected turn toward its end. Unlike other conversation I had had, Her Yang spoke of trust and knowing that there were two sides to every story.

There is probably truth to both sides of the story and I'm sure there are some good people in the Lao government that are really trying to help us. But there are also bad and corrupt people who are trying to hurt them...Just like what I read here, in our media mostly it is the bad that is spoken about so maybe that is one of the problems. There are always good and bad and we hear more about the negative. It is hard to say because we are not there to speak to both sides to really know what is going on.

Ricoeur (2004: 493) states that "once the trajectory of forgiveness has circled back to its starting point...the question arises as to what sort of gaze our reflections on the act of forgiving allow us to cast on the whole of the path." Her Yang spoke with a conviction that comes from acceptance and a reconciliation of what had happened during the years past and a hope for the future. She embodied healing and she spoke to me about

trusting in the process of development and knowing it will work out because each person has the ability to make a life that they chose.

Where we are living right now, it is stable and harmonious. There is no more fighting. There was a Hmong group that lived close by for a long time that were fighting back, but they have moved on. Since they have moved it is now us, the Hmong, and the local Laos and we are living together well. The government no longer interferes with our way of living.

Juu highlighted the importance of holding on to what makes a person Hmong. He told me that no matter where he lived or work, he would always be a Hmong from the mountains and it was in the conversations with Her Yang that I heard a similar sentiment. When she was moved down the mountain ten years ago, she moved to a new village where the ethnic groups were mixed. She lives side-by-side with Lao and Cambodian people. Every group is appreciated and honored and she says that her “family likes it there. We have friends and it is a good place to be. Does not matter what we are, it's about who we are.”

For a Hmong women, living in a community where women mostly are in a minor position, Her Yang seems to be an exception. Having no husband, she was forced to become a survivor. More than a survivor, she has become a woman living a successful life with an attitude of peace toward the others. This attitude could be considered instrumental in creating conditions under which development succeeds.

### **Dr. Nathone Soouthalaat**

With each person that I met during this research, identity was an important part of the conversation. Chanhxylue Payeejaluemoua and Her Yang spoke a lot in of the importance of their identity and fully embraced being Hmong. Nathone Soouthalaat provided a direct contrast with what I experienced with each of them. I met Nathone, a

medical doctor, at a Lao military hospital and she showed me not only the importance of identity, but also how quickly one can lose touch with it.

Juu introduced me to Nathone as the woman with no identity. I did not spend a lot of time with her because of a language barrier; however, it was not the words that were exchanged between us that were so important but the situation surrounding our meeting.

In my journal dated May 30th I wrote about our meeting;

The day started off at a military hospital where I met a Hmong medical doctor who no longer spoke Hmong. What was interesting about this meeting was that when she was introduced to me by Juu, who is also Hmong, he turned to the group, laughed and said "she's lost her identity." We all kind of laughed along with him but I didn't quite understand what he meant by that. I later realized what he meant when I went over to talk to her. I approached her to find out that she no longer spoke Hmong. Mai, who is a Hmong woman, and I were able to get a bit of information from her before she walked off. She grew up in the hills and during the war her family sent her to Vietnam to school. By sending her away, her family felt she would have a better life and encouraged her to no longer speak Hmong but instead to learn Vietnamese and Thai fluently. During this period, her family moved down to lower lands in Laos and had taken to the Lao culture wholeheartedly. Being Hmong to them was not good and they wanted a better life, so they decided the only way to do that was to forget how to be Hmong. Dr. Soouthalaat eventually came back to Laos; married to a Thai man, completely having forgotten her language of origin to work as a doctor serving the poorest communities, mostly Hmong. To Juu, language houses what it means to be Hmong and by Dr. Soouthalaat no longer speaking Hmong, she was no longer Hmong in his eyes and had hence lost her identity.

The Hmong people are being asked to change constantly by outsiders and to lose what makes them Hmong is not acceptable to most of them, but "there resides the possibility of seeing and understanding the world, and therefore one's self, differently" (Herda 1999:7). While Juu and Her Yang both expressed strong feeling of identity, there was still an evident struggle within each of them to maintain that feeling. Their environments are constantly fluctuating and each of them recognized this challenge and yet was still able to hold tight to their identities while being flexible within the change.

### **Action Today**

Action became a very important topic of discussion during all of my conversations. Without action on both the part of the Hmong women and the development workers, no movement in the direction of a so-called better life can possibly be realized. The three guiding questions that I went into each conversation with considered what my conversation partner liked or disliked about their new life; what has changed for them or what has not changed; and what were they doing to see that their life or the vision of their future was coming to fruition. Each person spoke, whether in subtle or overt ways, of action. The two participants who highlighted action the most during our conversations were Kai Xiong and Boua Xua Moua, two Hmong women farmers.

### **Kia Xiong**

Halfway through my trip down the Mekong River on a riverboat on the way to Luang Prabang, we stopped along the shore where we saw a gathering of children. When we followed the children up the hill to their homes, we discovered we were in a Hmong village that was the home to two clans, Xiong and Moua. I sat down with my interpreters to talk with the two leaders, Da Xiong and Moua Moua, while being surrounded by a large number of the villagers. It was toward the end of the conversation that I simply asked how women were treated in the village. Over the roar of laughter and instant conversations sparked by that question, one voice could clearly be heard over all the others. It was the voice of Kai Xiong, the youngest daughter of Da Xiong. About 16 years old, she emerged among the many women as the spokesperson.

KX: According to government policy, all the children and women must go to school. But from my experience, they love the boy more than they love the girl. They have more chance to go to school, because the girls are...we believe in our culture that when the girl is married, they are gone, because they will go to

another village or another family. And the boy is the person who keeps the culture.

KM: Is the future held in the boy? Is that what you think, because he will stay in the village, their future and culture is housed in the boy? Do they see their future through the boys?

KX: They want the culture and custom in the boy. We believe that once the boy gets an education, they will come back and they can be a leader in their village. The girl is gone and then they forget.

The conversation quickly shifted away from the difference between the treatment of boys and girls in the village and returned to the needs of the community as a whole. Da Xiong sees a future for his children, but that is only if they are given opportunities to go to school to learn to read and write. He said that "We want all equal...all to have education. But some don't have enough funds to do that. Not everyone can go to school. All can go to high school, but there is boat fees. The government tries to help them study in the nighttime, but they must work in the day time. So, they are tired by the time they study." In his opinion, it is through education that they can "prepare for the future." The village is poor and both Da Xiong and Moua Moua do not see an optimistic future. Moua Moua sadly stated, "we have no idea how to change our lives because there are no roads and no factory and no company or purchaser who will buy the crops."

I moved away from the group to speak with Kia. Kia Xiong is a young mother. Her family moved down the mountain from the highlands approximately 16 years ago when they were relocated by the government to settle in a small village that they now share with another clan, the Moua. She continued the previous conversation about women in the village by stating that they are "the breath that kept the community alive." Kia told me the women "kept the village alive and the children in order." She went on to tell me that the village received many visitors. They came often "from the river bearing gifts, but



not the right gifts." When I asked about the gifts and what was not right about them, Kai said that the visitors gave to the community what they felt the village needed from an uninvolved perspective. Kai recognized that this demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the community, making clear that it "was the questions they asked or didn't ask" that ultimately resulted in gifts that the village did not need. Shahideh (2004: 46) describes this as a "feeling of powerlessness" and notes that it "may derive from our disconnectedness...from each other."

To Kia, the questions asked by the visitors are paramount to anything else because with the right questions, the action can be taken and the voice of the people can be heard. It is through thoughtful questions that opportunities can be born for her community. But until those questions are asked, Kai believes that "life will be the same. We will be unhappy, poor, and unable to make a better life for our children."

### **Boua Xua Moua**

My time with Kia was bookended by my conversation with Boua Xua Moua. She continued the conversation about opportunity and action within her community. Four years ago the government of Laos relocated Boua from the highlands to the lower lands near Luang Prabang, Laos.

We started our conversation off by discussing her life in her new environment. I asked her how she liked the place she was now living because from where I was sitting looking out over a field of rubber trees, I saw land that was beautiful and peaceful. Her response snapped me into focus, for she said, "they have changed my life. I don't like it." I quickly refocused on Boua as a woman who had made a beautiful home for herself out of necessity as opposed to desire. When she showed me where she came from, pointing

up the mountain, her eyes started to glisten with unshed tears. She continued, "when they forced me down, I had only one pig and I had to sell my pig to come down. I was very angry...I loved my home and did not want to be here...they made me do this...my life is not better, but they said it would be." For Boua, her pig represented herself and by having to sell it, she felt that she has given up everything, including her life and who she was.

She poignantly told me that,

I was thinking that I had a good life up there. I was able to raise chickens and pigs and no one controlled me or my way of living. So, when I was forced down here I was not able to bring my big animals. I was able to bring a few small animals but that was it. I had to sell everything I had. I felt that my parents and my whole life...that was my whole life. I was able to live freely and raise livestock and be happy. My life ended when I moved down here. Everything changed. When I was forced down here I gave up everything, my life and who I was.

For Boua, who is perhaps 80 years old, she struggled to reconcile a move to a place that would be better than the place she had lived her life. The promise of a better life had yet to come to fruition four years later, complaining that "we do have access to hospitals and education, but we have to pay for everything. So, in a sense, it is causing us more stress because we do not have the money to pay for it even though it's there."

Through the progression of the conversation with Boua it became evident that she understood the reason why she was moved to lower lands but did not agree with them. She does not spend a lot of time discussing her future because of her age, but told me that "for my children, I can see them with a good future because they are able to go and work and make a life for themselves." She also let me know that today she is "a lot happier ...because I know that eventually I would have had to come down here. It took me a long time, but I'm happier. Everyone is being forced to move down." As Gadamer so aptly states, "horizons change for a person who is moving" (in Bernstien 1983: 143)

Boua's parting words to me were those of inspiration and hope: "if it weren't for what I have, my knowledge, of what I know I would not be able to do my life. I now have ten pigs and about 100 chickens. I am about 80 years old and I farm every day." Through action, Boua created a life she felt was worth living. "Our interactions are affected by and are driven by our knowledge of self, which is exercised through interpretation" (Shahideh 2004:37) and "often, not too many people reflect upon their way of being, or question their purpose as they go through their everyday lives...only a minority welcome the dynamics of the interplay between change and action, and use them as guidelines for reflection, self-discovery, and purpose" (Shahideh 2004:68-69). It seems that only when a person is forced to reflect on their situation because they are driven by a hardship, do they see the important connection between change and action.

