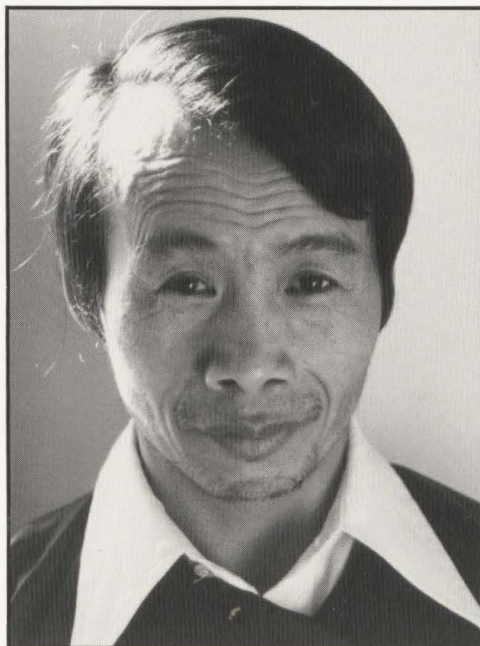


I Am a Shaman: A Hmong Life Story with Ethnographic Commentary

M1096

*Southeast Asian
Refugee Studies*

Occasional Papers



Number Eight
Dwight Conquergood, ethnographer
Paja Thao, shaman
Xa Thao, translator

**I AM A SHAMAN:
A Hmong Life Story with Ethnographic Commentary**

**Southeast Asian Refugee Studies
Occasional Papers
Number Eight**

**Dwight Coñquergood, ethnographer
Paja Thao, shaman
Xa Thao, translator**

**Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1989**

SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEE STUDIES

Occasional Papers

Series Editor: Bruce T. Downing

Number One: *A Bibliography of the Hmong (Miao)*
Compiled by Douglas P. Olney

Number Two: *White Hmong Language Lessons*
By Doris Whitelock

Number Three: *White Hmong Dialogues*
By David Strecker and Lopao Vang

Number Four: *Training Southeast Asian Refugee Women for Employment:
Public Policies and Community Programs, 1975-1985*
By Sarah R. Mason

Number Five: *An Annotated Bibliography of Cambodia and
Cambodian Refugees*
Compiled by John Marston

Number Six: *Southeast Asian Refugee Youth: An Annotated Bibliography*
Compiled by Ruth E. Hammond and Glenn L. Hendricks

Number Seven: *The Hmong: An Annotated Bibliography, 1983-1987*
Compiled by J. Christina Smith

A publication of the
Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
University of Minnesota
330 Hubert H. Humphrey Center
301 19th Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

1989

Publication No. CURA 89-3

Text of Paja Thao's story © 1986 Dwight Conquergood.
All rights reserved.

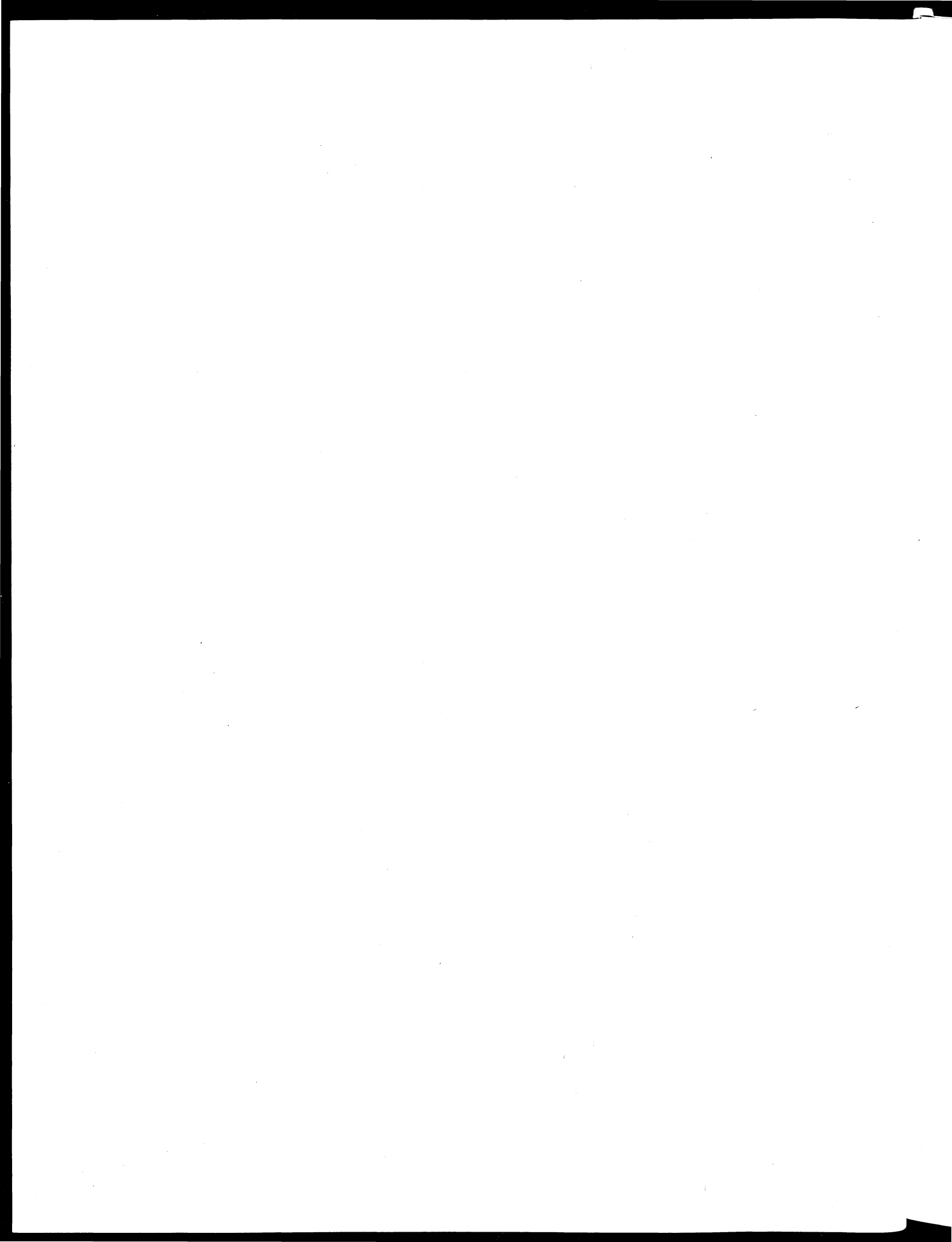
Edited by Ruth Taswell

“In the beginning there was a bad God who sent the demon of death down to earth to bring misery and sickness. God sent a shaman to earth with ‘equipment’ and he healed the people. The demon of death turned him into a pig and he had to leave, but he left his ritual objects and taught the people how to be shaman and how to heal. Follow his ways. He was the original healer.”

Xiong Hu, leader of the Chicago Hmong Community

The lifeway of the shaman is nearly as old as human consciousness itself, predating the earliest recorded civilizations by thousands of years. Through the ages, the practice of shamanism has remained vital, adapting itself to the ways of all the world’s cultures.

Joan Halifax, *Shaman: The Wounded Healer*



CONTENTS

	Page
Preface	vii
Acknowledgements	xiii
I Am A Shaman	1
Ethnographic Commentary	41
Introduction	42
Cosmology and Community	44
Shamanism: The Linchpin of Hmong Cosmology	47
Initiation and Instruction	47
Continuity with Tradition	50
Shamanism and Healing	51
The Dramaturgy of Healing	62
The Politics of Shamanism	73
A Life Synopsis of a Hmong Woman Shaman	78
Notes	83
References	85



A Hmong pandau ("cloth made beautiful like a flower") shows shamanic rituals:
(top) shaman shaking before altar, man hitting gong;
(bottom) shaman calling spirits and offering pig.

PREFACE

The decision to publish a study of Hmong shamanism that would feature extensively the voice of a single shaman was inspired by the “person-centered” ethnographic work of Langness and Frank. “What this consists of is a rigorous yet compassionate effort on the part of American scholars and others to portray the lives of ordinary individuals, in cultures and contexts sometimes far removed from the ones they know, with the kind of perceptiveness and detail that transform a stranger we might meet in our personal lives into a friend” (1981, p. 1). By inviting people from the cultures we study to speak for themselves – as they are quite able and eager to do – we move from observation to dialogue. When speaking for themselves, they are speaking to us. And what they have to say makes claims on us. Experiencing another culture through a speaking subject, a human voice, helps keep us alive to “existential human identities” and resistant to “the transformation of the human into the specimen” (Said 1978, pp. 142, 155).

Paja Thao is a Hmong refugee from the mountains of Laos. He arrived in Chicago February 21, 1984. The oral text that follows was recorded six months after his arrival in the United States. He

vii



The family offers a chicken during the ceremony to open the altar in America.



Paja Thao preparing spirit papers for a Shamanic performance.



Daughters
Zoua and Kia

The family
often
eaten during
the evening
to open the
the
America

abandoned his farm and escaped with a band of fellow villagers in June, 1975. They walked for fifteen days until reaching Thailand. He lived with thousands of other refugees in Camp Nam Yao for eight years. At the time this oral narrative was recorded, August 12, 1984, he lived on the eighth floor of a high-rise tenement building in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago. Now he lives in Appleton, Wisconsin.

He was about 49 years old at the time this life story was taped. His wife Yer Vang is about four years younger than he. The Hmong did not keep birth records or celebrate birthdays in their highland villages in Laos, so the reckoning of age is part guesswork. Paja is the father of twelve children, seven boys and five girls. The oldest son, now about 33 years old, still lives in Laos. Paja has not heard from his son since he escaped Laos. He knows this son must have children, but he does not know how many. He has nine known grandchildren. His second son, Yong Lue, is 30 years old and at the time this text was recorded he lived three floors below Paja in the same building with his wife and two children. Paja has two married daughters still living in Refugee Camp Ban Vinai, Thailand, with his other six grandchildren. When I was doing fieldwork in Camp Ban Vinai during 1985 I met both daughters and their families.

On August 19, 1984, six months after arrival in this country, Paja's eleventh child was born in a Chicago hospital. Paja counts little La as his fifteenth child, because four children died in Laos, three boys and one girl. Another son has been born since the family moved to Appleton.

ix

ON THE TRANSLATION

Xa Thao was the principal translator of this text. A relative of Paja, and the son of a shaman, he was specially qualified to serve as translator for this project. I worked with him during the translation process, but always deferred to his greater authority regarding the complexities of translation.

