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Celebrating Hmong: A Minute Ethnography of Hmong Americans in Minneapolis

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Celebrating Hmong: A Reflection

On Friday, July 30, 2021, the state of Minnesota celebrated Suni Lee Day, which honored the first Hmong-American to represent team USA at the Olympics. Lee proudly came home with the individual all-around gold medal in women's artistic gymnastics. The 18-year-old was born in the Twin Cities (Skluzacek, 2021), home to the largest Hmong population in America ("Hmong in Minnesota," 2021).

The first time I heard of the Hmong people was on June 16, 2021, when I learned that I would serve my summer with AmeriCorps at a Hmong elementary school in Minneapolis. Through learning about the Mekong River, eating Pho in the school cafeteria, and speaking to bilingual students living in multigenerational households, I have slowly learned more about the uniqueness and fascinating features of the Hmong culture. In addition to my service with AmeriCorps, I spoke with "Sandy Yang" (given a pseudonym for her privacy) a first-generation Hmong-American living in the Twin Cities. At the end of this nearly ethnographic summer, I was shocked that I had never previously heard of the Hmong people before this experience. Despite their rich history and traditions, the Hmong culture remains lesser-known by the general public. The purpose of this essay is to bring about awareness and celebrate the Hmong people, whose history, traditions, spirituality, and language have created a unique and remarkable culture that deserves to be recognized and celebrated by the American society that some Hmong now call home.

History

The Hmong people do not have their own country, but they do have a history. History is fundamental to culture because it "provides stories about the past that serve as lessons on how to

live in the present” (Samovar et al., 2017, p.57). Historical events that caused the Hmong people to immigrate to America occurred only within the last fifty years.

Northern Laos and Southeast Asia were home to the Hmong for 200 years before the Vietnam war (Wilson-Owens, 2007; Yang & Vang, 2017). When the Vietnamese wanted Hmong villages, General Vang Pao led an army of Hmong to defend their land. After successful defensive battles, the Hmong fought the Vietnamese in territories other than their villages. As the army grew larger, Hmong boys were drafted into the army as young as 10 years old. War offered opportunities for the Hmong, such as piloting military airplanes. One Hmong Vietnam veteran recalls that if a Hmong pilot heard that their village was under attack, the pilot would fly alone (against orders) to their village. Although pilots were instructed to report those who committed this act, the other pilots would never report against each other, because they too wanted to ensure the safety of their home villages.

The conditions of the Vietnam war worsened, and eventually, the Hmong had no choice but to flee their homeland. America sent planes to retrieve refugees, yet halted evacuation procedures after General Vang Pao arrived in America (Yang & Vang, 2017). This may be because at the end of the Vietnam War, the American government cut aid that was being sent to Laos (Rattanasengchanh, 2013). Thus, one may conclude that once the important military leader was safe, his people were of less importance to the American government.

The remaining Hmong fled to other countries, found safety in Laotian refugee camps, or attempted to cross the Mekong River to find safety in Thailand. Over 50,000 Hmong died trying to cross the Mekong River to get to the border of Thailand, and over 100,000 Hmong died trying to flee Laos (Yang & Vang, 2017). The majority of the Hmong in America came directly from Laotian or Thai refugee camps (Wilson-Owens, 2007).

Interview

Sandy Yang is a first-generation Hmong-American. Her uncles fought in the Vietnam War as teenagers. After Vang Pao was evacuated, Yang's family was one of the many that braved the journey across the Mekong River. Yang lives in a multigenerational household with her parents, siblings, and children. Like many Hmong youths, Yang's children understand Hmong but have great difficulty speaking it.

Hmong Household

Unlike typical American families, the Hmong often live in multigenerational households where the elderly are most respected. Like many Asian cultures (Samovar et al., 2017, p. 94), in Hmong families, the eldest or the grandparents are most respected, called upon first, and are looked to for decisions or answers.

Gender roles are also influential in Hmong households. If the household elderly are mentally unstable, decision-making responsibility falls upon the eldest son. For Hmong people, such as in the broader Asian cultural background, power and respect within the household are often male-oriented (Samovar et al., 2017, p. 83). However, younger generations of Hmong Americans grow more gender-inclusive along with modern American culture.

In addition to grandparents, others contribute to the well-being of families through the practice of collectivism, where the needs of the group are of higher importance than those of the individual (Samovar et al., 2017, p. 88). The Hmong people provide each other with social, emotional, physical, and monetary support. Yang recites the collectivist proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," when describing the support of the Hmong community. "When you invite someone over, the whole clan comes," she says.

Clans are distinguishable by last names. Clans are essentially supportive extended family. Yang explains, “If you meet a stranger with the same last name, you are family and you can immediately trust them.” Hmong are also not to marry anyone in their own clan, because this would essentially be equivalent to marrying one’s extended family.