### **Journaling About Utopia**

Throughout the entirety of this research, I have kept a journal. Herda (1999: 98) explains that the journal shows changes over time in the researcher's understanding of both the process and the theory. The challenge in the appropriation of these changes comes from the need to reveal a "world picture." Heidegger (1977: 118, 129) states that such a "world picture" does not refer merely to what something is. It is "also a picture of what is set before us, is represented to us, and what stands before us in all that belongs to it and all that stands together in it – as a system." Looking back through not just the transcriptions of each conversation, but also through my research journal, I realize that both are littered with comments about development and how it always seems so tightly woven together with this quest for a better life and the actions of working toward that vision. In the transcripts, I saw comments such as, "now that we are developed we do not

do that...we are no longer in the same situation...life is easier for us. We have changed and I'm happy" from Watsana; and "more is going on and I have access to roads...it took me a long time but I'm happier" from Boua. Similar statements can be found in each transcript and it was through revisiting the transcripts many times and also re-reading my journal that the theme of utopia began to surface for me as a possible hindrance to development work that was evident in relation to each of the research categories of identity, mimesis and action. "Man will know that which is incalculable, only in creative questioning and shaping out of the power of genuine reflection" (Heidegger 1977: 136). Reflections through the process of this research is "an opening up of possible new actions in the real worlds of our lives and organizations" (Herda 1999: 77). I explore the theme utopia further in the secondary analysis of Chapter Six and also in the finding section of Chapter Seven, but for the present, below is an excerpt from my research journal, dated July 1st, when the concept utopia was first formulated;

I'm sitting here listen to my research conversations and I missed so much while I was taking part of the conversations. It's amazing what you hear the second or third time around. Right now the concept of utopia keeps coming to mind each time that I hear a participant speak of action, whether it be their action or those of another. In all of the conversations that I've had for this research, I can point to one or more places where the person spoke of the idea of a "better life" or the promise of one. It seems that no matter where in the world you live, everyone is dreaming of a better life. But is it just that, an dream that is unattainable by the pure nature of it and once we open our eyes it is gone, one we can only see when we close our eyes, or is it really the drive for a better life, one that we work toward with our eyes open? I wonder if it is the better life that they will continue to move toward or will they one day arrive at this so-called better life? I tend to think that it is the former but I wonder if being moved down the mountain and being promised a better life, if the Hmong women I spoke with are awaiting one day that their life will be better or if they think that each day is better than the last because of the actions they are taking and it is a journey instead of a destiny. And on the other side of the coin, do those working in development wonder if one day the work they are doing will produce the day when life is better or if it's a process that happens over time and never truly has an end? Do visions of the utopian

better life hinder progress and produce the inherent disappointment that I have heard from most of my conversation partners?

### **Summary**

The life of a story never ends. By asking someone to share their story, it is an invitation to learn not only about its author, but also about yourself as a reader and a narrator. According to Kearney (2002: 45, 145) "it takes two to story" and "narrative is a world-making as well as a world-disclosing process." My research began by simply asking Tuu to tell me her story. Tuu invited me to participate by becoming an actor in her story. "We are subject to narrative as well as being subjects of narratives...we are made by stories before we ever get around to making our own" (Kearney 2002: 153-154).

In Chapter Six, I continue the presentation of the stories of the women and men I met during my travels in Laos and Thailand in the summer of 2008. Chapter Six is a secondary analysis of the data from the abovementioned conversations guided by the categories of identity, mimesis and action that provide an opportunity for a refiguration of development work as a text available for interpretation in the hope of moving toward a new understanding of the question of human progress. Chapter Seven proceeds from the secondary analysis with a summary of the data analysis with findings and implications, suggestions for future research and reflections from the researcher.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter Six, Data Analysis, follows the stories introduced in Chapter Five. The narratives of the people I spoke with are "living texts" that may serve as an opening to different possibilities in the field of development (Carey 2007: 27-28). These possibilities may provide a refiguration of the question of human progress using an ontological lens. Through this refiguration of the definitions of development, a new understanding can come forward as a text that may be used for interpretation.

I once read a poem by Rita Joe that plays through my head whenever I think of my travels and the experiences that I had with the Hmong women and others who were part of my research. It reads:

So I gently offer my hand and ask,  
Let me find my talk  
So I can teach about me.

It was during my time with my research participants, particularly the Hmong women, that I felt like both they and I found our voices. Their narratives offer me a space to imagine new ways of being in the world, "for while narrative imagination enables us to empathize with those characters in the story who act and suffer, it also provides us with a certain aesthetic distance from which to view events unfolding, thereby discerning 'the hidden cause of things'" (Kearney 2002:13). The women I met did not merely tell me their stories of themselves and their lives, but showed me through language a creative redescription of the world "such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold" (Kearney 2002: 12). It is through the lenses of identity, mimesis and action

that I discuss what was revealed to me through the narratives as they relate to experiences with development.

Identity and action are the strongest concepts to emerge throughout the research conversations because most of the data that I collected fell into one or both of these two categories. The category of mimesis emerged as a mediator between identity and action and as such also holds both of these concepts inherently within a larger picture. Further, through the research conversations about action and my subsequent journal observations on the same subject,, the theme of utopia surfaced. I present the following discussion in light of the categories of identity, mimesis and action with the underlying theme of utopia through which to view the collected data.

### **The Woman with No Identity**

The concept of identity plays a large role in my research and is both closely linked and at times hard to separate from mimesis. In all of my conversations, identity always arose; however, this topic took particular poignancy during my brief time with Dr. Nathone Soouthlaat.

### **Meeting Dr. Nathone Soouthalaat**

With the struggle to find identity ever present in life here in the United States of America, I was not all that surprised to find similar struggles happening a half a world away. I was immediately struck by the use of language and the implied meaning of Juu's description of "the woman with no identity." After meeting Dr. Soouthalaat, I was left with a feeling of knowing that my interaction with her was significant, but I could not understand why and it was not until I began to think of all my research conversations holistically that I began to understand her importance in my research. In all of my other

conversations, each person held tightly to their identity. They are proud to be Hmong and are excited to share with me what that means to them either by showing me their homes, meeting their family, talking with me, or simply showing me the crafts they take to the market to sell. Dr. Soouthalaat is in such contrast to that that at the time I had a hard time acknowledging her importance.

### **Always Changing, Yet Remaining The Same**

In the time that I spent with Dr. Soouthalaat, I realized she did not want to speak of her past except to tell me that she had lived a better life in Thailand and was now living in Laos close to her family. Ricoeur states (1999: 9) that we all have a duty to remember and to transmit the meaning of the events of our past to the next generation. Kearney (2002: 7) furthers this thought by stating that,

from the word go, stories were invented to fill the gaping hole within us, to assuage our fear and dread, to try to give answers to the unanswerable questions of existence: Who are we? Where do we come from? Are we animal, human or divine? Strangers, gods or monsters? Are we born of one (mother-earth) or of two (human parents)? Are we creatures of nature or culture?

Humans think, relate, and communicate through storytelling. Every person has a story. Through the narrative identity, a person makes sense of who she is and grasps her own personal characteristics, much as a character in a story, and it is through a person's stories that others can know them. Therefore, what strikes me about Dr. Soouthalaat is not what she said, but what she chose not to say.

To learn about each other, we all share stories about ourselves in relation to our family, our childhood, the years we spend in school, and other experiences that have happened to us. These stories are told and retold, imagined and re-imagined, worked and reworked, much like the draft of a novel, through time. Ricoeur states, "we speak of the



story of a life to characterize the interval between birth and death” (1991: 425). Likewise, Herda asserts that humans use stories to “mediate the past and future to the present, to bring into one plot many inconsistencies in our lives” (1997: 37). If Dr. Soouthalaat does not acknowledge her past, it is not possible for her to be fully in her present.

In order to understand Dr. Soouthalaat’s choice, it is important to look at her past. Dr. Southaalat is a Hmong woman from Laos who has taken on what appears to be an identity housed in a different culture. This choice was made within the context of her experience, for from an early age she was taught that being Hmong was a curse. As a Hmong, her life was literally at risk and her only hope was to move away from that identity, both literally and figuratively. Dr. Soouthalaat’s experience and reaction to it reflects on the goals of development, for as a result of this experience and her subsequent choice to recall only her Thai adulthood, she literally had no stories to share with me. This choice undermines her important duties of remembrance and imagination, as described by both Ricoeur (1999) and Kearney (2002).

To choose not to remember is to deny a part of existence and in the process ignore the interconnectedness of the self to another. This is an essential connection, one that is so important that the self cannot be thought of without the other (Ricoeur 1992: 3). In other words, we are who we are because of the others we are around, have been around, and will be around. To see Dr. Soouthalaat so completely ignore a part of her past is startling, because it implies that she has dismissed those who have helped her become who she is. Her experiences, relationships and actions speak of her identity, for together they comprise her understanding of the world and "it is 'our view' of life that is at issue" (Ricoeur 1992: 138).

However, while Dr. Southaalat is a woman without an identity because she has rejected her original culture, upon reflection I realized that what appeared to be a complete loss of identity was in fact just a lack of acknowledgement of a piece of an identity. Each of us holds within ourselves two parts to our identity, the one that remains steady and the same (*idem*) throughout time and the other that changes and is dynamic (*ipse*). It is impossible to say that a person can lose their identity, but instead it is within the realm of possibility for that person's identity to change constantly. In the simplest of analogies, Ricoeur (1988: 246) points out that each of us is given a proper name which we carry with us from birth to death. It is that proper name that is representative of the *idem* in all of us, the part that never changes. Dr. Southaalat is Nathone and will remain to be Nathone even during times when she might not recognize herself or chooses not to recognize her past. The *idem*, same, can answer the "who" of an action and it is the *ipse*, self-same, that arises from the dynamic structure of the complex same identity to adapt and change through time. As such a person not only becomes the author of their story but also the writer of a cloth of stories so intricately woven together that the two parts of a identity can be viewed as a whole. Dr. Southaalat is not without her *idem* and *ipse* identities.

To reduce this intelligent woman as a simple product of development is an insult to her and the life that she has lead, but in many senses Dr. Southaalat's choice to ignore her past and to embody an identity that is not true to her whole self is clearly a tragic result of development. We are all capable of creating an identity of our own and moving toward the person we choose to be, but underlying that work is the fact that we will also hold within ourselves the person we have been throughout time. Ricoeur posits that, "our

future is guaranteed precisely by our ability to possess a narrative identity, to recollect the past in a historical form" (in Kearney 1984: 28). Denying the past can hamper a person's ability to imagine a future.

In many respects, I can understand why a person would make a choice of this magnitude. I do not expect that we are all going to be open to our pasts. As humans, we suffer events that are often times too difficult to speak of, but we are our past, our present and our future. Ricoeur (1984: 97) reinforces this as a key part of understanding and story telling, saying that "understanding -- even the understanding of another person in everyday life -- is never a direct intuition but always a reconstruction." We make sense of our worlds and those who exist with us in it from what we already know and have experienced, so to lose pieces of our past is to lose the ability to understand fully either others or ourselves. It does not seem possible to continue to grow as a person when the foundation with which you exist is cracked or completely coming apart. Each new experience would crumble to the ground until the foundation had been stabilized. Dr. Soouthalaat's appearance in my research reveals the importance of one's identity throughout life's movement and how each of us remains the same and yet changes all in the same moment, "the space of experience and the horizon of expectations" (Ricoeur 2005: 208).

### **I Will Still Be From The Mountains**

It is impossible to remain the same throughout our lives. Not only do we change due to age and the passing of time, but we change based on the experiences we have all had. For the Hmong women living in Laos, change is a large part of their existence on a level that others might take for granted. The Hmong women who have been relocated to

lower lands as part of a development effort are working toward learning not only how to live in a new environment, but also who they are in that environment.