I have taken the translated text and arranged it on the page so that it looks like a poem instead of a series of prose paragraphs. In following this method, I am influenced by the work of several noted anthropologists and folklorists who believe that the verbal art of an oral culture should be transcribed as poetry instead of prose in order to appreciate the hallmarks of orality: rhythmic repetitions and formulaic language. Paja Thao, like many Hmong refugees, is nonliterate. The Hmong language did not have an alphabet until French and American missionaries developed one in the 1950s and 1960s.

Quotations from three humanist scholars set forth a supportive rationale for this translation mode:

Recently, noting similarities between spoken narrative and modern verse (much as critics have noted similarities between folk art and modern painting), we have begun to think of them as poetry. The change is productive. Poetry has exalted connotations in our culture, and naming stories poetry (like naming patchwork quilts abstract art) fights nobly against the denigrations of their creators. Some American Indian people do order their narratives into lines and stanzas, and setting any tale out on paper as though it were verse assaults the reader's complacency by forcing the story's words into visibility.

(Glassie 1982, p. 39)

If anthropologists, folklorists, linguists, and oral
historians
are interested in the full meaning
of the spoken word
then they must stop treating oral narratives
as if they were reading prose
when in fact they are listening to dramatic poetry.

(Tedlock 1983, p. 123)

Indeed, language is so overwhelmingly oral that of all the many thousands of
languages — possibly tens of thousands — spoken in the course of human history only
around 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have
produced literature, and most have never been written at all.

(Ong 1982, p. 7)

Elizabeth Fine has set forth the most conceptually developed discussion of these issues and
methods in *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print* (1984). See also Hymes (1981), Toelken and
Tacheeni (1981), Rothenberg (1985), and Clifford and Marcus (1986).

I hope that by casting Paja Thao's life story as an epic poem, the reader will be able to
appreciate better the artistry of his oral mode of composition — the verbal echoes and rhythmic
refrains, the interlaced pattern of imagery, the evocative allusions, and the power of simplicity. Some
of us who have spent time with the Hmong in Chicago — Joe Davy, Taggart Siegel, Michele Gazzolo,
Jerry Zbiral, and myself — privileged to share in their stories and ceremonial performances, have been
struck by the pointed beauty and dignity of their expressive art which a prosaic rendering would blunt.
We hope the words of Paja Thao will give a keener sense of how much there is to learn from these
people about courage, belief, and human kindness.

VIDEO-DOCUMENTARY

This monograph is an integral part of the award-winning documentary *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America*. The same fieldwork research produced both the print publication and the video-documentary. The shaman Paja Thao is featured in both the documentary and this monograph. Readers who become interested in the life story of Paja Thao have the opportunity to meet him and his family in the documentary. Some of the extraordinary shamanic performances he describes in this document can be seen in the documentary. Likewise, Zoua Yang, the woman shaman and herbalist whose life synopsis concludes the ethnographic commentary here, is featured in the opening scenes. Her husband Yang Lau, also quoted in the commentary section, is the first shaman to perform in the documentary.

The two media — print and film — complement one another. The printed text allows for depth and fuller description of context and traditions. Film media, however, give a sense of dramatic immediacy and experiential fullness to the events. One can see the faces, hear the voices, and experience the dynamism of a shaman's ritual performance. The ideal mode of learning is to use both media — print and video — together.



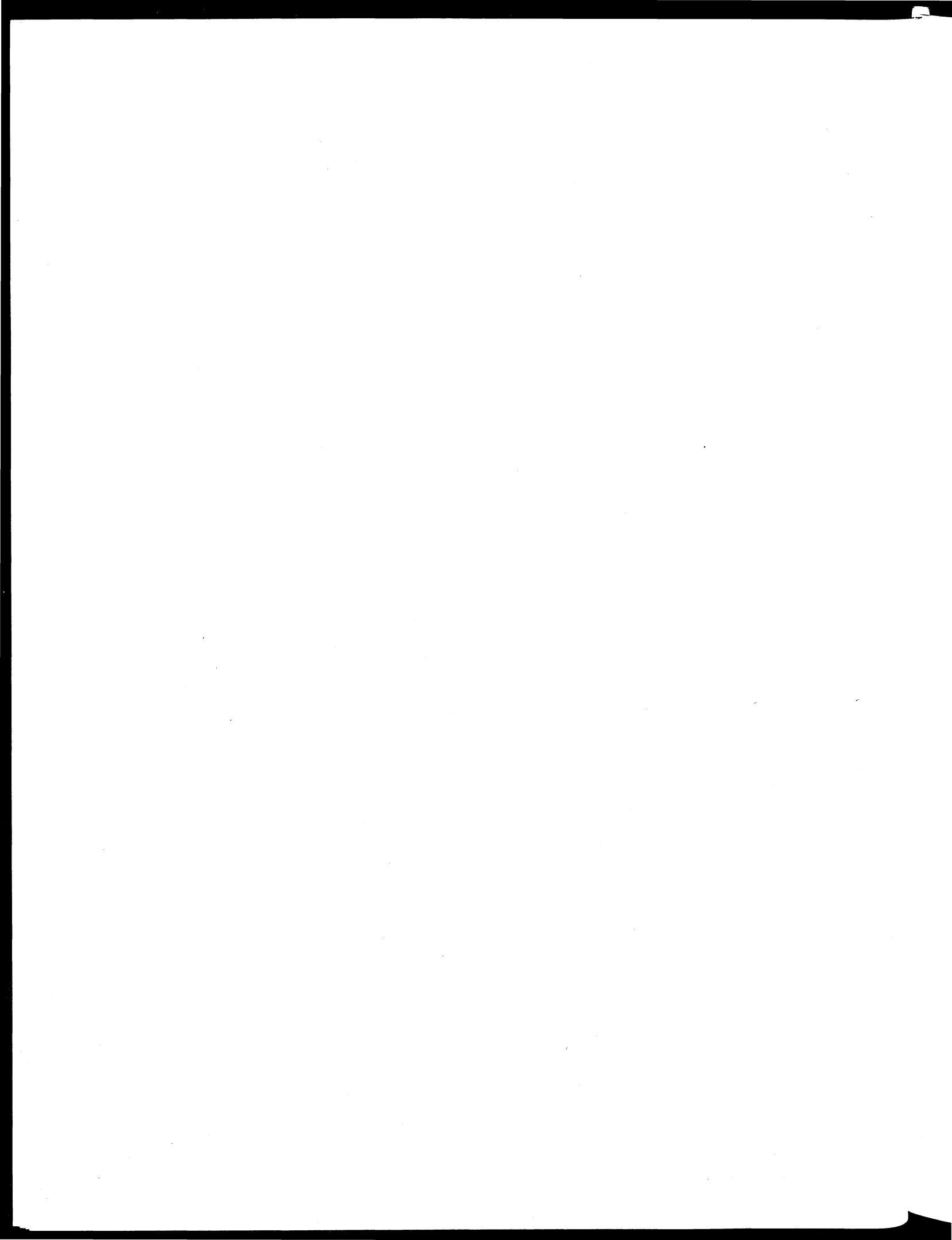
Conquergood
videotapes
shaman Dia
Lee sewing
pandau in front
of her altar in
Chicago.
(photo by Jerry
Zbiral)

The documentary was produced by Taggart Siegel and myself. It has received a number of awards:

Silver Plaque	Chicago International Film & Video Festival 1985
Winner	UCLA Folklore Film Festival 1986
Special Merit Award	Tokyo Videofest 1986
Regional Winner	Frank O'Connor Memorial Award of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Its running time is 28 minutes and it can be ordered from Siegel Productions, P.O. Box 6123, Evanston, IL 60202, phone: 312/528-6563.

Dwight Conquergood



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this monograph was funded by the Illinois Humanities Council, the Northwestern University Research Grants Committee, the Illinois Arts Council, the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts (Northwestern). Dean Roy Wood of the School of Speech, Northwestern University, granted me a research sabbatical winter and spring quarters, 1985, to conduct the fieldwork in Thailand. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the International Rescue Committee (Thailand) that enabled me to do fieldwork in Refugee Camp Ban Vinai.

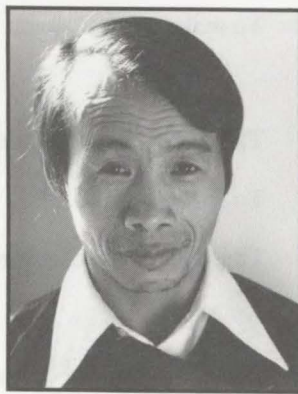
In addition to Xa Thao's translation skills, Xiong Hu, leader of the Chicago Hmong community, provided invaluable assistance and moral support. Paja Thao was one of many Hmong who shared their lives with me.

Taggart Siegel directed the documentary *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America* that complements this monograph. Gary Yia Lee was kind enough to read a draft of the ethnographic commentary and offered a number of valuable criticisms. Special thanks to Joe Davy, Mary Strine, Jerry Zbiral, Carol Simpson Stern, Michele Gazzolo, Kay Hartmann, Bruce Downing, Judith Weir, Brenda Johns, David Strecker, and Egle Zygas.