Yang notes the younger generation’s struggle between the collectivism of Hmong culture and the individualism of American society. For example, a person in the younger generation may only invite two people over and expect only two people to show up. In this way, the younger Hmong American is dishonoring the Hmong collectivist tendency that assumes that an invite to one is an invite to the whole clan. However, the young Hmong generation can be more inclusive than their traditional elders. Specifically, young Hmong Americans may consider clan members to include not only those with the same last names but also close friends who are non-Hmong in ethnicity. Thus, in some ways, the young Hmong American can be less inclusive (e.g., including only one person instead of everyone), while at the same time, be more inclusive (e.g., including those of non-Hmong ethnicity into the clan).

Many Hmong children have an American first name and a Hmong middle name as a tribute to both their new life and their heritage. Yang explains that immigrant parents often named their babies after the nurses that delivered them. This was not only a thank-you to the medical staff that delivered their children, but also due to the Hmong parents not knowing any American names. For this reason, there are many young Hmong Americans with names that were more popular in previous generations, such as Nancy, Linda, and Cindy.

Traditions and Spirituality

In celebration, popular foods in Hmong culture are egg rolls, pho, soup bases, Kapon soup, sticky rice, and tricolor drinks. Gifts are usually only given at birthdays, weddings, baby

blessings, funerals, and other celebrations of life. Monetary endowments are the most common type of gift in Hmong culture. Much like Americans, Hmong gather for weddings, funerals, graduations, and newborn children. The largest of celebrations, however, is the Hmong New Year.

Hmong New Year is the most significant holiday for the Hmong people. Hmong New Year arrives at the end of the harvest season based on the lunar calendar, which typically occurs between October and January. Celebrations include bullfighting, games, and feasts. Hmong-Americans have altered the traditions of the Hmong New Year, as there is no longer celebratory bullfighting, and many events often depend on the weather. Hmong-American New Year also now features Miss Hmong beauty pageants, dance competitions, and wearing traditional clothes at celebrations.

Religion and Rituals

In addition to the holiday celebration, religion plays a role in Hmong traditions. The three most common religions for Hmong people are animism (the belief that objects and phenomena have souls), shamanism, and Christianity. Generally, Hmong are pantheists, meaning they believe in many supernatural forces. This includes natural and ancestral spirits, as well as spirits existing for everyday necessities. For example, this may include spirits of the cooking hearth, the marital bedroom, and herbal medicine (Tapp, 1989). The Hmong people are traditionally deeply spiritual, and this can be seen through the various rituals that surround daily life as well as larger milestones.

Yang grew up as a Hmong Shaman. She emphasizes the importance of honoring ancestors and house spirits. Ancestral spirits watch and protect the household and visit in dreams. During the Hmong New Year, the Hmong will honor the spirits of their ancestors, cleanse the

home of bad spirits, and rejuvenate the souls of both the living and the deceased family members.

The theme of the “soul” is incredibly prominent throughout Hmong spirituality. The soul of a human is described as playful, much like a child, and thus there is great worry about the soul wandering. An individual is not necessarily attached to their soul. Rather, the physical body is like a house that the soul can leave freely. Thus, one’s wandering soul can lead to it getting lost, and the consequences may result in harsh sickness or great misfortune, such as an accident that causes physical harm (Tapp, 1989).

The Hmong are also deeply connected to their ancestors, not just in the physical world, but additionally in the afterlife. In life, Hmong typically live in intergenerational households. Therefore, younger generations are more socialized with older generations than in mainstream Western society. The elderly are also more celebrated and respected in Hmong communities. These attributes of respect go beyond the living world and extend into an individual’s death. Thus, ancestors are respected even after they have passed. In this way, the role of ancestors and regard for the elderly are tied into the Hmong spiritualism.

Marriage

Like typical American families, marriage in the Hmong household calls for traditions and rituals. Xiong explains that there are four ways that Hmong can get married. First, there is the old way which is known as “stealing the bride,” also known as “kidnapping the bride.” The process begins when a man chooses a woman who he thinks will make a good wife. To marry the woman, the groom and his family steal her at night to make her his bride. This is not just an expression; the woman is physically taken. As a captive, the woman has no say, and her family

cannot protest, as they may not know of her whereabouts. Although this is typically not practiced anymore, this is how Yang's grandmother was married.

However, one article ("Bride kidnapping," 2022). suggests that this practice of "stealing the bride" is a way for young lovers to choose their significant other in a culture where marriages were typically arranged. From this perspective, the "kidnapping" was actually a cover-up for a runaway to preserve the image of the purity of Hmong women. This maintenance of purity is especially important for the Hmong people, as women were expected to be modest and well-mannered. Additionally, Hmong consider cohabitation before marriage shameful, and therefore, "stealing the bride" offered a way for young couples to live together before marriage.

The second way to get married is still commonly practiced. The groom's family must conduct a sacred ritual to call upon the spirits of the bride's family. This ritual involves sacrificing a chicken, waving the chicken in circles in front of the bride, and chanting. Three days later there is a celebration that is similar to an American engagement party. The groom will also pay the "bride's price" which is when the groom's family pays the bride's family for the marriage. These components were how Yang was married. The other two common ways that Hmong marry include having an American wedding or eloping. Traditionally, Hmong women keep their original clan names. The younger generation now considers changing the last name to be an option. Like many Americans, some Hmong hyphenate their last names.