In contrast to Dr. Southalaat, Boua speaks of her life prior to the relocation as one for which she longs. She states, "I was thinking that I had a good life up there" and "I had to sell everything I had" to come down and leave "my whole life...I was able to live freely...my life ended when I moved down here." For Boua, the move to lower lands is still painful, but amazingly enough at the end of our conversation she tells me that her life has gotten better in the past four years. She says that she is "a lot happier now." It took her time to realize that she could create a life that was good for her despite the location, but it is within the realm of possibility that she will one day be happy in her new location. What gives Boua comfort is the hold she has on her past and her pride in being Hmong. She has reacted to the stresses of development differently than Dr. Southalaat. Boua has used the energy of the stress as a force to move forward and is able to fondly look back on her life knowing that in this new place there is a future for her family. She can still celebrate being Hmong. What I initially thought of as a loss of identity for Dr. Southalaat I now see as an inability to share her stories. Kearney (2002: 45) claims that "...good life-stories are those which can be retold in different ways." It is important that she find her voice so that her stories can be heard in anyway that she sees fit, just as her fellow Hmong women are raising their voices.

The link between identity and mimesis is strong and as such cannot be easily teased apart, as has been highlighted in this discussion on Dr. Southalaat's identity. In the case of both Dr. Southalaat and Boua, the shared stories of the past allow them to reveal who they are. Even their stories show that the embrace we have with our pasts is vital for

our movement to the future. Change occurs for all, some in ways not of their choosing, and it is the responsibility of the person going through the change to be an agent to create the life they desire. As Juu so aptly stated in my conversation with him,

I come from a place where I sleep on the dirt ground. No matter where I am, I will always sleep on the ground. That is who I am. I can share my meal with the poor, poor people. I can work besides the poor people. I can go and live in the remote places. That is where I come from and I can and always am a part of that. That will never change about me. I will go to school and live a better life, change, but I will still be from the mountains. But I am moving forward just like we are on this river. We are now moving toward the city and will arrive in about an hour. That is me in my life. I am moving forward but still come from the past...

This description aptly sums up the importance of carrying the past with us as we move forward so as to not forget who we are and to imagine who we will become..

Laos is a beautiful country full vibrant life, but just below the surface is a current of change that threatens that vibrancy. The Hmong women whom I spoke with recognized the inevitability of change and are doing the best they can to navigate it and to continue to live a life that is worthy of their standards. Juu's statement in reference to always being from the mountains is especially poetic because it emphasizes life's circular nature. No matter where Juu goes, he will always in some form return to the mountains. It is a part of who he is and to return to that, even if in thought, is to return to himself in a time when everything around him is in motion.

### **Mimesis**

The category of mimesis is tightly connected to both identity and action. It is through mimesis that the discussion of identity and action collide and also through which their importance is realized as it relates to Hmong women and the development efforts in Laos. What follows is a discussion of mimesis as a stand-alone category and a lens in

which to shift the paradigm of development from a linear process to a circular one.

Concepts of time and narrative are abstract and as such provide no definite beginning or end. The mediation between time and narrative becomes circular. The circular interplay allows for interpretation and reinterpretation of time, narrative. Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988) believes that the relationship between time and narrative are linked to a three-fold mimesis: a past, a present, and a future. As mentioned earlier, mimesis has a mediating characteristic to its theory. "The act of mimesis involves a circular movement from action to text and back again -- passing from prefigured experience through narrative recounting back to a refigured life-world. In short, life is always on the way to narrative, but it does not arrive there until someone hears and tell this life as a story"(Kearney 2002: 133).

These three stages or mimesis narrate a progression that firstly involves an interpretation of our past (mimesis<sub>1</sub>), which holds our traditions, assumptions, goals and motives; secondly, imagines our future (mimesis<sub>3</sub>); and thirdly, through the interplay between these two, creates a present (mimesis<sub>2</sub>) that holds a temporal dimension of a configured life. We thus turn our past experience into realities and are able to find the capacity to act in our present and work toward an imagined future. The stories of development shared by the Hmong women are highlighted with many glimpses of mimesis.

### **Let Me Find My Talk**

Each woman that I spoke with envisions a future. Most of the time it is not a future for themselves, but one for their children. For example, Watsana states, "we talk a lot, at home and in the community." She explains that through the talking she has learned

to equate a growing happiness with their current relationship with the government. As a result of development efforts in her community, this was not always the case. It took a lot of time and effort on the part of everyone in her community to begin to speak freely about the relationships they had with the government, but because there has been an openness toward talking in the community and in the homes of the Hmong, Watsana says that she "saw a better future" for her children. This had led to movement toward understanding the other and seeing the advantages that development can bring to the futures of their families. The children now have choices and it is up to them "to compete." Watsana is an example of one Hmong woman changing how she views development. If she had chosen, along with other members of her community, to ignore their past there is a distinct possibility that they all would continue to remain in a state of flux with the government. But instead, Watsana and her community embrace their past and reflect upon it regularly by recounting their stories to their children and also discussing it amongst themselves.

It is through viewing development differently, a shifting of the paradigm from one of a leader and follower of sorts to one of a partnership, that has allowed Watsana to be successful at her work in development. She treasures the work she does with the Yellow Leaf People and that comes from having looked at past experiences with development, talking through what worked and what did not work, and moving toward a place where she wants to help others in a way that she feels is for the good of her community.

Through partnerships such as Watsana's with the Yellow Leaf People, not only does the paradigm of development begin to shift, but so does the paradigm of leadership. There is a shared common goal when working in partnerships and leaders can emerge through this

collaboration.

Boua provides another example of the emergence of a leader. She unfortunately has not had as many experiences working in a partnership as Watsana has through her work, but just as Watsana has done, Boua shows that through her past experiences and her vision of a future, she can be a pillar of the community and contribute as a leader. Leadership grows organically in a community; it is not something foreign that has to come from a person of power or privilege. In the case of the Hmong women that I spoke with, I see their leadership as a way of being and a movement always toward learning and growing. They might not be happy with their current situation and be struggling to see a future, but they are talking and making choices in the hope of a better life and are doing so while always keeping those around them in mind. For example, in the conversation with Boua, I saw her struggle to talk about her imagined future because she feels she is too old to have one. However, she moved down the mountain a mere short four years prior and did not merely submit to an unhappy fate. Instead, she stood strong and did what she needed to do to create a life for herself and her family, even if she did it through her tears. She speaks of a future for her children, saying that she can "see them with a good future because they are able to go and work and make a life for themselves," and that is a future that she has helped create for them through her hard work.

The stages of mimesis show a progression realized in a circular movement with no true beginning or end. A tale is "spun from bits and pieces of experience, linking past happenings with present ones and casting both into a dream of possibilities" (Kearney 2002: 5). The stages of mimesis are indisputably circular in nature, but they are not vicious circles in which there is an endless spiral that mediates past the same point over



and over, but instead is a meditation past the same point at differing altitudes, which eliminates redundancy (Ricoeur 1984: 71-72). "Thus the hermeneutic circle of narrative and time never stops being reborn from the circle that the stages of mimesis form" (Ricoeur 1984: 76). Even if in the process of development people feel as if they are losing their identities, they truly are not. They might not be recognizable by their environment or their physical presence, but inside there is still a part of them that remains the same. It is through the reflection of the past and the ability to image a future differently that the Hmong women can begin to act within the changes they are going through. Development done poorly does not have to be devastating; however, this commentary is about minimizing the harm already done and then doing better in the future. In other words, even bad decisions carry the possibility of hope through imagination.

Development in the same vein should be thought of in a circular fashion. Development is by definition a historical process and within that assumes a direction mistaken as linear because change is seen more as linear than cyclical (Charlton 1997: 7). Ricoeur (1991:426) states that,

an event is more than a mere occurrence, something that just happens: it is that which contributes to the progress of the story as much as it contributes to its beginning and its end. In correlation with this the narrated story, too, is always more than mere enumeration in a simple or serial or successive order of incidents or events. Narration organizes them into an intelligible whole.

The movement away from the linear aspects of development are most important in this area. Viewed holistically, development should not be a succession of events that happen in the hope of progress for any one, but instead is a constant revisiting of the past from

the present point that each of us stands with an imagine future in front of us of where we collectively want to be.

Although there is action in all stages of mimesis, it is in mimesis<sub>3</sub> where action is most important. It is at this stage that the Hmong women can imagine acting and inhabiting a new world. What follows is a discussion of action as the conversations reveal.

### **Action**

Throughout our history, we all have come to points where we can either chose happiness or misfortune. In order to move toward happiness, we must imagine ourselves as part of what that happiness looks like. The Hmong communities are daily met with the realization that the life they have known is changing and they make choices to either be a part of that change or resist it. They are agents of their life. Ricoeur (1984:55) writes that,

to act is always to act 'with' others. Interaction can take the form of cooperation or competition or struggle. The contingencies of this interaction then rejoin those of our circumstances through their character of helping or hindering us. Finally, the outcome of an action may be a change in fortune toward happiness or misfortune.

The conversations I participated in reveal the action of the Hmong women moving toward an imagined future where their life is better in small increments that are often times hard to uncover, but are there nonetheless.

When thinking of action, it is often in the sense of a physical event or behavior that leads to another. But in the sense of critical hermeneutics, Ricoeur explains that action extends beyond that narrow definition. Action implies goals, motives and agency. All of these are clearly distinguishable from the way one physical event leads to another. With agency, the agents of action, Hmong women in this case, do and can do things that

are taken as their work or their deeds and as a result are held "responsible for certain consequences of their action." It is also understood "that these agents act and suffer in circumstances they did not make that nevertheless do belong to the practical field, precisely inasmuch as they circumscribe the intervention of historical agents in the course of physical events and offer favorable or unfavorable occasions for their actions" (Ricoeur 1984: 55).

Every person is an agent in his or her own right. From the outside, work in the development field looks to be a system based on two parts, those that are developing and those that are being developed. It may appear to be black and white and lacking a middle ground, but there are people such as Vahpheng and Watsana working hard toward getting the others to join them, and Boua, Her Yang, Kia, and Juu on the other side working toward a better life. The challenge for both sides is how to breach that fence, tearing it down completely, and creating an open field to exist in a space of partnership: a whole where all "members of the set are in a relation of intersignification" (Ricoeur 1984: 55), all pieces of the whole are equally important. They are all agents of action.

### **Agents of Action**

While in Laos, I thought about the resistance I experienced as a child when playing with magnets and how similar I felt when hearing about the experiences of development. Each person I talked with is like a magnet, but because there is a born binary relationship between those working to develop and those being developed, there is an inherent resistance on both sides. Both have similar goals of a better life but struggle to make that connection. The resistance is not to change, but to understanding how to breach the space separating the self-imposed two sides of that change. "It is first in

reference to *action* itself that we say it is mine, your, his, or hers, that it depends on each of us, that it is in our power "(Ricoeur 1992: 95). To breach that space, each involved person should recognize the other and how each is responsible for movement toward change. The power lies in the group and not the individual.

Watsana spoke about making a difference not just in her own life but in those of the Yellow Leaf People that she worked so closely with. Watsana does not embark on her development work without knowing what it is like to be one of the people who in the past were designated to be helped. She spent a lot of her younger years growing up in a developing environment. She speaks of these times as being difficult and full of hardships. She states that they "had been mistreated" and that her family was "looked down at...called 'miao' (cat in Hmong)...." She feels this was degrading and wrong, but understands that this behavior is born out of a lack of knowledge on the part of those who were working with the Hmong at the time. For her family, these people were government officials. Watsana long ago decided to change the face of development and show how it can be done with respect and honor of those with whom she is working. She no longer has "any ill feelings toward them" and she acknowledges that she "can make change" for herself and that she is "leading my children into a better world."