**Paja, in trance, speaks
with spirits in front of altar.**

I AM A SHAMAN



In my country Laos I did not know anything
I just worked on my farm
And planted corn and rice
To feed my wife and children

I planted corn to feed my animals
Then I sold the animals for money
Because I had to buy clothes for my wife and children

2

After all that, I am also a shaman
After I had three children, I became a shaman
Thirty years have passed since I first became a shaman

I became a shaman not because it was my will
But because it was the will of my shaman spirits
The shaman spirits came to me
To make me a shaman

The spirits make you sick
To let you know
That you must be a shaman

It is not for you to choose
And then to do
The way of becoming a shaman
Comes from the spirits

You must follow them
They will make you sick
Until you become a shaman

If you shake
Then you will get better
All Hmong know that becoming a shaman
Does not come from your will

A long time ago
From generation to generation
All the old people
Tell the way of the shaman

3

The God Saub spoke from the sky
He threw down the sacred bamboo wood
We call that "bamboo shaman"

Whoever lifts it up
Will lead the life of a shaman
And will have power to heal

When you wear the veil
You do not see anything
But you have the spirits with you

They help you and tell you what to do
How to talk to the spirits
How to help the soul

Sometimes an old man gets weaker and weaker and he dies
His soul climbs the steps to the sky
You must follow the soul to the sky when you shake
You follow the path of the sick one

If the weak soul goes to the sky
Maybe it just wants to die
It goes to the ancestral family in the sky

The soul goes to the place where it can get release
And power to be born again
And passage to another life

The children who are sick
The shaman knows
You know the kind of sickness
You know how to heal, you know already

Sometimes, however, the spirits take the soul
Or sometimes the soul is frightened away
And escapes the body

Or sometimes the soul makes you sick
Or sometimes you follow your heart
You follow your own way
Sometimes you feel better

Sometimes you have too many afflictions
And the shaman cannot follow them all at the same time
Then you get sick again

But if the shaman can go all the ways
But he does not find the spirits
Maybe you say "It feels better"
Then it is better

But if you say "Not better"
Then maybe it is not better

Saub gives you power to help the soul
To catch and protect the soul
If you follow this way
Truly you can catch the soul
And the sick one will feel better

You go to catch the soul with your two hands
And with your heart
And you grip the soul
After that, the sick one feels better too

Some sick people get very weary
And are too tired to drink water
All the family cries

But if they call you
You go to their house
The people come to call you
To bring all your shaman tools

After that, the weak one feels a little bit stronger
And then you shake
After you shake, the weak one feels much stronger

And then the weak one can open his eyes
To look at you with his eyes

All the shamans see nothing while they wear the veil and shake
When you close your eyes, darkness
When you open your eyes
You see only the smoke of the incense

Thus the spirit-master taught my teacher
And so he taught me
Because he blessed and wished for me a good future
And so I do well

Whoever is sick
I can help

ALL THE WAYS OF THE SHAMAN ARE LIKE THIS

Some people get very feeble
Weaker and weaker
Maybe their children fall down
And the soul does not rise up with them again
His soul falls to the ground
They call two or three shamans to come and help
But they cannot help

Then they come to tell you
You go to that house
You should know what the sickness is

Sometimes the soul of the sick one sinks to the ground
Or sometimes your children fall down
You take the buffalo horns
You throw them down
And the buffalo horns will tell you where the soul wandered

If the soul sinks deep into the ground
You know which color of animal
To offer for the soul

7

When you lay down your life on the ground
The people put one big jar of corn on your chest
 And one big jar of water
 And the top grindstone
 And the sick one sits on the grindstone
All pressing down on the chest of the shaman

Two men stand at your head and feet striking gongs
And a four-hands pig by your side
Then you shake three times

The sick one sits on top of the water jar
The people carefully steady the water jar while he shakes
If the water splashes on the shaman it is bad

*THE WAY OF THE SHAMAN FOR SAVING THE SOUL WHICH SINKS
DEEP INTO THE GROUND IS LIKE THIS*

If the shaman only shakes and lays down his life on the ground
Without putting water jar on his chest
Then we use a three-hands pig
And two gongs

We put the pig underneath the shaman's back
And underneath his knees
And the sick one sits on his chest

8

Then the shaman shakes three times
After that the sick one rises
And goes to sleep

Then the people take the shaman to the altar-bench
He is stiff
The people flex his arms and legs
They spray water from their mouth on him

Then he begins to shake and speak to the spirits
When he is lying down on the ground
He does not feel the heavy weights on his chest
Because he has the spirits to help him

For this ceremony when the shaman lays down his life on the ground
The family has to pay six silver coins
Two for the head
One for each arm
And one for each leg

I teach the way of the shaman to my grandchildren
So that after I am gone
They will remember Hmong culture
The way it is

Because the spirit-master says it is so
Generation after generation
If the family does not pay
The shaman does not have to shake

ALL THE WAYS OF THE SHAMAN ARE LIKE THIS

9

When you lay down your life on the ground
With weights on your chest
You have to stay at home for thirteen days

If someone calls you to shake
You do not go
After thirteen days you can go

Every shaman has a different master
Who teaches a different way
I just follow the way of my master

When you shake to take away a curse
When the whole family gets sick
You shake to carry away the affliction with you

If they call you
You have to shake
If they do not call you
You do not have to shake

When you shake to carry away the bad things with you
You feel heavy
You do not see
You slow down as you climb the steps to the sky
Your speech slows down
You feel tired

You work very hard
So they must pay you a little

THIS IS THE WAY OF CARRYING AWAY AN AFFLICTION

Here is the way to shake for having children
From the time I became a shaman until now
I have helped four or five women
Women who are barren

The first time you shake
You shake to build the bridge to the sky
So that the baby can come to the earth

The shaman brings the bridge into the bed of the husband and wife
He puts the bridge inside all the pockets of the clothes
Of the husband and wife

He sends his shaman-spirit with a baby-carrier up to the heaven
To bring the baby to the earth
And give to the husband and wife

And then the shaman turns another way
To see if the wife has a bad spirit
Which comes to her and makes her barren

You shake to cut the web of the evil spirit
So that it cannot afflict the wife anymore
After that she will get pregnant

11

Then you will know what kind of spirits are good
And what kind are bad
You make a fence between the two

Then you speak softly to the good spirits
And promise them an animal offering
They are happy with your vow

Then you will know what kind of animal
And what color of animal
Will make the fence around the evil spirits
And make them afraid

Sometimes you use a red male dog
Or a chicken with curled feathers
Or a black sheep

After that the woman will get a baby

SO THIS IS THE WAY THE SHAMAN SHAKES FOR HAVING CHILDREN

Thus my master taught me
If the big spirit who lives between the sky and the earth
Comes to the wife and makes her barren
Then she cannot get pregnant

You take this animal to make a fence
And shelter the wife from the evil spirit

You take a cat
And a black dog
 With white around the muzzle
 And white markings above both eyes
And a red chicken
One you kill
One you keep

Take a sheep to make a fence at the crossroads in the sky
Where the three ways of the spirits meet
You cut the web of the evil spirit
After that she will get pregnant

When the woman gets pregnant
Then the family promises you payment
But you must take care of her
Until the baby is born

When the baby is born
And the shaman sees with his eyes
You must go back and shake again

You take the same animal as before

To make the fence

The shaman says

"It is finished

Do not come back anymore"

After that you must take care of the baby for three years

If he has a headache

Or a stomachache

Any problem

You must shake again

You have to take care of him

You shake to build the bridge to the sky for the baby

You must pull the white ropes over the door across the roof

To the bench of the shaman's altar

Then you sit in the parent's bed

After that the baby can find his way

To his father and mother

Then he has parents

When the baby is about three years old

Then the Shaman comes and shakes for the last time

He cuts the web again

He says, "For the rest of your life

Child, do not bother the spirits

Spirits, do not bother the child"

So the spirits do not have the way to come to the child anymore

If you cannot help the first baby
It is hard to save the following babies
Sometimes your chanting works
Sometimes it does not work

If the parents have good luck
Then you can help
But if they have bad fate
Then you cannot help

SO THIS IS THE WAY YOU SHAKE FOR CHILDREN

Here is the way you shake for elderly people
Sometimes old people have a problem
And they call the shaman

You follow the soul to the sky
You go step by step
The way of the shaman has twelve steps to the sky
Then you reach the celestial kingdom
All the people come to earth this way

Whenever old people get sick
You shake and divine
You throw down the buffalo horns
To find out the way

Sometimes the soul climbs the stairs to the sky
To get release from the body
You must divine which path the soul has taken

You go up to the first of three steps

Then you go to the second step

Then you go to the third stair

You reach the level where nine or eight paths come together

And then you see

Where the three main ways merge

After you arrive at the point of the three main ways

You should follow which course the soul has taken

15

Sometimes the soul goes by the back way

Where it can never return again

Sometimes it goes to the spirit kingdom

Sometimes it goes to the ancestral kingdom

Sometimes the soul follows the way of sickness

If the soul follows the way of sickness

You must seek him along the path

My master and Saub taught me these truths

The way you go one step by one step

One level by one level

When you go to the place of release

To get power to be born again

And passage to another life

Then you leave the place of souls

And return to the earth as another life

The sky kingdom with its order and ways
The earth kingdom with its customs and laws
Mirror each other

If you do not have the goodwill of the spirits
You cannot follow any of the ways

Here is the way of elderly couples
The old men and the old women who die
Their souls return to the ancestral kingdom

When the soul of the husband or wife goes to the sky
To search for the partner who left
After that, both souls go to be born again into a new life

This is the way with the elderly couple
The one who dies first
Comes back to make the partner sick
To take her back to live with him

The soul comes back and takes away
The spirit money for food and drink
After that, she gets sick

*SO THE WAY OF THE SOUL WHICH TAKES AWAY
THE SPIRIT WEALTH GOES LIKE THIS*

If you shake to burn spirit money

To make strong the weak one

Then she will get stronger

THE WAY OF THE ELDERLY COUPLE GOES LIKE THIS

Here is the way of shaking for children

You just shake underneath the sky

You follow only the steps of sickness

17

The way of the shaman

You just follow your heart

You do it your way

 You think this way

 Then you do it this way

Then it is better

But if you are a shaman

When you are angry

 Then whether you shake

 Or whether you do not shake

No matter, it does not work

But if you shake for this family

And the husband and wife honor you

Then it is good to follow the goodwill of your heart

Talking about the way of the shaman
They say the altar bowl of rice
Is to make spirit medicine
To save life and make strong

So this is the medicine which helps life
And blends with the shaman spirits
After you help in this way
The sick one is better

*LET US PASS DOWN FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION
THIS WAY OF THE SHAMAN FOR SAVING LIFE*

Here is the way of spirit rites in the world
It is the custom for your father and mother to follow this way
 From one generation to another generation
 From one age to another age
 Your father's father and your mother's mother
Did like this
They carry this tradition from one generation to the next generation

You call to feed only the spirits of your father and mother
The spirits of your grandfather and grandmother
In your lifetime

I still believe Hmong religion
In my country Laos none of my cousins changed to Christians
But now all my cousins come to America
And all of them change to Christians

Now only my son and I
Hold to Hmong religion
But I am not sure how much longer
Before my son changes to Christian

As for me, I will never be Christian
Because my father and mother gave birth to me
I am not the only one
There are many from every clan
Who still believe Hmong religion

19

I shall never forget my own culture
I am a Hmong
My father and mother gave me birth
I shall call to feed their spirits