Birth and Death

Funerals are another carefully handled Hmong ritual. Funerals practice spirituality. Spirituality includes practices that do not necessarily require a strict formal religion (Samovar et al., 2017, p. 107). In traditional Hmong villages, funeral rituals would last for a week, although, the funeral would not happen immediately. It was important for funerals to last for such an

extended period because the living had to prepare proper rituals to ensure that the deceased's soul was not lost from wandering.

After the deceased had passed, messages would be sent (by foot) to the deceased's friends, siblings, and children in other villages. The deceased would often lie in their home for about two weeks before they were buried. Hmong-American families still preserve the sacredness of funerals, yet there are now changes to fit American society. The funeral is a four-day process, Friday through Monday, with each day designated for specific ritualistic purposes. In one of these rituals, the family uses a drum and chants to guide ancestral spirits home so the souls of the recently deceased can be reunited with family in the afterlife. In America, there are Hmong funeral homes that help Hmong Americans with this process. However, because the funerals take so long, funeral homes are often overcrowded. When Yang's grandmother passed away, they could not hold a funeral for her for two months after her passing. Hmong people cannot go to traditional American funeral homes because they do not understand the custom and necessities of the rituals. With the addition of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hmong funeral rituals have recently been shortened to a two-day ceremony, typically occurring over Saturday and Sunday weekend days. If a Hmong had lived a short life before passing, such as a child or a young unmarried adult, their funeral may only last one day. This is because longer lives call for more celebration and acknowledgment, whereas shorter lives do not. This relates to attitudes towards yearly birthday celebrations: birthdays become increasingly important to celebrate as parents grow older. Adult children will host parties for their elderly parents to give blessings and celebrate long life.

In addition to death, there is a ritual around birth. The Hmong believe that each body has three souls: the first soul appears when the baby is conceived; the second soul appears when the

baby is born, and the third soul the family must call upon three days after the baby's birth. If the baby cries too much it means that their soul is lost. This soul-calling ritual includes a celebration with a sacrificial chicken, a medicine man and medicine woman, and a white string tied around the baby's wrist (Rice, 2000; "The Split Horn", 2021) because the color white symbolizes peace and happiness. This process of string tying is a blessing called Khi Tes and may occur at other important times of life, such as birthdays, graduations, or overcoming times of sickness (MV, 2019).

Language

Hmong is a language, and language itself is "a means of preserving culture" (Samovar et al., 2017, p. 266). In Yang's family, everyone except for the children speaks Hmong, and everyone speaks English. She expresses that it is easier to talk to (and discipline) the children in English. Some Hmong children are fluent in Hmong because grandparents in a multigenerational household may not speak English.

The dialect of the Hmong language affects communication through pronunciation, accents, vocabulary, and grammar (Samovar et al., 2017, p. 274). Hmong dialect includes Green Hmong and White Hmong among many others, just as there is British English and American English. Yang's husband is Green Hmong and Yang is White Hmong. Communication between Green and White Hmong can be difficult. For example, the word for "blanket" in Green Hmong is the word for "bridge" in White Hmong, and the word for "carry" in Green Hmong is the word for "dog" in White Hmong. This difficulty in differentiating dialects can also influence why parents may choose to not teach their children the Hmong language.

The Hmong language is changing, in part to globalization, which is the reshaping and refining of culture through exposure to other peoples and nations (Samovar et al., 2017, p. 77).

After the Vietnam war, the Hmong were separated into different countries, and many Hmong are not teaching their children the language. For example, Yang's husband was born in France, and he learned Hmong in school classes. While many children hear and understand Hmong in their households, they may struggle to enunciate the words correctly, as is the case with Yang's children. The Hmong language is in danger of extinction. Yang expresses that learning the language formally is much more difficult than learning the Hmong language at home. The less exposed a person is to a language, the more difficult it will be for them to use and practice their language skills.

Conclusion

When I asked Yang what she wanted people to know most about the Hmong people, she had this to say:

The Hmong do not have a land, but we are still a culture and a people. The Hmong have a beautiful history and heritage. Anyone and everyone should attend the Hmong New Year and experience the celebrations for themselves. I cannot speak for all Hmong, but the Hmong people welcome newcomers with open arms because they love to share our culture and traditions.

The Hmong American people have a tragic past, yet they are not well known by the larger American society. There is so much more to learn about the Hmong culture than was discussed in this essay, including parenting traditions, how sociological issues are dealt with, and how the younger culture balances their commitment to their past while trying to keep up with the ever-changing mainstream American society. Another interesting area of research could include the symbolism of the chicken in rituals and spirituality.

Overall, research would benefit from exploring the Hmong culture, because of the different intergenerational experiences that have occurred in such a brief period. These changes will impact American society as time goes on because generations of future Americans will have

biological and ethnic ties to Hmong culture. It is important to study the traditions of the older Hmong generations and how they affect the younger Hmong Americans while the older generations are still around to provide their living history accounts of the historical events they experienced. I felt the sharing and the acceptance that Yang discusses, and I encourage others to pursue further knowledge of this remarkable culture.

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