I was drawn to Watsana's passion about development and changing the experience she had to something better for those with whom she worked. She works side-by-side with the Yellow Leaf instead of in front of them, encouraging them to catch up. Looking back on her life she realizes that to forgive past mistakes of government officials was necessary. They did not take the time to ask the right questions and get to know her and her people. She is drawn to do it differently and that is where Watsana's power as an

agent lies. "Every action is direct towards some result that informs and motivates the agent's aim in action" (Kearney 2002: 131).

While reflecting on the conversation with Vanpheng, I see that her power of action lies in her resources and how she chooses to use them. While we talked about her help in the Hmong communities around Luang Prabang, she explains that she works "closely with the women and want to see their lives get better." She goes on to say that she recognizes that change takes time and sometimes the women she works with "do not know that we are coming. But we explain to them why we are there and they like what we teach. We tell them it will make their lives easier." Ricoeur (1992: 172) states that we are all aiming for a good life but for the Hmong in Laos, who is really defining what that means and for whom do they do it? In this case, unfortunately, it is often the organization that Vanpheng works for that does the defining, rather than the people who are the intended recipients of the development.

Vanpheng's organization is focused on teaching newly relocated women about gender equality. However, issues around gender seemed too broad of a topic to tackle with the Hmong women who are struggling with a new life. To ask them to tackle the issues of gender equality at a point when they are just trying to find their way, making a home and feeding their families, seems too farfetched a goal. Instead, they should help the newly arrived Hmong to stabilize their lives and teach them to navigate the new city-like environment in which they find themselves. These issues feel more important to me at this point in the development of Laos than accosting unsuspecting women with this grand idea that they are being mistreated and dominated by men. Whether that is true or not depends first on whether the women feel mistreated; however, before even assessing

these social issues, the Hmong need to know that their basic survival needs are being met.

Teaching topics based on gender issues are not irrelevant; however, for the Hmong women I met, gender was not a concern of theirs. When I sat with Boua, I heard her stories and learned that she has been working for four years to create a life for herself in the lower lands of Laos and she is still struggling. "Life interprets itself. And it is because of this directedness, conscious or unconscious, that our lives may be described as a flux of events which combine to form an action which is both *cumulative* and *oriented* - - two crucial features of any narrative" (Kearney 2002: 131). While Boua struggles, she has still orientated her self and viewing all of her experiences as a whole, one bleeding into the other. One experience is based on the ones before it and never are events of our lives in isolation.

Development should no longer be about closing an unclear gap of progress. Human progress should be about the well-being of the people it is touching as defined by those people instead of representing a charitable comparison between us and them. It requires equal action oriented toward a new understanding from all sides of the circle to create a forward movement toward a new life. It is about risking a revisit to the past as it is in that moment so that a future can be imagined and our actions now can be oriented toward that imagined future. Imagination is the beginning of creation. "The very act of participating in a discourse, of attempting discursively to come to an agreement about the trust of a problematic statement or the correctness of a problematic norm, carries with it the supposition that a genuine agreement is possible" (Habermas 1973: xvi). The implication is that there is room for exploration of new realities and the imagined possibilities within the work of development.

Because development is in the business of change, progress, and involves human dynamics, no one person can predict how any project will turn out or how it will truly change the lives of those it is designed to help. But development does not have to leave a bitter taste in anyone's mouth. To avoid that distaste, development should not be done in a drop-by fashion. It takes time, encouragement, patience and a love for the work.

De Rivero (2001) speaks of development as a myth. He states, "the gurus of the myth of development, who measure everything, have virtually a quantitative vision of the world. They pay no heed to the qualitative historical and cultural processes, to the non-linear progress of society, to the ethical point of view" (2001: 117). Money is still the dictator of where the work is done and how it is done. There is a rush to accomplish and then to move on. Vanpheng states that money is important because it is what they "need it to do our work and to help the women." How money influences the work, though, can change. Development can become more than just providing material items to others. That rose colored future that others are envision for the Hmong communities can be modified to include the voices of the Hmong instead of being a dictation from the higher ranks who control the money. By including the Hmong in the discourse regarding their future, a new model of development will begin to emerge in Laos.

### **Utopia**

As I reflect on the conversations and I re-read my journal entries, I notice that the underlying theme of utopia flows through the research category of action. Sitting next to Kia as she holds her baby, she tells me about being relocated by the government and the promise of a better life. As we talk, a little boy runs by waving and I notice the marks on his face that I had seen on the faces of some of the other children and women. I ask Kia

what it is. She tells me it is caused from the heat. She proceeds to tell me that there is an ointment that would help treat it but they do not have the money to buy that ointment and no outsiders have thought to bring it when they visit. She says, "I am grateful for all that we are given because we are poor, but no one asks us what we need. They just give us what they do and never ask." There is an inherent assumption that one knows what is best for another and it is this type of assumption may be at the crux of why the current paradigm of development may not working. The questions are what brings forth a space in which to have dialogue and the answers are what can move the dialogue, but if the questions are never asked then the answers can never emerge.

Within not asking the right questions, I also see the dilemma of promises not kept or even more specifically the dilemma of unrealistic promises that do not recognize the historical foundation of each person and community toward creating a better life. Ricoeur refers to utopia as a stumbling block in the work of development because without an understanding of one history and having a vision of the future not anchored in the past, true progress cannot take place (1988: 215). When Kia brings up access to the ointment so that the children and women who were suffering from the rash could be of help, I begin to think about all of the other promises that were broken. The ointment represents those broken promises. Kia later describes to me that there were schools just as the government had promised for the children to attend, but the children in her village rarely attend because they can not afford to pay for the transportation by boat to get them to the schools. Or as Boua explains to me about access to resources,

we do have access to hospitals and education, but we have to pay for everything. So, in a sense, it is causing us more stress because we do not have the money to pay for it even though it's there. It is not free access so we have the resources, but we do not use them because we do not have the money.



And so the question of broken promises still prevails: has anything changed for the Hmong because they were moved to lower lands or is the location just different? To bring them closer to needed resources such as education, medical, roads, and work is what I could consider an action taken in the right direction toward bettering the lives of the Hmong, but for them to be literally closer to the needed and promised resources and to still be figuratively miles away from actually obtaining or using those resources presents a problem. While speaking to Vanpheng, I brought this issue up and her response was that;

it is sad, but we help with that. We realize the situation is not good for these women and their family. We work closely with them to help get the things they need, but they still don't have everything. We want to teach them to have a better life and to help them see that they can have. It is hard work and takes time.

I would agree that it takes time and hard work, but when a decision has been made on behalf of another person, such as it has been for these Hmong women, to say it takes time and hard works is often not easy for these women to understand. I remember the tears in the eyes of Boua when she as she tells me that the resources were there for her use, but she cannot use them because she is unable to pay for them. This woman did not ask to be moved from a home she had been in since she was a child. She was happy where she was, living a life that was dictated by the choices and action she made. To have that taken from her with the promise of a better life seems a harsh reality to have to face at any age when a better life is not exactly what she feels she has been given.

No matter what the reason the government has to move the Hmong people from the mountains to lower lands, there is a promise made to them that has been left unfilled. Promises such as this are what continue to enlarge the gap between the Hmong, the

government, and those working in development even if the actions on the part of the Hmong women and some of those people working in the development arena have helped to alleviate part of the struggle. Ricoeur (2005: 128) writes,

we shall have occasion to observe that the ability to promise presupposes the ability to speak, to act on the world, to recount and form the idea of the narrative unity of a life, and finally to impute to oneself the origin of one's acts...but the phenomenology of promises must focus on the act by which the self actually commits itself.

To shift the paradigm of development would be transformational, but it has to be done in community of action with others. The call for change is there and there are many who are acting as agents of change such as Watsana, Vanpheng, Kia, Boua, Her Yang and from my other conversation partners. They are speaking out and not just talking about what is wrong, but also how to make it better. A lot of what I hear is about partnership, working together to make a better life for everyone. Ricoeur (2005: 253) posits that being able to act as in speaking is exercising the "capacity to make events happen in the physical and social world" and they take place " in a setting of interaction, where the other can take on over time the role of obstacle, helper, or fellow actor, as in meetings where it is sometimes impossible to isolate each person's contribution." These women speak of being a part of the development process and not just a result of the process, instinctively demonstrating the applicability of Ricoeur's concepts.

### **Summary**

The Hmong are not passive actors who are waiting for help from development efforts and other authorities. In none of my conversations in the Hmong community did I hear the word "can't." Instead, I heard words such as "future," "hope," "change," and "happiness." All of my conversation partners were strong in voice and were willing to

participate in their lives and their futures. The exception was Dr. Soouthaalat, and though she was an exception in terms of identity, she was not a passive actor in her life either, for she is a well-educated woman, working in a hospital helping the Hmong who are sick and in need. The weight of all the actions of this group of people holds a heavy potential that will one day come to fruition. Even if on the smallest of scales, by just telling their stories, they are not giving the power to another. They may be struggling to negotiate how to participate fully due to unequal socio-economic footing, but they are there and ready to do what it takes to imagine and create a future. This is a group of people who will continue to make their mark on society with their inner strength that is aiding them in making a better life for themselves, their families and their communities. Already, Hmong women and men are making history by joining in efforts to create better living situations in their communities. Their children are the future of their communities and they aspire for great things.

This research concludes with Chapter Seven, Research Findings and Implications. What follows is a summary of the research and the research findings and implications that emerged, along with a personal reflection.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **RESEARCH FINDING AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter Seven presents a summary of the research project revisiting the research issue, a description of the participants, the historical context, a literature review, the theoretical framework, and the research process. The findings of the research are then outlined and the research implications emerge from the findings along with suggestions for future research. The dissertation concludes with some of the researcher's personal reflections. A return to the matter at hand through reflections on development in Laos will begin Chapter Seven.

#### **Summary of Research**

This research looked into the ontological nature of human progress as reflected in socioeconomic development projects and proceeds from the narratives of Hmong women and a Hmong man. The stories shared with me reveal lives that have been lived and continue to move forward into a realm of possibility along with sharing their practical wisdom. Their stories showed that interpreting the questions of development requires an understanding of progress and what it looks like to live in a world of envisioning a community on the way.

The participants of this research project represented a wide range of people. Organizations and personal perspectives are reflected in the stories of the Lao Women's Union, Rajaphat Loei University, private merchants, travel guides, grassroots developers, farmers, health care providers and the private Hmong citizens of Laos. The focus of the research was on Hmong women, but I quickly discovered the importance of including the

voices of those men who were in the lives of the women participants. A description of each participant is included in Chapter Four and further discussed in Chapters Five and Six along with the conversations I had with each.

Laos as the research site was discussed in Chapter Two to situate the research in a historical context and to provide information about Hmong people and their traditions and culture. Laos is a newly developing country and within the country's struggle to find its place in the world at large are the Hmong communities who are trying to find their place in an ever changing country live.

The background of the research topic presents a discussion of development issues pertinent to Hmong women with a focus on the relocation efforts of the Lao PDR government. Chapter Three follows with a review of literature to explore the process of development, the critical hermeneutic orientation, the interpretive anthropological approach, the interpretive orientation toward development, development as it relates to the Hmong in Laos and a further investigation of Hmong women and development. I follow this with the research protocol in Chapter Four, as described by Herda (1999). I describe the categories of identity, mimesis, and action and how they guided the research and analysis of the data collected in Chapters Five and Six by using specific theories of Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988, 1992, 2004, 2005) and with the importance of story telling as presented in Kearney (2002). The conclusion of this research is presented in Chapter Seven with findings and implications, suggestions for further this research and ends with my personal reflections on the research, my experiences traveling and of the people I had the pleasure to meet.