There was my grandfather who gave birth to my father
And then my father who gave birth to me
And then I gave birth to my sons

When you are born into the world
You wait for your fortune
After your father and mother die
You inherit the fortune
You see, they take care of you in life and in death

When your father and mother die
You carry them to the grave
You say, "Father and mother I choose a good place for you
Now support me and make my life increase"

When you lift your father or mother into the grave
You, the son, must support the head
After that, you speak softly to your father or mother

You do the same for your uncle or aunt
If they do not have sons to do for them
But you must claim this right soon
Before neighbors step in

Even when the dead body smells
You must not make a face
When many worms eat the corpse
You must brush them away from the body

Now I come to America
All of my cousins change to Christians
I do not change to Christian
Because even though my father died
My mother is still alive

I shall call to feed the spirits of my father and mother
So I will not change to Christian

After I am gone
It is up to my grandchildren
But my way is to keep calling and feeding
My father and mother
My grandfather and grandmother
That is why I still keep Hmong religion

When you feed the spirits of your father and mother

Grandfather and grandmother

You say, "Come to eat

Come to defend

Come to protect

Close the mouths

Stop the tongues of the evil spirits

Do not allow them to take hold of anyone

Come to us

Shelter us from sickness"

21

You just call them to come

And protect the nine or five people in your family

They gain strength

They grow in health

"You come to eat

Protect us from blows

Of falling vines in the jungle

Defend us from the snake

And the frog

And black magic

Come and protect the music of the pipes

And of the gong

Come and greet my family

Nine or five people

Help them live in peace

And a long life

Bring us abundant harvests

And a rich life

"When I have food

I will call you to eat

When I have wine

I will call you to drink

I will invite you to join everybody in eat and drink"

THIS IS THE WAY OF CALLING AND FEEDING ANCESTORS

22

Here is the way of the baby or young sister who dies

You don't call them by name

"Even though I don't call you by name

Please come to eat and drink with us

Because I do not know all of your names"

This is the spirit of my house

Spirit paper, shaman spirit

You call them to come to eat and drink wine with you

"Please help shelter us from the wild jungle spirits

So we do not get sick

So we do not get tired

You make a gold umbrella

And a steel umbrella

To make shade for me and my family

Come to eat with us

And do not sell the souls of my family to the wild jungle spirits"

After you call these spirits
You take a cup of wine
And a spoonful of rice
And you go outside the door of your house

And you call the wild jungle spirits of the village
And the river spirits
You call all the wild spirits to come and eat
Then it is finished

23

Now you come to live in America
When you have a feast
You must call the spirit government of Chicago
 And the spirits of the mountains and hills
 And the spirits of the borders
You must call all of them
Whether you have a small meal or a big feast
You must call them to come to eat
And drive away the evil sickness
To protect my family
Nine, five, or eight people

When you go to the jungle
May you not have an accident
When you call this way
Then it is finished

THE WAY OF CALLING AND FEEDING THE SPIRITS IS LIKE THIS

Thus my Thao clansmen practice the calling of spirits
I am simple, I never feed the spirits of the gourd
Now some of my clansmen come to America

None of them knows how to feed these spirits
They do not know these spirits
All my clansmen change to Christians

Now there is only my family
I, all alone, am not sure how to follow this way

Also, the Bull Spirit
And the Pig Spirit
I never feed these spirits as well

But I can remember a little bit
The rhyme and way the words fit together
So I can remember some of the way

How to feed these spirits
Maybe if I try to do it
Maybe I can do it

But all the elders say
If you have never done before
You cannot do it in the right way

So it is with the Bull Spirit
And the Pig Spirit

Maybe I cannot do it
Because I am all alone

This is the way of the Hmong Pig Spirit
And the Spirit of the Gourd

Long ago, the God Saub taught that the Pig Spirit belongs to men
When you cook the pig
The women must not eat

25

However, the Spirit of the Gourd belongs to women
So with my Thao clansmen this is the way it goes
With the Spirit of the Gourd

Long ago we stole the Pig Spirit from a far away place
You keep this secret from outsiders
You do not want them to speak of this

My Thao clansmen follow these rules when we eat
When you kill and dress the pig outside
Then there is no problem
After you finish, then you bring inside the house

It is the way of my Thao clansmen to have seven bowls
First you go to cut chicken grass, or elephant grass
You wave the grass over the gourds

Then you take a small curved gourd

As big as your fist

And one twig

And one string

And one pig

Then you must take the gourd spirit

And tie it by the string to the twig

Your right hand holds the chicken grass

Your left hand holds the hanging gourd

You wave three times

After that, it is time to make ready the meat

You must offer the pig

You take some beeswax and a burning brand

You stand and call the spirits from the front door

The spirits enter through the back door

Then it is time to offer the pig

First you cut the backbone

Then the heart

Then the lungs

Then the liver

Then the two kidneys

After that, you lift out the intestines

First the black intestine

Next the white intestine

And then you lift out the stomach

You put eggs in the first bowl
Of the ranked order of the seven bowls

You cleave the head in two
You put the jaw in the first bowl
Next the two split sides of the head
Each with its eye

Next you divide the two ears
 And the two eyeballs
 And the snout
And place in the bowl according to the natural order

27

The nose must kiss the tail
Point in the direction of the last bowl
THE WAY OF THE BULL SPIRIT IS LIKE THIS

After you finish, you offer to the Bull Spirit
By waving three times
You use the savor of the broth to call the Bull Spirit

You call, "Nine or ten animals are ownerless
 But this one belongs to you
 This one is named for you
 This one belongs to you
 You must protect us
 Do not seek out another family
 Do not wander among my clansmen
 Be not sad

Now you must come to protect my family and my animals

Make them increase

Like the birds

Like the wild pig in the jungle

And like the bear

Protect all the members of my household

"Make them increase

Until my house is full

And make my animals increase

Until the pens are full

And make my fields increase

Until the granaries are full"

You wave three times

You say these words

Then it is finished

THE WAY OF CALLING THE BULL SPIRIT IS LIKE THIS

The Spirit Basket on the Altar

The God Saub taught about this spirit basket
You put incense in this basket

Sometimes there are dangerous spirits
Spirits of the underground
Or wild jungle spirits

In my country Laos, you keep magic inside the spirit basket
When you are afflicted you scoop up the magic
And throw at the dangerous spirits
And that is like stoning them with heavy iron balls

29

When the shaman shakes, he says
"The sacred spirit basket is the hiding place
For the footprints of my soul"
SO IT IS LIKE THIS

Holy Teachings of the God Saub

What are the holy teachings?
The holy teachings are about spirit medicine
The spirits of the shaman are healing medicine

When you get sick in the body
You must have this healing to be cured
And to make your life stronger
And to give you breath

Roasted Altar Rice

So in my country there is rice
To roast and make holy for the altar
This altar rice you must use when you shake

You throw it to your spirit helpers
To feed them
You say, "I feed you

You follow me"

THIS IS THE WAY YOU USE THE ROASTED ALTAR RICE

The Maintenance of the Altar

Here is the water bowl for sprinkling
And here is the spirit basket
It is not sacred until it is placed here on the altar
But then it is very sacred

When you shake and reach the sky
You take two pieces of spirit paper money
And two bowls of water
From the father of the spirit helpers' kingdom
When you shake you give to the master shaman of this kingdom



Shaman's altar

This is the way the God Saub taught us
 About the shaman's spirit paper money
 This spirit paper money comes from the "bamboo shaman"
 It is the same thing
 Whoever picks it up will shake and be a shaman

These are the shelves of the altar
 Which is the eating place, the drinking place
 The table where the spirits come to feed

There are three auspicious times
The nineteenth, fifteenth, and fifth nights of the waxing new moon
When the spirit helpers come to eat the altar rice
When they come to visit your household

The spirit helpers don't live all the time at the altar
You just have the visiting place on the altar for them
So that they have the way to come and eat and drink

On the arrival of the fifth and fifteenth days of the new moon
You must roast the rice
And fill the bowl with water
And burn the incense sticks

When you go to shake in another house
And they give you spirit paper money and incense
You must burn them at this time

And if they give you a pig head with shoulder
You must call your spirit helpers to eat and drink
And come to protect your household
So you don't get sick
Don't get weak

"Help me when I shake in this my house
Give me safekeeping when I shake in another family's house
When I shake in another family's house
Save me from trouble"

"Bamboo Shaman"

In my country, this one is the shaman's spirit bridge

For this spirit bridge of the shaman

You dig up a bamboo tree from the roots

You keep all the leaves on this bamboo tree

You bring it home

And place the whole tree

On top of the altar

33

After that you go and cut another bamboo

And you hang it underneath the ridge beam of the roof

In this country we don't have bamboo

So I can only do this custom imperfectly

The Altar Wood

Long ago they said

From all the kinds of trees

You must choose only two

All the others are not for this

You just choose the chestnut

And the spirit tree

When you go to cut

You must pick two straight trees

The same size

Side by side

You cut one

And you leave one

You must cut the tree

So that it falls towards the sunset

Then it is good

34

But here we do not have

So I must do the custom imperfectly

Dressing the Altar with Spirit Money

In my country the altar dressing

We make from big thick paper

Made by the Hmong

But now we come to America

And we do not have the right kind

We have to do it in another way

Eggs

They say of them when the shaman shakes

He says, "Teach me how to talk to the spirits"

All children love to watch the eggs

These eggs, they said, have son-mother-yolk

They have shaman yolk

The egg yolks moan

Then you throw roasted rice to the mouths of your spirit helpers

The egg yolks moan again

Then you throw the roasted rice into the hands of your spirit helpers

35

The egg yolks eat and smile and laugh

And come to give you teaching

Eggs are the yolk of the shaman

THE WAY OF EGGS GOES LIKE THIS

The Spirit Paper Which Hangs on the Wall to Protect the Family Wealth

They said it is the Hmong way

To hang this spirit paper on the wall for protection

It is the spirit of the family's wealth

If you change to Christian

You throw out this paper which hangs on the wall of your house

The most important of all spirit papers

You change this spirit paper once every year

You must put up a new one

If you move to another house
You must stamp the paper with chicken's blood and feathers
 You use a white chicken
 Or a red chicken

THIS IS THE WAY OF MY THAO CLANSMEN

36

The Gong

The God Saub taught us about the shaman's gong
When you shake you must have the gong
It gives you strength
It aids your spirit helpers

Every new shaman must have a gong
If you do not have a gong you cannot shake
The experienced shaman must have the gong with him
Sometimes when you go to shake far away
The dangerous spirits chase after you
 The ghost demons
 Eclipse devils
 Footprint spirits
 And wild jungle spirits

You must strike your gong three times
While turning around in a circle
To protect yourself from these haunting spirits

Equip
rituals
horns

If you go to shake far away
In a different village
And you shake for the big spirit
You must carry your gong by yourself
You must not let anyone carry it home for you

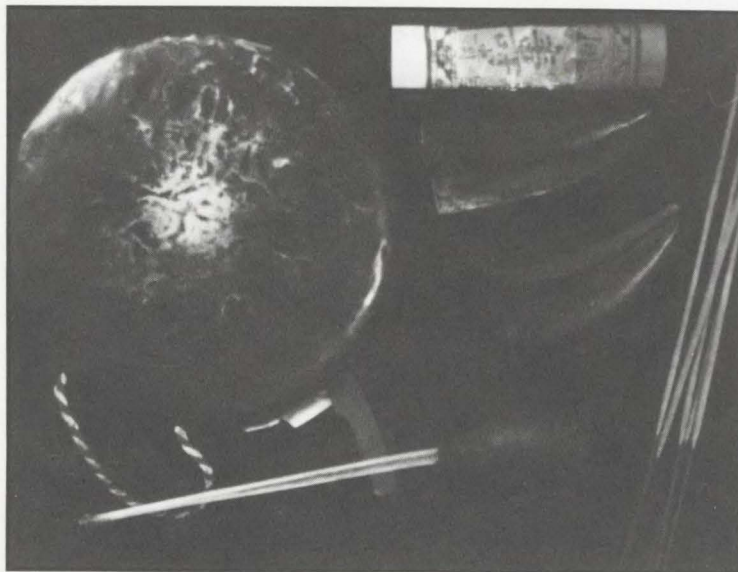
And if they give you a chicken
You must not let anyone carry it for you
Because sometimes you return home
The dangerous spirits pursue you

Then you have the gong and the shadow of the chicken
to protect you

You are not afraid
After you strike the gong three times
You do not worry

THE WAY OF THE SHAMAN GOES LIKE THIS

Equipment used in shamanic
rituals: gong, spirit paper,
horns and incense.



Buffalo Horns

The God Saub taught us about the horns

You lift up the horns

And throw them down

To find out which way the soul has gone

After that, the two sides of the split horn

will tell you

Then you will know

There are times when old people get sick

And their soul climbs the stairs to the sky

Then the horn will stand straight up and twirl

In this way you will know

There are times when the soul sinks down

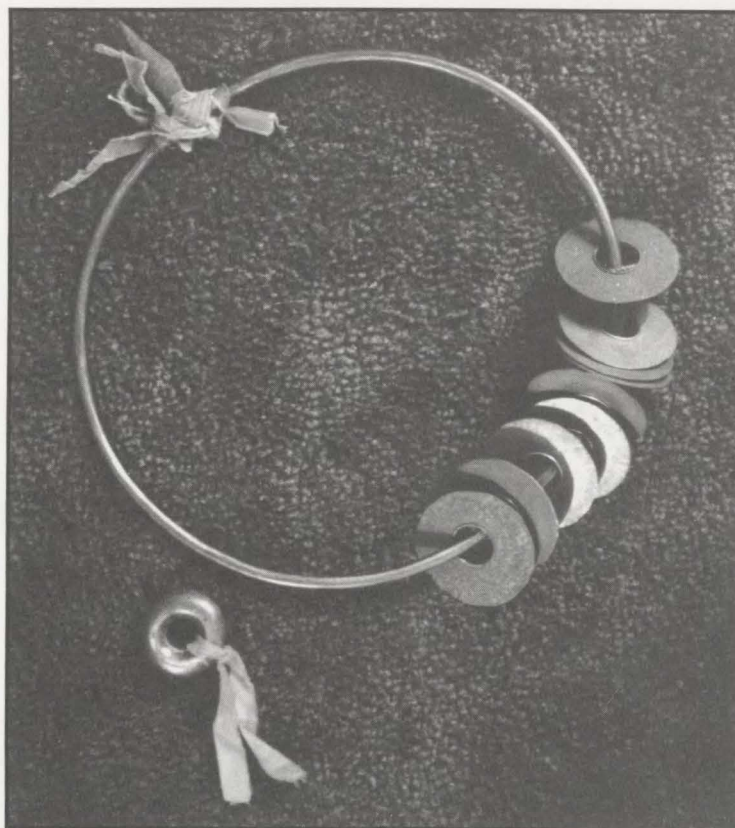
The horns will tell you

Or times when the soul goes to live in another life

Or sometimes the soul is frightened away

The horns will tell you

Then the shaman takes the direct way to find the soul



Shaman's rattle

Rattles

The rattles are like fighting weapons

Stones and heavy iron balls

When you shake you follow the sound of the rattles

Wherever the sound reaches

You can go there as well

The rattles ring first

And then the spirits know you are coming

They open the doors

And then you can enter that way

THE WAY OF THE RATTLES GOES LIKE THIS

The Shaman's Bench

The bench is the shaman's dragon charger

You have your horse and then you can go

If you do not have this horse

You cannot mount the steps to the sky

Your bench is your horse

If you do not have your bench

You cannot shake

ETHNOGRAPHIC COMMENTARY

INTRODUCTION

42

The Hmong are a sturdy mountain people who live in remote farming villages throughout Southeast Asia, and southern and western China, particularly the Yunnan and Kweichow provinces. An ethnic minority group, the Hmong are well known for their strong work ethic, independent spirit, and love of freedom. Outsiders call them *Miao* or *Meo* – pejorative terms that mean “barbarian” or “primitive” – but they proudly call themselves *Hmong*, which means “Free People.” They seldom live in villages below 1,000-3,000 meters above sea level. Like mountain peoples the world over, they have developed a culture of extraordinary integrity, communal self-reliance, intimacy with nature, and resistance to outside authority and official power structures. Indeed, one of their traditional proverbs reveals their resistance to (and sense of humor about) the homogenizing forces of lowland officialdom: “To see a tiger is to die; to see an official is to become destitute” (Tapp 1986a, 2).

Although the Hmong have selectively borrowed traditional practices from the majority of cultures of the countries where they reside (before 1975, principally China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam), they have maintained, by and large, distinctive dress, oral literature, ritual practices, and foodways. They speak a multitonal language of the Sino-Tibetan group. Dialectal differences exist among various Hmong groups, most notably between White Hmong and Blue Hmong, but both groups can understand one another orally. The language was only oral until contact with Euro-Americans resulted in the development of a Romanized alphabet in the mid-1950s and 1960s. To this day many Hmong are unable to write their language and the language and culture of the Hmong still manifest most of the characteristics of what Walter Ong calls “primary orality” (see Ong 1982).

During the war in Southeast Asia, throughout the 1960s and until 1975, the Hmong fought alongside U.S. forces. Recruited by the CIA as front-line anti-communist fighters, they were sometimes referred to as the CIA’s “secret army.” Experts in mountain and forest habitats, the Hmong were remarkable guerrilla fighters. They led daring missions and are credited with rescuing more than 100 American pilots shot down over Laos. Moreover, they suffered heavy casualties in their military involvement with the United States. In proportion to their population, they suffered casualties ten times higher than Americans who fought in Vietnam (Cerquone 1986). Even those who were not fighting on the front lines experienced severe disruption of their lives and death. Xieng Khouang Province in Laos, home to many Hmong, was one of the most heavily bombed areas in the history of the world. According to Cerquone, “American bombers dropped about 300,000 tons of bombs – or two tons per provincial inhabitant – on Xieng Khouang Province alone...” (Cerquone 1986, 4).

When U.S. forces withdrew from Southeast Asia in 1975, and Laos collapsed to the Pathet Lao forces who formed the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic, the Hmong faced inevitable adversity. Not only had they been collaborators with the hated American enemy, but they were a minority group, always living on the margin. This combination of social marginality and collaboration with the enemy made the Hmong acutely vulnerable to reprisals. Tens of thousands of Hmong began to flee their beloved mountain villages and seek asylum in refugee camps in Thailand. The exodus was harrowing; thousands were shot by pursuing Pathet Lao soldiers or died of starvation or from exposure in the jungle. Even many of those who made it to the bank of the Mekong River, which separates Laos and Thailand, drowned during the perilous crossing.¹

Once in Thailand, the Hmong were confined to austere refugee camps, where they tried to

regroup and contemplate an uncertain future. From these camps, thousands have been resettled across five continents of the world. Since 1975, more than 60,000 have come to the United States. Large Hmong populations are concentrated in California's central valley and the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, and smaller but stable communities are scattered across cities in more than thirty states, including Chicago, where I first met the Hmong in 1982.

COSMOLOGY AND COMMUNITY

Anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that "most symbolic behavior must work through the human body" and that "there is a strong tendency to replicate the social situation in symbolic form by drawing richly on bodily symbols in every possible dimension" (Douglas 1982, xii). The way in which a culture symbolizes the natural body is an interpretive projection of its social experience. In short, the ideal for the human body mirrors the body politic.

Much can be learned about Hmong society by examining their symbolic projections of the human body. Notions of physical health and illness draw on the most fundamental concepts about the body. According to Hmong cosmology, the human body is the host for an ensemble of life-souls. The number of souls believed to inhabit a human body depends on whom you consult. Some say seven, some nine, others twelve, or even thirty-two. The point is that the body is a site for multiple souls, whereas according to American cosmology, the body is a site for a single soul. A human body is healthy when all the life-souls are centered in the body, cooperating interdependently and living together harmoniously as a group. Sickness is explained by the isolation and separation of one or more of these souls from the community of the body. Disease, depression, and death result from diffusion, dispersal, and loss of souls.

Therefore, the major restorative measures for this affliction, curing rites, are in fact, soul-calling rituals. The most common of these in Hmong culture is the *Hu Plig* (Soul Calling). The ritual specialist summons the soul or souls who have become separated from their bodily community. Whether the soul became separated outside the body because it was frightened away or kidnapped by an evil force, or simply wandered off by itself, the message is the same: return to the body, reincorporate, restore the integrity of life. The ritual is climaxed when the ritual specialist ties strings around the wrists of the newly revitalized person, *Hu Plig Khi Tes*, concretely signifying the binding up and holding intact of the life-souls.