## **Findings and Implications for Practice**

Many humans are “aiming at the good life with and for others in just institutions” (Ricoeur 1992: 172). Ricoeur (1992: 194) posits that a good life is not only a personal matter, but also an institutional matter. He asserts, “living well is not limited to interpersonal relationships but extends to the life of institutions,” whereas institution is characterized by “the bond of common mores and not that of constraining rules.” It is always easy to critique others, but one of the hardest tasks is to “work together with others to bring to life, in a practical and just manner, a process for critiquing existing social realities and creating new ones...this process entails a redescription or refiguration of our existing worlds in our organizations and communities” (Herda 1999: 1). Below are the five findings of this research as guided by the categories of identity, mimesis and action, which are accompanied by the implications.

### **Identity**

**1. Finding:** Leadership is defined by one's actions and not by one's position. For example, the Hmong women of this research are examples of leaders through their actions of surviving and creating a life they consider worth living for their families and communities. **Implication:** The paradigm of leadership may need to be changed.

Leadership as a narrative text in the hermeneutic sphere allows for innovation. It is no longer most concerned with the person holding the title of leader, but instead emerges through the actions of others. When viewed through the lens of a shared community, leadership can redirect us to find a space, through dialogue, of collaboration that allows for reflection and decision-making in community with others. Leadership then emerges in relationship to others in the work that is done and manifests care.

Take for example the amazing strength that has been shown in the stories of the Hmong women. These stories not only allow each of them to become better acquainted with who they are, their past, their dreams and hopes for the future, but also allow others to get to know get to know them. It is through the stories these Hmong women share that I realized that the strength of good leadership comes from many places and from many people; leadership lives in the stories we tell of our lives. These women are leading, even if unaware, by example when they participate in their lives and those of the community. As a community, they are leading the Hmong to a better life through sharing knowledge. A community and leadership should be one “without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge” (Habermas 1998: 15). These Hmong women have endured hardships that have shaped their lives in ways most westerns will never understand and it is through their reflections and refiguration of their past and their identities that lessons of determination, of hope, of love, and a desire to help others can be learned. According to Huntington, “individuals find and redefine their identities in groups...,” and “to define themselves, people need an other” (2004: 22, 25). It is through community and the leadership of everyone in that community that true lasting change may be made.

**2. Finding:** Current development policies and practices may be compounding the problem. **Implication:** The paradigm of development may need to shift from a linear process, in those aspects of development that do not merit linear thinking, to a interpretative process.

No longer should development be view as a process of getting from point A to point B, but instead the paradigm could begin to shift to embrace a circular model that

shows a continuous movement of revising the past with an eye toward the future and a knowledge that in this moment change is possible. Through the conversations with the Hmong women, development emerges as a circular process. By removing the hierarchical nature of current development practices, Hmong women like Watsana, Boua, Kia, Her Yang and even Dr. Soouthalaat will be given the opportunity to show that development does change lives and even with the predictable problems and issues that arise from it, so too can arise the human spirit to survive and create a life of noble works along with a stronger sense of who the person is. All five of these women are leaders and to recognize them as such is to imagine the possibility that we are all leaders no matter what our status and that we all have the capability to make a difference.

### **Mimesis**

**3. Finding:** The meaning of development work as it relates to historical context is often not well understood by development workers and the government. For example, relocating the Hmong involves more than just a physical move because they do not just leave behind who they are but instead bring it with them. **Implication:** The process of development is a social text that exists in a public sphere to be interpreted by anyone who chooses to engage with it. This social text should embrace the past, the present and the future.

Viewing development work objectively can create problems within projects. There is no true objectivity when a person realizes that they carry with them their history, traditions and prejudices. Instead, those in development must allow development work to become a text open for interpretation. Just as in the findings from under the identity category, the stories that are told of our lives and those of others are what carry the most



weight when it comes to getting to know who you are in relation to others. They reveal the past, the present and the future.

In the stories the Hmong women told, I saw a desire for a better future and a drive to get there. They understand development work as a means of gaining a better life. The women saw a future for themselves and their children and admitted to knowing that their children would be given the opportunities to succeed if they were willing to take them. If their children were given opportunities such as education, they could create a life for themselves that was different than those of their parents. Today children live in a world different from which their parents experienced. The willingness of the Hmong women to be orientated toward a new understanding of what a better life means is driven by their connection to past traditions and memories. Utopian visions of a better life can hinder progress because of the disconnection to the past and so too can objective views that are focused on measurable outputs. The history of each person allows for a clear definition of what a better life means and also allows for the space in which to imagine a better future in light of the current situation.

### **Action**

**4. Finding:** Development goals seem grand in nature. The focus on issues of gender relations instead of first meeting the basic needs of the Hmong seems to be causing more problems than it solves. **Implications:** Changes to development goals to reflect the movement of focus from basic needs to large concepts could result in more realistic change.

The work that Vanpheng does appears to be good. She is a development worker who strives to help the women she is working with, though she must also follow the

guidelines set forth by the funding she receives. She works toward achieving measurable results but also knows that she has to somehow find a way to keep the women and not the numbers at the forefront of all the work that she does to ensure success. All of the Hmong women that I came into contact with were relocated by the government and asked to live in an unfamiliar place. None of them were taught how to cope with the new environment, let alone how begin to create a life so vastly different than the one they were coming from. The need for this type of assistance is still apparent even after a few years of living in the new environment. The development goals of the projects I encountered seemed grandiose and yet lacked attention to the most basic needs of the Hmong women. That does not benefit anyone and it is important to cultivate in the Hmong women the knowledge, confidence and experiences that are necessary to make a transition successful before embarking on teaching them about concepts that they are not familiar with. It would be beneficial instead to teach them about the new job opportunities available to them, how to produce homemade goods and sell them at the market, how to purchase land, how to navigate the now available resource such as health care and the educational system. Even something as simple as showing them around and pointing out key places such as markets, transportation, vendors, doctors, community programs, etc. would assist them in the assimilation progress that many of them are still struggling with years after their move.

It is through meeting these needs first that topics such as gender relations can and should be addressed. Getting to know what is needed would go a long way towards affecting realistic assistance; showing the Hmong communities that they are valued in this new environment and enabling their participation. This addresses Herda's (1999: 1)

statement affirmation that “we need to acknowledge and understand that humans have the capacity to live in community and to address and solve problems together in organizations and social settings” (Herda 1999:1).

**5. Finding:** Development work sometimes portrays unrealistic results. For example, the Hmong women in this research were mostly unhappy with their development experiences because they believed they were not given the life they were promised. Development was described to them as the process of being given a better life, thus removing responsibility and power from the Hmong women to create a life for themselves. Instead, it could have been presented as a change that might result in better living conditions because they would have increased access to needed resources. **Implication:** Unrealistic development goals may cause disappointment in the process, which leads to a resistance toward an orientation of a new understanding and a shared vision of what a better life means to all parties involved.

From every corner of the world, progress through development is a promise of eradicated poverty, reduced inequality, and improved standards of living. It is that promise that connects us all to a hope for a better future. Life in Laos among the Hmong does not represent traditional Hmong, but is instead a mix of old and new. The Hmong women are struggling, but they are making progress toward beginning to live a life of innovation based upon tradition. It is with caution that I make the above statement because as Ricoeur (1988: 215) points out, “the idea of progress which still bounds the past to a better future, one brought closer by the acceleration of history, tends to give way to the idea of utopia as soon as the hopes of humanity lose their anchorage in acquired experience and are project into an unprecedented future.”

Essentially, the tie to the past can create a better future, but once that connection is lost, forgotten, or ignored, the drive for a better life is no longer based in reality and the possibilities become a hindrance rather than an imagined future within grasp. The work of development can so quickly turn into a barrier because the understanding of past experiences and memories are left to the wayside and a push toward an unrealistic goal becomes driving force behind the project. Kai's story of the ointment is an example of this. The promise for a better future is what helps to bring her people to the lower lands, but their basic needs are not being met and thus the community is disheartened and resistant to development even if they still hold hope in the hearts that it will eventually bring about change and a better life.

Utopia is a promise for a pure beginning, but there really is no true pure beginning and never is our history exhausted in our own dreams. There is more in the past than what has happened and so “we have to find the *future of the past*, the unfulfilled potential of the past” (Ricoeur in Kearney and Dooley 1999: 14). The task within development projects should be to prevent the tension between the seduction of a purely utopian expectation of the future and instead should be to navigate to a place where the expectations, meditating on the future and the past equally, are “determined, hence finite and relatively modest” so as to give rise to responsible commitments (Ricoeur 1988: 115).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Ideas for future research are limited only by imagination. Although I am reaching the end of my research, future researcher will be able to continue my efforts. Research based on a critical hermeneutic participatory inquiry is a means of gaining new

knowledge via the medium of stories and interpretation. The scope of this research is broad and as such leaves room for exploration on the part of others.

**1. Suggestion:** I finish this research topic knowing that there are stories of the Hmong in Lao PDR that are incomplete. Future research is needed to tell these stories. "Storytelling will never end, for there will always be someone to say 'Tell me a story', and somebody else who will respond 'Once upon a time...'" (Kearney 2002: 126).

Stories that we share with others and that we listen to will help to create a sphere in which to discover and explore new ways of thinking and looking at development projects. As shown in this research, stories are a powerful vehicle in which to house not only our identity but also an exploration of our actions and hopes for the future. They will continue to move us all forward. As Kearney (2002: 137) so aptly states, "we will never reach the end of the story...we shall never arrive at a point, even in our most "post" of postmodern cultures, where we could credibly declare a moratorium on storytelling... the serpent of storytelling may swallow its own tail, but it never disappears altogether."

**2. Suggestion:** It is important to address what development means to development workers and policymakers. Inviting those of a target population to participate in the process would enrich the conversation and its stories such as Watsana Phrakhunana's and her work in the development arena that reflect the dynamic nature of development. A better understanding of how a person who was once on the receiving end of development work made the transition into working in the field of development would be a rich area for mining new knowledge.

**3. Suggestion:** Another worthwhile venture would be to investigate current development efforts targeting the Hmong communities and the need to create a space of common

understanding. Vanxay Chanthadala and Dr. Prokab Phon-ngam noticeably did not mention the difficulties that arise doing development and painted a picture with a brush dripping with a false sense of perfection. Conversations regarding the differences between those working in development, those most influenced by it, and exploring ways to begin to work as partners instead of on two separate sides of the same issue are needed. Vanpheng Chanthaphasouk's story allowed me to see the possibilities present for breaking down the walls and to make the work of development circular instead of existing in the old paradigm of a linear process.

**4. Suggestion:** Along with working toward a shared understanding, to begin to understand the actual needs of people whom the work of development is supposed to be helping is important. Kia Xiong and Boua Xue Moua expressed in their stories that the moves they were asked to make were inevitable but there were parts of their experiences that they felt could have been avoided if they were simply given the option of participating. Further understanding of what the Hmong need from the beginning though conversations are necessary to begin to avoid the continued digression of the Hmong communities who are influenced by development negatively. Both of these women's stories acknowledge the need for change and both had come to a place of acceptance, but the road to getting to that place was long and rutted when they stop to look back to where they have been. Understanding what is thought to be needed verses what is really needed and ensuring that everyone is having these conversations could help to move development models into a new phase of existence.