What makes for a healthy human body also makes for a healthy body politic. The Hmong ideal of society is one in which individuals find their meaning and identity within the scope of the group and its various ramifications: household, lineage group, village, clan, and so forth. Productive relationships with others are healthier than singular achievements. Interconnectedness rather than competitiveness is the prized norm. A sick society, according to Hmong world view, is one that is fragmented, alienated, highly individualistic, and ruled by entrepreneurial competitive impulses, rather than communitarian drives.

Hmong beliefs and values about what constitutes the ideal society, epitomized and enunciated in healing rituals that recall souls that have become separated from the body, offer an interesting contrast to an American cosmology that celebrates individualism. According to Robert Bellah and his colleagues:

Individualism lies at the very core of American culture....We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious. Our highest and noblest aspirations, not only for ourselves, but for those we care about, for our society and for the world, are closely linked to our individualism (Bellah et al. 1985, 142).

This commitment to individualism gets expressed in common sayings such as "God helps those who help themselves" and "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps."

Further, our rugged individualism is enacted in our myths about Horatio Alger and the restless frontier cowboy who never settles down but rides off into the sunset, away from settlements and communities that are seen as threatening to the autonomous self. Radically different from the Hmong world view, the American ethos locates integrity of the self in its withdrawal and isolation from corporate communities. "A deep and continuing theme in American literature is the hero who must leave society, alone or with one or a few others, to realize the moral good in the wilderness, at sea, or on the margins of settled society" (Bellah et al. 1985, 144). For the Hmong, standing alone, outside the village, cut off from the clan, is unthinkable as a moral alternative. Movement away from a communal center represents the loss of everything that makes one a viable person. It is a fate associated with death. Ntsuag the orphan is a compelling figure in Hmong folktales precisely because being alone without family is considered the greatest tragedy. It is important for Americans to recognize the distinctive qualities of our own national ethos in order to understand and appreciate different world views developed by other peoples as adaptive responses to their environment and historical situation.

45

Both the cowboy and the hard-boiled detective tell us something important about American individualism. The cowboy, like the detective, can be valuable to society only because he is a completely autonomous individual who stands outside it. To serve society, one must be able to stand alone, not needing others, not depending on their judgment, and not submitting to their wishes.... And this obligation to aloneness is an important key to the American moral imagination. Yet it is part of the profound ambiguity of the mythology of American individualism that its moral heroism is always just a step away from despair (Bellah et al. 1985, 146).

Whereas Americans find their deepest identity in individualism, Hmong find their most meaningful fulfillments within a web of attachments and interconnectedness. Basic cosmological commitments have practical consequences for everyday action and choice. With such divergent ways of understanding the nature of self, meaningful life, and the cosmos, it is no wonder that the Hmong experience stress, confusion, and anxiety in adjusting to life in America.

American mythic history is resonant with restless loners singing songs such as "Don't Fence Me In," and Daniel Boone heroes who cried, "Give me elbow room," as they escaped from encroaching settlements. In a thousand ways, our separatist, individualistic ethic gets enunciated daily: individual place settings at meals, the importance of "a room of one's own" even for children, advertising appeals and jingles such as "Have it your way" and "We do it all for you." The enactment of Hmong culture, on the other hand, is like a symphony; every part plays the themes of returning, recalling, restoring, reincorporating, binding together, and reuniting separated parts into a collective identity. These themes are counterpointed against dissonant concerns and fears about loosening, losing, leaving, dissolution, fragmentation, isolation, and loneliness.

Equilibrium, the coexistence of life-souls within the body, is matched by sustaining balance and meaningful communication with innumerable spirits that live outside the body. In addition to ancestral spirits who continue to interact with living descendants, the natural world is alive with spirits. Trees, mountains, rivers, rocks, and lightning are all animated by distinctive spirits. Nature spirits are generally good. Most animals are regarded as kindred creatures who share and exchange souls. The Hmong celebrate their humanity, not as a discrete and impenetrable part of the natural order, but as part of the circle of life of all creation—caught up in the rotation of the seasons, and deeply connected with the configuration of the mountains,² and the reincarnation of life from generation to generation,

even from species to species. Life, in its myriad forms, is intimately articulated through souls and spirits.

The Hmong cosmos has its own coherence and internal logic. It is richly equipped to explain the mysteries of life and to enable meaningful action in the world. All the premises that support Hmong culture are rooted in a deep belief about the primacy of spiritual reality. The more you study and understand Hmong cosmology, the more impressed you become with the remarkable intricacy, beauty, and depth of their spiritual life. The Hmong have a highly developed spiritual system. Westerners committed to a progressive ideology based on science and technology, often define the Hmong and other primal cultures as “undeveloped,” “pre-literate,” “pre-modern,” “pre-industrial,” or “primitive.” Such labels define the people in terms of “absences” – relative only to the labeler – instead of the “rich presences” that the outsider may not be able to see because of his own blind spots. One can imagine a Hmong anthropologist encountering contemporary American culture and labeling it “pre-spiritual,” and “undeveloped” in terms of human relationships.

SHAMANISM: THE LINCHPIN OF HMONG COSMOLOGY

When I began talking and studying with Hmong consultants to learn about their culture, they always pointed me to the *Txiv Neeb*, the shaman (literally, "father/master of spirits"). The word for the shaman's activity is *ua neeb* (which means "shamanic trance"). The more I studied Hmong culture and shamanism, the more I realized that the shaman epitomized the Hmong belief system. The shaman, however, is more than a radiant cultural centerpiece; he or she is the active agent of cultural process, dynamically exercising and mobilizing the core beliefs of the culture.

The practice of shamanism connects the Hmong to a host of other cultures across the globe and throughout history. Native Americans refer to their shamans as medicine men or medicine women. Hollywood has labeled African shamans as witch doctors. Shamanism has been widely practiced in South America, Oceania, and China; it is particularly well known in Korea and is an important feature of many Eskimo cultures. Some Hmong believe their foreparents learned shamanism from the Chinese because some old shamans still today call their shaman spirits in Chinese when they are in trance. The word *shaman* comes from Siberia. Cave wall paintings in southern France, traced back to Paleolithic times, depict performing shamans in healing ceremonies. It is one of the oldest and most durable forms of healing found around the world.

Mircea Eliade (1964) wrote the classic study of shamanism that places this complex of beliefs within a comparative framework of cross-cultural analysis. The distinguishing characteristic of shamanism that sets it apart from other forms of folk healing is the ecstatic trance the shaman enters to achieve a particularly intense form of communication with spirits. All Hmong have a relationship with supernatural reality, and ordinary people can and do perform many spiritual rites for prophylactic and curative purposes. In special times of crisis, however, the extraordinary powers of the shaman are needed to redress the situation. The shaman is the one who can actually cross the threshold between earth and sky, and human and spirit, and enter the side of reality that is unseen, but nonetheless real, to rescue captured or fugitive souls, battle with evil ogres, or reconcile an offended nature spirit. His or her special powers of communication with spirits are signified by out-of-body consciousness, the ecstatic trembling of trance possession. Eliade notes that although surface differences exist among different traditions of shamanism, the predisposition to enter ecstatic trance is a universal characteristic. Symbols of spiritual flight abound: birds, feathers, flying horses, flying ships.

INITIATION AND INSTRUCTION

Shamanism is a *vocation* in the true sense of "calling." An individual does not decide to become a shaman as a career choice. One has to be called to shamanism through a special visitation of the spirits. This summoning is communicated through initiatory illness. The shaman Paja Thao explains from personal experience:

I became a shaman not because it was my will
But because it was the will of my shaman spirits
The shaman spirits came to me
To make me a shaman

The spirits make you sick
To let you know
That you must be a shaman

It is not for you to choose
And then to do
The way for becoming a shaman
Comes from the spirits.

The marked candidate usually has a serious illness or some kind of chronic ailment. An experienced shaman is summoned to diagnose the source of the affliction. In this case the etiology is not simply a loss of soul, but the desire of a previously deceased shaman's spirit-helpers to incarnate in the afflicted person.

48



Assistant balances shaman in ecstatic flight. The rattle he grasps in his right hand helps him capture fugitive souls. Ban Vinai, Thailand.

Another Hmong shaman in Chicago whom I interviewed described in detail his initiatory sickness. He said that when he was nineteen years old he became gravely ill and was unconscious for ten days. His soul went in a dream to the rocky cliff mountains and descended into the deep valleys. During this time he said his soul learned many things. The shaman came and said his soul was already at Step Nine on the Twelve Step Ladder ascending from earth to the sky. He was laid out on a table. When the shaman struck the gong, he began to tremble immediately. This was the sign that he had been marked for shamanism. When his soul was called back after this ten-day initiatory confrontation with death in the netherworld, he remembered the sensation as feeling "like a leaf that floats up from the bottom of the lake." His hand gesture mimed the upward floating movement of a delicate leaf.

Proof that he had been called back from death came the next morning. A pregnant sow outside the house gave birth to nine stillborn piglets. He was so far gone that his life-souls had reincarnated into the pigs. The shaman called back his life-souls from the brink of death thus causing the pregnant sow's stillbirths. Even though he began to tremble spontaneously, he did not know how to chant the sacred words of power. He studied for three years with a master shaman and paid for this instruction with one bar of silver.

Although many Hmong shamans recount less spectacular initiations, the above personal testimony is remarkably consistent with other descriptions of shamanic initiation in a variety of cultures collected by Joan Halifax in a book called *Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives* (1979). The shaman must experience the destructive forces of death and disease to overcome their negative powers. The shaman is the one who can wage lifelong battle against the God of Death on behalf of others precisely because she or he has confronted it personally and survived the encounter. The initiatory sickness imbues the shaman with the authority of direct, immediate experience. Halifax speaks of another benefit derived through this form of experiential learning: "The opening of compassion and the awakening of empathy in the healer" (Halifax 1982, 10).

After the initiatory illness, the novice shaman studies with a master shaman teacher. The period of instruction, a "residency" of sorts, lasts two to three years. The young shaman must learn the sacred chants and the complex and highly elaborated techniques and procedures of the shamanic rites. He or she must also learn the name and nature of the legion of evil spirits who bring harm and suffering to humankind. During this time, the master and apprentice shaman form a close bond. Paja Thao speaks fondly of his teacher:

Thus the spirit-master taught my teacher
And so he taught me
Because he blessed and wished for me a good future
And so I do well.