**5. Suggestion:** Lastly, I would say that the whole project of development might be hindering more than helping in the matter at its core: that of human progress. We need a

deeper understanding of the meaning of development and not merely what is wrong with development or viewing development as a waste of time and resources. Instead, to understand that development exists in the movement of identity and action. Both Chanxylue Payeejualuemoua and Her Yang stories shared a movement toward working together and trusting in the partnerships of which they have been a part. They both were in a place of seeing the benefits of development when done through friendships to build a better future.

### **Conclusion**

Laos is striving for modernization. How they achieve that modernization is what is most important. The process of development touches so many lives in Laos and it is vital that everyone involved be cognizant of what development means and how to be a part of it in an ethical manner that reflects the self and its relationship with the Other. Development practices must reflect a shared understanding and invite everyone to engage in the text to move beyond the current situation and into a space that allows for innovation and openness.

This research provides insight into Hmong women's discourse as it pertains to development policy and projects. The findings and implications can be applied to any type of development work. Governments, private organizations and educational communities can benefit from a more open and comprehensive approach to development policy making, models, theories and practices using a critical hermeneutic approach that emphasizes a shared approach.

## **Personal Reflections**

When I started this research three years ago, it seemed impossible to think I would be here completing this dissertation. I did not realize at that time how this research would become a part of who I am and I realize now that my interest in the Hmong and Laos have not come to a close with the completion of this final requirement. The conclusion of graduate school is just the beginning of my journey in choosing to live a life worth living. I am leaving behind this text a changed person with a horizon that has been expanded. I view the world differently and in a way that I feel is less clouded and, now, is oriented toward understanding and hope. For this experience I am truly grateful.

Laos is a country at the beginning of its journey of development. There will be many changes in the country and it is my hope that I will return to see how it evolves over time and to see how the people of Laos travel the road of development hand in hand with each other, always attuned to the other as it relates to the self. There are many opportunities and possibilities to view development through a lens of partnership and friendship in Laos. The work I have presented here hopefully will assist in seeing those opportunities come to fruition. A lot of work needs to be done by everyone and I imagine that in my future I will be a part of that work guided by the wisdom shared with me by my conversation partners.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Letter of Invitation

#### **University of San Francisco Letter of Invitation and Research Questions**

Date

Participant Name and Title

Company or Organization

Address

Dear Mr./Ms.;

Thank you agreeing to participate in an exploration of my dissertation topic. As you know, my research explores how women through their stories are creating a space for a changed dialogue of development in Laos. More specifically, I want to critique concepts of development as they affect the women in the Hmong community and explore new ways of seeing development to create a space for a new and shared understanding of the way in which development affects those it is purportedly designed to help.

I am inviting teachers, students, tribe people and other professionals in Laos, Thailand and the United States to discuss their experiences in my research topic. By engaging in such conversations and observing experience, I hope to progress toward a social-cultural framework for development practices that influence, engage and inspire women in the development field of work.

In addition to the opportunity to share ideas, I am seeking your permission to recorded and transcribe our conversations. In doing so, I will provide you a copy of our conversation so you may look it over. You may add to or delete any section of the conversation at that time. When I have received your approval, I will use our conversation to support my analysis. Data that you contribute, your name and position will not be held confidential.

Below, you will find a series of proposed questions. These questions are primarily for use as guidelines to direct our conversation. They also indicate my specific interest in your area of expertise. The most important thing to remember is that I am looking to hear stories from the real-life projects that you've been involved in and what you have noticed about the learning that takes place within them. My hope is that our conversation provides an opportunity for use to learn something together through the exploration of the topic I have described.

Reflection upon your experiences, please consider the following questions:

Topic: Identity – How are Hmong women shaping development for themselves, their families and their communities?

- Describe where your work within development has the most meaning to you and what you feel is essential knowledge to exist successfully in the space of development.
- What are the influences in Hmong women's deliberations relevant to development?
- How do Hmong women create connections personally, communally and societal to create relationships with those working in the development efforts?

Topic: Care – How is development work enabling Hmong women to express care in their work and relationship with others?

- What kind of dialogue is encouraged about development in the communities?
- What do you feel is important to emphasize in the establishment of national and international policies of development?
- What do you feel are the critical issues regarding what development should be in Laos among the ethnic groups?

Topic: Action - How are Hmong women influencing development practices?

- What are Hmong women learning about development in their communities and its influence on their work, families and communities to reach national and international goals?
- What is the local knowledge being used to appropriate development practices in Laos?
- What contributions are Hmong women making through their work and communities to build local capabilities to influence development efforts?

Again, thank you for your willingness to meet. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Mendonca  
 Researcher, Doctoral Student  
 University of San Francisco  
 School of Education  
 Organization and Leadership

kimberly.mendonca@gmail.com  
 Tel: 415.297.2196

## **Appendix B: Letter of Confirmation**

### **University of San Francisco Letter of Confirmation**

Date  
Participant Name and Title  
Company or Organization  
Address

Dear Mr./Ms.;

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to have a conversation with you about your ideas, experiences and viewpoints on how Hmong women's stories are creating a text in which to discuss development. I am confirming our meeting on \_\_\_\_\_.  
Please let me know if something requires you to change our arranged place, time and date.

With your permission, I will record our conversation, transcribe the tapes into a written text and submit it for your review. After you review the text, I would like to discuss the conversation we had and any follow-up comments. Please remember that data for this research is not confidential.

The exchange of ideas in conversation is the format for my participatory research. It allows you to comment, add or delete to what the transcripts contain. This process will not only give you the opportunity to correct anything stated in our conversation, but allows you the opportunity to reflect on our conversation. After your approval, I will look at the text of the conversation that we had, gather new ideas, possibly enlarge the area under investigation, and continue my research.

Once again, thank you and I look forward to our conversation.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Mendonca  
Researcher, Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco  
School of Education  
Organization and Leadership

kimberly.mendonca@gmail.com  
Tel: 415.297.2198

## Appendix C: Letter of Consent

### **University of San Francisco Consent to Be a Research Participant**

#### **Purpose and Background**

Ms. Kimberly Mendonca, in the University of San Francisco, School of Education, asked me to be a participant in her research. She plans to explore how women through their stories are creating a space for a changed dialogue of development in Laos. More specifically, she plans to critique concepts of development as they affect the women in the Hmong community and explore new ways of seeing development to create a space for a new and shared understanding of the way in which development affects those it is purportedly designed to help.

#### **Procedures**

I agree, as a part of this study, to participate in conversations with Ms. Mendonca regarding women in the Hmong communities of Laos and their stories of development. I agree that Ms. Mendonca may record the conversation on audio, which will be transcribed. A copy of the transcription will be returned to me for review, editing and approval before its inclusion in the analysis. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time, may discontinue the conversation at any point, and may request changes or deletions. My participation in this research project is voluntary and any data I contribute to this study will not be confidential. I agree, as a part of this study, to participate in conversations with Ms. Mendonca regarding women in the Hmong communities of Laos and their stories of development. I agree that Ms. Mendonca may record the conversation on audio, which will be transcribed. A copy of the transcription will be returned to me for review, editing and approval before its inclusion in the analysis. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time, may discontinue the conversation at any point, and may request changes or deletions. My participation in this research project is voluntary and any data I contribute to this study will not be confidential. While the conversations and transcripts in this research are collaborative, the writing that comes from them is the researcher's product, and may include some editing by the respondent. I am therefore consenting to forgo anonymity under these conditions. I acknowledge that I have been given complete and clear information about this research, and it is my option to make the decision at the outset about whether to participate or not, and can withdraw at any time without any adverse consequences.

#### **Risk and Discomforts**

I am free to decline to answer any questions or stop the conversation at any point or my participation at any time. I understand that I may request to remove my entire transcript from the study. I also understand that I may be identified and quoted in the dissertation or subsequent publications.

**Benefits**

I will receive no monetary compensation. The anticipated benefit of this conversation to me is the personal reflection about how the stories of the Hmong women in Laos reveal a space in which a new and shared understanding of development can occur.

**Alternative**

I am free to choose not to participate in this study.

**Cost**

There will be no cost to me because of taking part in this study.

**Questions**

If I have questions or comments about the study, I may contact Ms. Mendonca at 7321 Geary Blvd., Apt. A, San Francisco, CA 94121, USA, via phone at 415.217.2196 or via email at kimberly.mendonca@gmail.com. I may also contact her advisor, Dr. Ellen Herda, at the University of San Francisco via phone at 415.422.2075 or via email at herdatemp@yahoo.com. Should I not want to address comments to either of them, I may contact the office of Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects between 8: 00 am and 5: 00 pm, Monday through Friday, by calling 415.422.6091 or by writing to the IRBPHS, Counseling Psychology Department, Education Bldg. – Room 017, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA, USA, 94117.

**Consent to Participate in Research**

I have a copy of this consent letter to keep. I understand that my participation in the dissertation research conducted by Ms. Mendonca is voluntary. I understand and agree with the above procedures and conditions.

---

Participant’s Signature Date

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Researcher’s Signature Date

---

Researcher’s Name (Print) Date

## Appendix D: Follow-up Letter

### **University of San Francisco Follow-up Letter**

Date  
Participant Name and Title  
Company or Organization  
Address

Dear Mr./Ms.;

Thank you for taking the time to meet with you on \_\_\_\_\_. I appreciate your willingness to participate in my research project. I think our conversation will be a valuable part of my dissertation.

I have attached a copy of the transcribed conversation. After reading through the transcription, I will summarize our conversation as an exploration of meaning and recognition of the contribution of women in the Hmong communities to the discourse of development in Laos.

Please take a moment to glance through the attached transcript and add the changes or clarifying comments you feel are appropriate. I will contact you in two weeks to discuss any changes you might have made.

Again, thank you for your participation.

Warm Regards,

Kimberly Mendonca

**Appendix E: Approval from Human Subjects Committee**

April 15, 2008

Dear Ms. Mendonca:

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your application has been approved by the committee (IRBPHS #08-026). Please note the following:

1. Approval expires twelve (12) months from the dated noted above. At that time, if you are still in collecting data from human subjects, you must file a renewal application.
2. Any modifications to the research protocol or changes in instrumentation (including wording of items) must be communicated to the IRBPHS. Re-submission of an application may be required at that time.
3. Any adverse reactions or complications on the part of participants must be reported (in writing) to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS at (415) 422-6091.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP  
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

-----  
IRBPHS - University of San Francisco  
Counseling Psychology Department  
Education Building - 017  
2130 Fulton Street  
San Francisco, CA 94117-1080  
(415) 422-6091 (Message)  
(415) 422-5528 (Fax)  
[irbphs@usfca.edu](mailto:irbphs@usfca.edu)

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<http://www.usfca.edu/humansubjects/>

## **Appendix F: Transcripts of Pilot Study**

November 3, 2007

Location: USF

Present: Chai Xiong, Edgar Ednacot, and Kimberly Mendonca

Note: Prior to the conversation, Edgar and I met Chai on the third floor of the Education building and we all introduced ourselves. This was our first meeting. Ellen had introduced us all via email and Chai and I had exchange a few emails prior to this conversation. Before we moved to a location outside to talk, Chai agreed to have both Edgar and me talk with him about Laos and current development issues there.

EE: She studying more specifically Hmong woman.