The mode of instruction is oral and participatory. Shamans learn how to shake through example and imitation. They would shake with their master teacher, following his or her words and imitating his or her actions. Most of the verbal instruction would take place at night. They would lie together on the sleeping platform and discuss the mysteries of the spirit world, the powers of special chants, the intricacies of ritual technique. There are no written books or manuals. All of the learning is mnemonic, personal, and experiential. All of the shamans with whom I talked developed a strong identification with and personal affection for their master teacher. Within this traditional system of learning, there is room for variety of technique and personal innovation. According to Paja Thao:

Every shaman has a different master
Who teaches a different way
I just follow the way of my master.

CONTINUITY WITH TRADITION

Every time a Hmong shaman performs, she or he reenacts the myth of "Shee Yee and the Evil Spirits," which explains the origin of sickness and death (see Johnson 1985). Evil spirits were hatched into the world because of the failings of a primordial couple: "All of these spirits came out of Nyong's egg, because he did not think of others, but instead, was self-centered and selfish, and would not let his egg be burned. Because of him, all these evil spirits entered into the world of men, and all those terrible diseases" (Johnson 1985, 28-29). Horrible suffering and devastation afflicted the world for a while. But according to the cosmogonic myth, a deliverer in the person of Shee Yee, the first shaman, knows how to heal the sick, and provides protection against evil spirits.

To the present day, every shamanic performance opens with the invocation to Shee Yee, the primordial shaman.

...Shee Yee is the greatest of Hmong mythical magicians, and the chief or patron saint of Hmong shamans, with whom they identify themselves when performing their sacred ritual functions. (Whenever Hmong shamans go on their ride into the spirit world to search for a lost soul, *they tell the spirits that they are Shee Yee.*) (Johnson 1985, 73; emphasis mine; see also Morechand 1968; Mottin 1982.)

50

Eliade explains how this dynamic reenactment of sacred myth empowers the ritual performance; the ritual performance does not simply commemorate the mythic past:

What is involved is not a commemoration of mythical events but a reiteration of them. The protagonists of the myth are made present, one becomes their contemporary. This is why we can use the term the "strong time" of myth; it is the prodigious, "sacred" time when something new, strong, and significant was manifested. To re-experience that time, to re-enact it as often as possible, to witness again the spectacle of the divine works, to meet with the Supernatural and relearn their creative lesson is the desire that runs like a pattern through all the ritual reiterations of myths (Eliade 1963, 19).

It is remarkable how present-day Hmong shamans steep themselves in the sacred past through performing the cosmogonic myth and thus tapping into those primordial powers. Every shamanic performance, therefore, reconstitutes the sacred history of the world.

If the Hmong who have resettled in America lose their traditions of shamanic healing, they will lose something much more fundamental than a set of curing techniques. Modern medicine may be able to substitute for a soul-calling ritual as an effective remedy for a headache. But, Western medicine can never satisfy the deep spiritual yearnings of the Hmong to participate in sacred dramas that make life meaningful. The Hmong have not yet learned to quench their need to experience directly and sensually what Eliade calls "dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred" into the world. "It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the world" (Eliade 1963, 6). A shamanic performance entails something much deeper than curing a specific illness. What is really being refurbished and recreated every time a Hmong shaman performs is the system of meanings and web of symbols that grant coherence and comprehension. Whether the sickness abates or lingers, the shaman's real accomplishment in every performance is that she or he *establishes the world*.

SHAMANISM AND HEALING

The effectiveness of a shaman's cure should be judged according to precisely his or her ability to bring shared cultural symbols into play within a specific case of illness or misfortune. The individual sickness is but a focusing site through which the shaman re-creates the fundamental workings of the cosmos. The shamanic passion is engaged primarily in creating a moral world that provides an interpretive framework for dealing with the illness. The measure of a shaman's success is this ability to *activate belief* in a powerful but accessible cosmic order (not, *necessarily*, the achievements of instrumental effects from stimulus-response techniques). Shamanic healing techniques work through cultural symbols and homeopathic connections, not allopathic treatments.

Superficially glimpsed by rationalistic Westerners, the shaman might be construed as a very primitive form of medical doctor. Limiting the shaman's role to ministrations of the physical body reflects the specialized differentiation and compartmentalization of modern culture. The shaman's functions within a primal society embrace the combined roles of physician, spiritual minister, psychiatrist, and elder statesman. All these dimensions of human experience — physical, spiritual/religious, psychological, sociological, political — are thought to be interpenetrating and inseparable in a primal society.

The shaman rescues meaning from the diffuse, confusing, inchoate parts of existence. He or she wrests order from chaos, discovers pattern and continuity where before all seemed lost and incomprehensible. Physical pain and bodily ailments are explained as localized manifestations of cosmological imbalance and disorder. The back pain or stomachache is not the ultimate target of the shaman's redressive rites. These bodily pains are but communications of a disturbance in the spiritual ecology of the world. The shaman's healing rituals provide existence with a moral interpretation and meaningfulness. It is a meaningless existence, an incomprehensible world, that is insufferable, not a physical ailment.

The renowned anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, in two brilliant essays, "The Sorcerer and His Magic" (1963a) and "The Effectiveness of Symbols" (1963b) explores the effectiveness of shamanic curing rituals. Through examination of case studies, he concludes that the primary function of a shaman is to reproduce and restore *belief*, not physical health. The individual cases of illness to which a shaman ministers are highly charged arenas within which shaman and audience attend to the shared system of beliefs that anchors their collective lives. "The system is valid precisely to the extent that it allows the coalescence or precipitation of these diffuse states" (Levi-Strauss 1963a, 182). He argues further that "the value of the system will no longer be based upon real cures from which certain individuals can benefit, but on the sense of security that the group receives from the myth underlying the cure and from the popular system upon which the group's universe is reconstructed" (Levi-Strauss 1963a, 183).

And yet there is a positive connection between shared belief in cultural symbols and physical healing. Levi-Strauss surmises that shamans, from time to time, need to produce actual cures for their patients to succeed at their primary function, namely, "world-making," the validation and upholding of a meaningful universe. There is no doubt in his mind that shamans are able to "cure at least some of the cases they treat and that without this relative success magical practices could not have been so widely diffused in time and space" (Levi-Strauss 1963a, 180). He is quick to insist, however, that "this

point is not fundamental. It is subordinate" to the shaman's capacity to instill belief: "Quesalid did not become a great shaman because he cured his patients; he cured his patients because he had become a great shaman" (Levi-Strauss 1963a, 180).

Levi-Strauss describes a remarkable case study of a Cuna shaman who sings a mythic song to a woman caught in the throes of difficult childbirth. He explains how this ritual performance actually facilitates the safe delivery of the child "in the incantation...the shaman speaks for his patient. He questions her and puts into her mouth answers that correspond to the interpretation of her condition, with which she must become imbued" (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 199). The shaman narrates a myth of dramatic struggle and painful journey through the vagina of the laboring woman to liberate misplaced souls within the woman's body and to enlist the cooperation of the soul of her uterus. The incantation is rich in "luxuriant detail" about the armies of enlightenment who are finding their way through the tortured darkness and bloody passageway in order to liberate the woman from the personified beasts of pain and to lead and clear the way for the safe descent of the infant from the womb through the birth canal.

52

The effect of the shaman's performance is to induce "the patient intensively to live out a myth" that she now embodies (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 201). This myth projects the woman's physical suffering onto a cosmological plane; it is an externalizing process, a transference from the body to the cosmos. The shaman's dramatic narrative "provides the sick woman with a *language*, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed" (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 198). Actual relief for the suffering woman comes through her belief in the shaman's symbolic representation of her crisis. Mary Douglas once compared the efficacy of ritual to the currency of money: both work so long as "they command confidence," as long as the public has faith in them (Douglas 1966, 69). Levi-Strauss explains the cure of the Cuna shaman along similar lines:

The cure would consist, therefore, in making explicit a situation originally existing on the emotional level and in rendering acceptable to the mind pains which the body refuses to tolerate... The sick woman believes in the myth and belongs to a society which believes in it. The tutelary spirits and malevolent spirits, the supernatural monsters and magical animals, are all part of a coherent system on which the native conception of the universe is founded. The sick woman accepts these mythical beings, or, more accurately, she has never questioned their existence. What she does not accept are the incoherent and arbitrary pains, which are an alien element in her system but which the shaman, calling upon myth, will re-integrate within a whole where everything is meaningful.

Once the sick woman understands, however, she does more than resign herself; she gets well (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 197).

The effectiveness of a shaman's performance is not confined to psychosomatic cases, although as Levi-Strauss notes they probably constitute a large number of the cases a shaman effectively treats (Levi-Strauss 1963a, 180). The Cuna woman was suffering clearly from an organic disorder. The shaman's performance enables her to image, and thus control, her physiological processes, "making it possible to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible — which induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganization, in a favorable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected" (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 198). In this respect, the Cuna shaman's cure resides on "the borderline between our contemporary physical medicine and such psychological therapies as psychoanalysis" (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 198).

David Graham's important ethnography of the Ch'uan Miao (Hmong) in China (1954) includes a striking example of a shaman's ritual performance text that illustrates, in a Hmong symbolic idiom, the points that Levi-Strauss notes in the Cuna text. Graham provides little extrinsic ethnographic commentary for his collection, but we can deduce from intrinsic textual evidence that this ritual chant was performed for a family that had recently experienced misfortune. The elderly members, in particular, had become ill and weak; their suffering was interpreted as soul-loss. This remarkable performance text enacts the Hmong shaman's dramatic pursuit, capture, and triumphant return with the fugitive souls. Titled "Going into Paradise," it is Text #729 under "Songs and Ceremonial Chants: Ceremonies of the Magician or Shaman" in Graham's collection (1954, 43-44). To appreciate the dramatic structure it is quoted at length:

Whip the mules. Let the big horses go very quickly. Raise the lanterns and the torches higher. *Duv, duv, duv* [the onomatopoeic sounds of galloping horses]. We are going up to Ntzi's sky above. We will go and dance at the flowery altar.... We will see whether his flowery altar has come out. We will see if the time for using the flowery altar and the flowery drum has come. We are going to climb Ntzi's heavenly ladder. One section, two sections, three sections, (four sections), five sections, six sections, seven sections, eight sections, nine sections, ten sections, eleven sections, twelve sections. When you have climbed the twelve sections, then you have reached the house in heaven. We will see if... flowers are blooming. We will see if the pears are bearing fruit. I see, see, the pear blossoms have dried up. The insects are eating the pear trees. They do not bloom or bear fruit. *Hun, hun*, quickly take the brass fan and fan it. (The tree is the souls of my parents. Pear blossoms are daughters; pears are sons. If the tree dries up, the parents will suffer and there will be no descendants.) Bring the iron and fan it (then the tree will prosper). Quickly release the falcons (sparrow hawks) to eat the insects. Ya, the tree is clean and leaves are growing, and it is blossoming. The blossoms are blooming all over the tree. The fruit is growing all over the tree.