KM: Or I'm thinking about studying women, but I don't really know. I'm hoping that from this pilot conversation I can get a specific idea of what sort of development issues I'm interested in and is there enough information on women in how development in Laos affects them.

EE: So, we're both focusing on the relocation and how people are getting pushed down. I'm looking more at malaria because they are getting pushed down they are getting a lot of cases of malaria and people are dying from malaria. So, I'm trying to look at how health plays into that, what the government is doing, what NGO's are going, vs. what the people really want to do about the malaria problem. So, that's it.

KM: So, you are aware that the conversation is being tape and if at anytime you want to stop recording, we can stop it and you end the conversation or terminate it at anytime also. Just so that you are aware of that.

I'm interested in first finding out about you. Like your background and Laos in general. I've never been there. I've been to South East Asia. We took a trip there in May. We went to Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and uh....what's the other one? I've forgotten. Where did we start?

EE: Malaysia?

KM: Malaysia. And this May we are planning on going to Laos to visit. So, if you could just give us a brief description.

CX: Okay...well, I don't have vivid memory of the country.

KM: Okay.

CX: because when I came here I was...uh, I think 10. I was nine when we left Laos, so I've never been back there.



KM: Oh! That was one of my questions. When was the last time you had been there?

CX: So, that was like...I believe 1984 or '85 when we left the country. So, I kind of don't have any actual picture of what the country is like today, but I still have relatives over there and they send pictures and video so we can see what, what...we have that picture.

KM: Okay.

CX: I still have relatives who are from the mountain areas and I also have relatives in Vientiane. The capitol city. So, we kind of get all of it.

KM: So, you are getting all of the perspectives...

CX: Yeah. In Vientiane they are advanced and they are become more modernized. And we still have relatives in the mountains when they are like in their 50s and 60. So, you get to see the two different contrasts in terms of their lifestyles.

EE: Yeah...

KM: Okay and you're communicating with them by videos and pictures?

CX: Well, I think either by telephone. I think now days they have a telephone, pictures, tape cassette and video cassette.

KM: Okay, and how is their life? Are they being affected by development issues? Or is the government forcing them to move? Or are they having issues with the government? I mean... do you hear about that?

CX: Yeah, I think that actually two of my cousins that are not living in Vientiane, but closer to Vientiane Providence. Originally they were up in the mountains, but because like what you were saying the relocation...I don't know if they were forced, but they were given I guess the option to move or to relocate. And I think that they kind of decided to do that.

KM: They did...okay.

CX: But I do have...um one of my aunts...she still lives up in the mountains and three of her sons and one of her daughters are still up there and I remember my dad was telling them last year that they should relocate. Even if they don't have the financial help from the government that we were going to do that. Send some money to them to help them relocate, but they don't want to change their life styles...I guess. They still want to farm. They still want to raise animals.

EE: Are you ethnic Lao?

CX: I'm Hmong.

EE: Hmong...okay.

KM: So, what would be one of the reasons? Why is your dad telling your relatives that they need to move down? Is it because he's hearing things....Is your family here in the United States?

CX: Yeah.

KM: So are they hearing stuff in the news that's...

CX: Well, I think ...I remember my dad telling them that for them to stay up there in the mountains that from generations to generations they have no education. So, their illiterate for like three or four generations. From the mid 30's to now, they're still illiterate. So, the education is one of the things that my dad was trying to push. If they...although if the parents, although they are illiterate, if they move or relocate to the low land the children will have the opportunity to go to school where they will have a brighter future. That's what my dad was telling them to do that. That will give them the opportunity and first of all that's the education that he wants them to get and that's very important. Where economically and socially they may have obstacles but my dad at that time was willing to help them with a little bit of financial assistance.

KM: Is it because the government won't take the services up to them. I mean you said their not being educated up there. Is it because there are no schools?

CX: Yeah, yeah.

KM: There just working the land? So, they're just farmers.

CX: Yeah, no schools. I don't know if it's because of limited funding but they don't have any schools up there. And I remember my dad was telling me...actually my aunt just passed away about a couple of months ago and the reason was that there was no medical clinic...

KM: That was my next question...what about medical...medicines.

CX: Yeah, they didn't know what was wrong with her or why was she sick. I think that was the second thing that my dad was asking. If you stay in the low lands, relocate to the low lands, there are hospitals, medical clinics where if you're sick it's close by so you go and get that treated. So, unfortunately they didn't do that, so my uncle-in-law...he passed away and my aunt...she just passed away last month.

KM: Is the family still there? Are they going to remain...?

CX: Ummm...I think that one of her sons...she has two sons...I think that my dad was trying to push them and now that my aunt has passed away that that would be the rational for them to relocate. We're hoping that they are going to relocate to my cousin that is closest to them in Vientiane Providence so that they can have access to more of the services.

KM: Okay.

CX: ...the hospital. And I think that for their communications they have telephone access where they can call and we can talk over the phone.

KM: Oh that's good.

CX: Well, up there in the mountain land they have to come down just to talk to us.

KM: Oh...so it's a trip just to have a conversation.

CX: Yeah, yeah.

KM: So, how is life up there? I mean how are they supporting themselves?

CX: I think that farming...

KM: Farming? Okay.

CX: Yeah. Raising life stock and then mostly farming.

KM: And the children are there working with them?

CX: Yeah.

KM: It's a whole family affair. And the family structure...are their numerous generation in one household?

CX: Yeah. I think there is two generations that lives together.

KM: Okay.

CX: Actually, three. My aunts, and her sons, and her grandkids. And that's typical of the Hmong family.

KM: Is to have every body together?

CX: Yeah. I think that one thing is the financial situations...where if a son or a daughter...if they get married, financially and they can't support themselves then obviously they are not going to be able to move out, although they want to.

KM: (laughs) they want to get away from their parents!

CX: Yeah.

KM: Okay, um...I just forgot my next question. Do you have any?

EE: I guess...um like when people move down to the low lands...what kind of work are they looking to get in to? Because they are usually farming...can they farm the low lands too? What kind of jobs are they looking for?

CX: Yeah...I think my cousin...I know that when they relocated...there were no job for them, so financially and economically they didn't know what to do. So, we had to send them money to purchase their land for farming.

EE: Okay, okay.

CX: I also think that we sent them money to purchase the tracker so that they are able to farm. And I think that he also has a small business selling vegetables and other livestock like chickens. So, it's kind of like a small business. And I know that they aren't making a profit but the thing with that is that that enabled them to continue their lifestyle. My dad was telling me that as even though they don't make a profit they still have the resources...

EE: ...to provide for your family at least.

CX: Yeah, yeah. So he was saying they don't make any profit...they don't make any profit.

EE: But their not losing any money either.

CX: Yeah, their not losing money either. And we also help them to...I remember my dad would sent them money to build their house because we pay for that. And I remember that that was like four or five thousand dollars just to do that. That is one of the things that the relatives do...not promise, but we told them that these are things that we are going to help you with if you relocate. And I think that's one of the reasons why they decided to do that because without that I don't think that they would make that decision to come down.

EE: Do you think that a lot of other families have support from other countries? That like from the families that migrated over?

CX: Yeah, they were saying that you can tell if they have relatives in the United States because their life is different and the reason is because we have a lot of relatives over here that will send them money. Although it's not much, we have family that is willing to do that. Like on an annual basis we will send them that.

EE: You know that's really interesting because I was thinking about just right now...Oh! Maybe it's a fusion of horizons with myself. Did Ellen ever talk about fusion of horizon?  
CX: Yeah.

EE: Okay, good. Well, I don't know if I had one or not, but ....

KM: You could've!

EE: Yeah, yeah, maybe. It's a long like...cause we give money back to the Philippians. We have family there and they are very, very poor...very poor area... my dad's province.

KM: Okay.

EE: We send back money probably every other month to my aunts and uncles over there and we also send these renowned packages. Have you heard of them? We put a bunch of stuff in them like shoes, magazines...

KM: Oh! Just stuff?

EE: Just stuff.

KM: Stuff they might want.

EE: Yeah, and we send that every other month. And of course they are very appreciative.

KM: Right.

EE: But that...like I don't know....a family obligation. But it's not...it's kind of just understood that we give.

KM: Because you have more?

EE: Right. But if you parallel that with what development projects are, it's really interesting because like US Aid or World Bank...they kind of throw lots of money and they put these monies into programs to help countries and to help villagers and so forth but that money is totally taken differently then the money that you get from family.

KM: So, it's a different perception of the money?

EE: It's a different perception, but it's a different way of understanding of a handout vs....

KM: ...a loving gift...

EE: ...a loving gift from family or an expectation that they are just taking care of me. And I take care of them too.

KM: And we do it because we're blood.

EE: Yeah. Which is totally different than some foreigners or some big international bank giving you money or those kind of programs.

KM: So, does your family receive from other outside sources? Or is it just internal, family stuff?

CX: Yeah, I think it's mostly internal family. I don't know if they actually receive any assistance from the government. Although, recently I believe that my cousin...they move in, I believe, 1994 or '95 and I don't believe that at the time there was a program for assistance from the government, but I noticed recently like in 2003 or 2004 where you were talking about the government wanting to expand that and they were encouraging the hill tribe people to come down. And they wanted to provide the financial assistance, but we have relatives that were given that promise but when they did they didn't receive anything.

KM: So, there was a broken promise?

CX: Yeah and I think that's one of the things that triggered other hill tribes that although the government to the outside world, to the international community, that's what they're telling them...that's what we want them to do. To move down so that they can economically and socially they can develop, but when it comes down to it the people that are actually relocating they aren't getting that. And when people hear that, especially in the Hmong community, the Hmong people, from one family to another, then they don't believe it.

KM: So, news travels fast through the community. So, have there ever been incidents where people have gone back up to the hills? You know, like we're not getting what we need here so we're just going to go back to what we know?

CX: I don't know personally because I don't have any relatives that have done that, but yeah I'm sure that in general there are a lot of families that once they realize that they're not going to get any support from the government then that changes their whole living lifestyle so they can't survive and they have no choice but to go back.

EE: Because of that...there is obviously a lack of trust with ethnic minorities and the government, with the Lao PDR. I guess from what I've read or what I've heard from people is that it's corrupt. A lot of third world countries...it just very corrupt. But like the history of all of that...do you think that there will ever be a chance where people will actually trust the government again or...is it getting worse, is what I'm saying, or is it getting better?

CX: Um...I think recently...I don't know if you guys have heard about the situation with the Xiong Pow?

KM & EE: Yes...

CX: I think since that time... I think that before that from 2004 to 2007 there's a lot of animosity there. The Lao government and the people, especially the Hmong in the jungles of Laos, they were like going back and forth about the rebels and attacking. So, there's...that holds a lot of animosity between that period. But since this year, June 2007, I think the government...their like taking a different approach now, but I'm not sure if that approach is just to blind the international community or if they're actually making that changes because I know that we have relatives, not in the urban, but in the city where the government is telling or making promises to the Hmong to not to relocate but to trust the government to have the Hmong co-exist, if they were to relocate, with not just the Lao government but the Lao citizens in general and other minorities. I think that's in a sense they are trying to portray to the international community where that is happening in reality in the country, I don't know if that's happening...but especially for the Hmong people in the hills or in the jungle... I don't think they will ever have that trust. Because of the history of the government and the Hmong from generations and generations...I don't think that there will ever be that trust unless there is a major change in...

EE: ...the people that are running the Lao PRD, right?

CX: Yeah...

EE: Or they die. Right?

KM: Yeah...

EE: Because a lot of people...like the royal army... those people have been replaced with ...like Lao PDR, most of the people in charge are former army. They were all in the army...they were all captains and militants. And, I guess, they have that in the back of their head; I'm thinking... that they have that in the back of their head and their prejudice.

KM: So, their already coming to the table with something...this is the way it's going to be...

EE: Exactly! Yeah, they have their own intentions. It's not until that changes, that leadership changes, or they just die off...

KM: Or a true understanding of the other person because, I mean, because to me it sounds like there is struggle for power. Power there is more a status thing, not that it isn't here, in the government. I don't know...like the people of the hill tribes don't really have a say.

CX: Well, I think that Hmong... when you talk about Laos and the Hmong and the LPDR or the Lao people in general it always comes back to the Vietnam War. That's where

everything kind of started and in Hmong we have a saying that unless we can erase that, or go back and erase that, that that part of the history, the Hmong and the LPDR or the Hmong and that Laos there will always be that sense of, you know...

KM: Distrust.

CX: Yeah, distrust and we have a saying that the cut never healed. That the Vietnam War is a very deep cut. That it's not just a cut on your hands or your feet, but it's a cut in your heart and in your mind, your soul where it will never heal. A lot of the Hmong, even those that were sided with the LPDR at that time, with the communist at that time, their telling the Hmong that we sided with them, gave them our lives and we're not being treated the same. They still experience the prejudice and discriminations even those that are 100% with the government. They still don't trust them and especially the Hmong that had sided with the CIA. They still consider the Hmong the enemy because we sided with the CIA, I mean the Americans. They try to extinguish them because they don't want the Americans to exist in that country. We have 3 or 4 generations in Laos and the younger generations don't know...they were not part of it.

KM: They don't even know and probably don't even understand.

EE: Yeah, yeah.

CX: But their still be connected...

EE: Exactly.

CX: ...to what their grandparents or parents did.

KM: Three generations back...yeah.

EE: Wow. And that happens all the time.

KM: Yeah.

EE: In other countries. Like with Japanese- Americans when they got interned.

KM: Exactly.

EE: Thy joined the military too. They were put in concentration camps.

KM: Yeah. Born and raised here, and joined our military and were still segregated and put into camps just because of who they were or their associations with other people.

EE: You're right...that cut is deep.



CX: I think that even the older generations, Hmong parents, when they talk about the country of Laos they will always bring up the situation, the incident with the Vietnam War.

KM: (laughing) That's like the one founding thing that has them going and they won't let it go.

CX: Yeah, that's the founding event of the Hmong!

(Group laughs)

KM: I wasn't going to say it, but...

EE: You're good! We didn't learn that until just recently.

KM: Yeah, so that's awesome.

EE: It's good that you learned that now.

KM: Yeah, I was going to say it and then I stopped because I thought to myself, no that's theory.

CX: Yeah, I think that when we look at the history of the Hmong, especially the Hmong in Laos, that's what defines them.

KM: So, it's what happened before the Vietnam War and what happened after the Vietnam War. There's this huge event that's causing a lot of animosity.

CX: Yeah.

KM: That's really interesting.

EE: Wow.

KM: So, what about women and men? I'm just trying to figure out...I'm struggling with this whole idea if I should focus development in general or if I should focus on how women effect development. I'm interested in the family structure. What role do women play in the house and in the economy and the community?

CX: Well, I think women back in the old days don't have any say when it comes to how the family is run. They don't have any say outside of the house. They job is usually to bear child, cook and take care of their husband or the family. That's the main role of the woman.

KM: Okay.

CX: So in terms of education and tradition and culture, they don't have any of that. That's not their responsibility. It is the husband, the guy, or their sons to carry that from their generations to the next generations. Where once the woman is married, not to cut ties with her family, but once she is married her responsibility is with her husband and his family.

KM: Her new family.

CX: And in Laos that is still a common practice.

KM: So, do the women go out...okay, so from what I've read it's always portrayed as the woman bears most of the responsibility of the home...whether that feedings, marketing, going out and selling their products... it just seems that a lot of responsibility falls on their shoulders. Is that how you would see it?

CX: Yes.

KM: So, how do you see them playing into the whole forced migrations or voluntary migrations? As it stands now? I mean, do they have a say?

CX: Yeah, interesting. That's what happened...getting back to my aunt. At that time, she wanted to move, but her husband says no.

KM: Right. But your dad is having conversations with your aunt, right? He wasn't having conversations with your uncle was he?

CX: Well, he was having conversations with both. My aunt was saying that she wanted to come and then she would tell my uncle, but he didn't want to come. So, my dad talked to both of them but when it comes down to it's the guys who make the final decision and he says no. and he was still farming at the time and still had some livestock that he still wanted to raise, so he don't want to come. But she wanted to and her sons and her daughter they wanted to come too.

KM: So that family wanted to go, but the dad...

CX: He didn't want to. So he's the one that has the final say at that time.

KM: And then he passed away.

CX: Yeah he passed away.

KM: And then she passed away and never did move down.

CX: Yeah, and actually when he passed away she wanted to relocate at that time and it was her decision but it was unfortunately that she passed away before she had a chance to do that. And I think she was telling my dad and my cousin in Vientiane Province that

she wants to relocate because she didn't like the lifestyle up there. Their just poor, no advancement, no development and she visited my cousin in Vientiane Province and that was the lifestyle that she wanted to live. To them, even though it's not much, but to them that's their dream...

KM: Their utopia!

(Group laughs)

CX: Yeah!

EE: Nice! You put that in.

KM: Totally!

EE: Note that we're laughing too!

KM: so, yeah, she had a vision as to what she wanted her life to be so she was imagining that but she could never achieve that ...it never came to fruition. Do you think that her children are holding on to her ideal?

CX: I think her daughter will probably move with my cousins. Two of her sons, one of them is married and he might want to, but his wife doesn't want to because she wants to be close to her family.

KM: Right.

CX: So probably her daughter and her one son that is not married. They are probably that two that might relocate because they want to live their lifestyle in the big city. We're hoping that now that both of the parents have past away that they will make that decision to come down and to relocate. Because like my dad was saying that if they stay up there that no matter what they do they are not going to get anywhere.

KM: It's not going to come to them...they have to go to it.

EE: Right. That's interesting because let's say 10 years ago you didn't really thinking about moving. People didn't think about moving or relocating did they?

CX: Hmm...I don't think so.

EE: Is it only because your dad felt like they should move that they started thinking about it or because they have always had it in the back of their minds that they should move?

CX: Yeah, I think...that in terms of their mindset they don't see outside of their realm of their community.

EE: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CX: They just say this is all we can do and from generations to generations that's all they see. But when we have a relative outside that kind of expands or shows them a different horizon a little bit, they start to see that. And especially with the education and be able to read. Not only in the Laotian language but also in Hmong so that they can communicate. And I think in a way my dad kind of knew how to get them to see that. And education is a very important thing, so he always when we talk to the family, especially in the mountains we have to use the rational of education. You know if you stay up there it could be three or four generations that won't be able to read. So, that if you come down in just one or two generations your children, you will see that progress. Although the parents are uneducated for their children they are willing to make that risk to take that chance. And I think that my dad kind of knew that.

KM: Yeah, so he played that card.

(Group laughs)

KM: So you said that you came over when you were 10? So did your family...where did your dad come from?

CX: We are originally from the Xam Nua Province, which is by...about 100 kilometers from Vietnam.

KM: Okay.

CX: So, we are from the northern part of Laos. And that's where my grandparents and great-grandparents are from...we trace back to our history to about 1860's.

KM: Oh, wow!

CX: Yeah. That's where they originally come when they traveled from China.

KM: Okay. Is it like city or ...

CX: Yeah, at that time it was a big city, but it was still up in the mountains.

KM: Okay, and what made your parents decide...Are they here now?

CX: For my dad, he didn't want to come. After the war he didn't want to come, so they stayed. So, I guess a lot of my family, cousins, decided to move or immigrate to Thailand in 1975. My dad didn't want to come. He was a soldier so he wanted to stay.

EE: Soldier in the royal Lao?

CX: Yeah, I think he...they called him the SU Special Guerilla Unit for the American.

KM: Oh so he sided with the Americans?

CX: Yeah, so he was a soldier, I think he was a Lieutenant, so he didn't want to come. So, from 1975 to 1979 he kind of stayed behind. And kind of defend what was left at that time. And then in 1980, he was captured. Even though he was no longer a soldier...but for some reason they kind of traced back his involvement, so even though you lay down your arms and you are just like a citizen now. They kind of traced that back and captured him. He was imprisoned for 18 months.

KM: Wow!

CX: After he got out, that's when he made the decision...he was saying that, you know, if he stay he can not co-exist with the government. He sees no progress with his own life and that with his children. He finally realized, understand, that his children are not going to have any future so that was when he decided that no matter what he was going to try find a country or place where his children would have the opportunity to have brighter futures. So, that's why we immigrated to Thailand in 1981 and I think we were in a camp for four or five years before we actually moved or immigrated over here.

KM: And is he glad that he came over here?

CX: Yeah, he's glad because, you know, we... for those unfortunate families that are back there, he was saying that their lifestyle is still in the 40's or 50's and we're now in 2007. So, he's glad that that was a wise decision.

KM: That's awesome.

CX: And all of those, my cousins and other family, wanted to come too but we didn't have enough money.

KM: Right.

CX: So, that's why they were not able to come. And my dad was saying that it was a risk, you know. To think about it...at that time, the danger of it is that...it's life or death. You don't know what's going to be a head. So you either make...if you make it, you make it and if you don't ...

KM: Yeah, it's a huge risk.

CX: Yeah it was, but he was willing to make it.

EE: But when you thought about what's a head, right, did he imagine something? Because with my family, they imagined the US to be opportunity and money growing on trees and they really thought that....

KM: The whole American Ideal!

EE: Yeah, exactly. They really felt that. They were like, my sons going to have a good education here and all of that. Didn't they think it would be more positive than negative anyway?

CX: Well, I don't know in terms of that detail. I think that in a way they kind of knew....Like I was telling about the younger generation, at that time because of the lack of education they didn't know what democracy or... was at that time. But they knew what communism was and to them as soon as it won't be communist to them it would be a better place to be.

EE: It will be better no matter what.

KM: We don't like this, so no matter what it is it will be better.

EE: It has to be better.

KM: So, there was hope.

CX: Yeah. And I think one of the other things is that they kind of had a sense of prosperity and financial state of the US because they supported the war and they had a lot of resources. And in a sense, they kind of knew.

KM: Yeah, because you saw them come over and everyone saw what they had with them.

EE: Wow. Very cool. So you still have family in Vientiane?

CX: I think that I have one of my uncles and two of his sons still in the Vientiane Province.

EE: I think we're going there.

KM: Oh, we are?

EE: I think we are. I want to go there.

KM: Well, we can go there.

EE: Because that's where the ministry of health is so I really want to talk to folks there.

KM: Well, thank you! That was actually a lot of good information. I can write on this.

(Group laughs)

EE: Oh that's good!

KM: And it gives me a better understanding of what's going on. Because, you know, I read all of this stuff but I'm not hearing it from someone or some family who's been there and experienced it. Thank you! I appreciate your time.

----- *End of Transcript* -----