We will see if the rice field is full of water and if the lake is dry. Ah, we will call Ntzi's Mbao Do Tao to come and repair it. We will also call Ntzi's Mbao Do Tong to come and help dig the ditch deeper and repair the lake and dragon pool. I will also see if the other family's flower tree has fallen. We will also see if that family's young fruit tree is crooked. We will call Ntzi's Mbao To Tsai to come to help lift it straight, to lift that family's young flower tree until it stands firm. We will go quickly and we will see whether the flowery altar has many people and the flowery drum has many people about it. We will call Ntzi Mbao Do Yai to come and help uncover it. We will call Ntzi Mbao Do Yai to come and help unbind it, to allow (the souls in) the flowery altar to go away (in several directions) to uncover the flowery altar so that the souls can fly off. Let us light the lanterns and lamps to see whether that family's souls are complete and to see where the *hun* and *p'o* of that family have all gone. Ah, ah, the souls of the family of those people went early. The *hun* and *p'o* of that family have all gone. *Hun, hun*, lift the lanterns and torches higher. Drive the horses and pursue quickly. We will call Ntzi Mbao To Ts'ai (god's sons who are excellent pursuers) to follow you. You must look after the souls of the old people as they return home. You must look after the *hun* and the *p'o* of the old people as they return to the world.

Call this family's souls to come quickly. *Hun* and *p'o* come quickly. This is

not your sleeping place. This is not your dwelling. This place is rotten like chicken manure and rotten like duck manure. Come quickly, let us go. Ah, ah, they have been caught (the souls), they have been caught. We have caught the souls of these old people (of this family). Ai, I have caught them. I have caught the *hun* and the *p'o* and they are in my hands. Bring them and put them in my hands. Bring the souls and put them on the backs of the mules and bring the lanterns and lamps to make light. They must show if the souls are cleared or not (all present or not) and the *hun* and the *p'o* are all here or not. Give the souls to the leaders of the troops to bring. Let the several generals catch the souls. Catch them carefully; bring them home and let them control their families. If one is missing, I will call you to account. Let us bring the lanterns and lamps and light them. We are going home. *Duv, duv, duv*, the horses come rapidly. We are going down the ladder of heaven. We are going down the first section, second section, third section, fourth section, fifth section, sixth section, seventh section, eighth section, ninth section, tenth section, eleventh section, twelfth section.

I come to thank you, Ntzi, to give thanks to you, Ntzi. Above I will inform Ntzi's heavenly palace. Below, I will inform the old people, De Bo and Te Zye. I have come to thank you, to express thankfulness to you. I am going to drive the horses and return home. Leap off the horses, leap off the backs of the colts, steady the horses, for we are going to go back. *Duv, duv, duv, duv*, we have come back and are getting off the horses.

This shamanic performance seems to be a detailed amplification of Paja Thao's summary description of how a shaman helps old people:

Sometimes an old man gets weaker and weaker and he dies

His soul climbs the steps to the sky

You must follow the soul to the sky when you shake

You follow the path of the sick one

Here is the way you shake for elderly people

Sometimes old people have a problem

And they call the shaman

You follow the soul to the sky

You go step by step

The way of the shaman has twelve steps to the sky

Then you reach the celestial kingdom

All the people come to earth this way.

In addition to the shamanic archetype of the flying horse and heavenly ladder/cosmic tree which, along with the cosmic mountain, are traditional images of celestial ascent, earth-sky passages (Eliade 1964, 266-273, 467-470, 487-494), many Hmong cultural symbols and images are found in the Ch'uan Miao text. Flowers, flowering trees, lakes, dragon pools, birds, rice fields, homes, journeys home, family groups, images of uncovering, unbinding, releasing, and lifting up, along with tying, fanning, and fastening permeate Hmong folklore and mythology, often visually depicted in the *pa ndau* (literally, "flower cloth") textile arts, for which Hmong women are justifiably well known (Catlin 1987). In her insightful study of Hmong textile design, Michele Gazzolo notes that a "dialectical tension

between fixity and mobility, containment and release, habitation and migration" is played out on many levels of Hmong expressive culture (Gazzolo 1986, 13).

Images of lamps, lanterns, candles, and lifting up torches symbolize the shaman's penetration of darkness and ability to illuminate the vague and shadowy sides of existence. Jacques Lemoine notes "the lamp that must be alight on his altar, shedding light on the unseen," as one of the Hmong shaman's key accessories (Lemoine 1986, 340). Shamanic cures begin with a diagnosis. Bringing the disturbance, the malady, into the light of understanding is the first step toward control and healing. Eliade affirms, "It is consoling and comforting to know that a member of the community is able to *see* what is hidden and invisible to the rest and to bring back direct and reliable information from the supernatural worlds" (Eliade 1964, 509).

Shamans often brandish torches by part of a healing ceremony. However, this dramatic action would always take place before or after entering trance.

To appreciate any shamanic text, it is crucial to understand that it is a "performative utterance" arising from an oral culture in which words are articulators of power and energy, not passive labels of an antecedent reality. "Performative utterance" is a useful term developed by J. L. Austin and John Searle to label those speech acts that accomplish something in the world—something that would be impossible to do apart from speaking those words in the appropriate context. "Performative utterances" are distinguished from "constative utterances" that report on prior action. In a "performative utterance" the word is inseparable from the deed; speaking is the doing of an action that has consequences. Examples of performative speech acts include promising, apologizing, greeting, praising, forgiving, the pledging of the marriage vows "I do," and so forth. Saying "I love you" to the right person in the appropriate context is a way of constituting/transforming a human relationship. Certainly a declaration of love needs to be understood as a more powerful and consequential speech act than the verbal report, "it is raining" (cf. Austin 1975; Searle 1969; see also Tambiah 1981).

In an oral culture, such as the Hmong—a culture in which knowledge and tradition are shared and preserved by word-of-mouth instead of inscribed texts—words are believed to have great power. Speaking a word, particularly a name, can make things happen. Appreciation for the power of language, in general, is akin to the forcefulness we associate with a limited number of speech types such as prayer, summons, blessing, curse, or entreaty. Walter Ong explains this association between words and power by the fact that in an oral culture language must be dynamically "sounded"; it cannot be detached from living presences and flattened into a two-dimensional object laid out for burial on a mute page. He claims:

The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven. Deeply typographic folk forget to think of words as primarily oral, as events, and hence as necessarily powered; for them, words tend rather to be assimilated to things, "out there" on a flat surface. Such "things" are not so readily associated with magic, for they are not actions, but are in a radical sense dead, though subject to dynamic resurrection [through oral performance of written texts] (Ong 1982, 32-33; cf. also Tambiah 1968; Peek 1981).

Paja Thao provides two particularly eloquent examples of ritual invocations that function as performative utterances. The first speech is to summon ancestral spirits:

Come to eat
 Come to defend
 Come to protect
 Close the mouths
 Stop the tongues of the evil spirits
 Do not allow them to take hold of anyone
 Come to us
 Shelter us from sickness....
 Protect us from blows
 Of falling vines in the jungle
 Defend us from the snake
 And the frog
 And black magic
 Come and protect the music of the pipes
 And of the gong
 Come and greet my family
 Nine or five people
 Help them live in peace
 And a long life
 Bring us abundant harvests
 And a rich life.

The second example is a moving speech to the Bull spirit:

Now you must come to protect my family and my animals
 Make them increase
 Like the birds
 Like the wild pig in the jungle
 And like the bear
 Protect all the members of my household

 Make them increase
 Until my house is full
 And make my animals increase
 Until the pens are full
 And make my fields increase
 Until the granaries are full.

Saying words like *make them increase* becomes a way of securing prosperity.

Northrop Frye speaks also of "the sense of quasi-physical power released by the utterance of words" in the primordial phase of language:

When a sacrosanct myth is read at a religious ritual, as say, the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma elish* was read at the New Year, some kind of magical energy is clearly being released. It would perhaps be overconceptualizing to say that it was thought to encourage the natural cycle to keep turning for another year; but... *a controlled and articulated expression of words may have repercussions in the natural order* (Frye 1982, 6; emphasis mine).

This understanding of the performative, power-driven nature of speech held by oral cultures is

displayed preeminently in shamanic song and chant.

When the Hmong shaman chants, "Let the horses go very quickly.... We are going up to Ntzi's sky above," he or she is not simply reporting an imagined soul flight, but literally enacting that ecstatic journey through the sounding of these words. Much of the theatrical excitement of a shamanic performance, for the patient and the witnessing audience alike, is the understanding that the shaman's words are truly "winged" — that they are a source of enabling energy, an active agency of the shaman's mystical flight. When the audience hears the shaman sounding *duv, duv, duv*, they do not think, as we might, that the shaman is merely imitating the ride on a flying horse up to heaven. They believe that the articulation of these sounds within the ritual context magically calls these winged steeds into being. As each repetition and subsequent development in this journey-quest iteratively confirms the reality of the shaman's vocalized experience, the audience too gets caught up in the presencing powers of the shaman's chant. Believing they are in the presence of great power, the audience becomes an "en-chanted" co-participant in the reality that is released and channeled through the shaman's voice.³

In an oral culture, ritual declarations become decrees. Saying "We are going to climb Ntzi's heavenly ladder" becomes the agency for making that celestial ascent. That is why each step of the ladder must be announced: "one section, two sections, three sections, etc." Pronouncements become accomplishments. The journey is constituted progressively through the steps and stages that are called for in turn. Saying "Quickly release the falcons (sparrow hawks) to eat the insects" that are plaguing the pear tree is a way of effecting that cleansing rite of renewal. When the old people who are identified with the fate of the tree — "the tree is the souls of my parents" — hear the shaman's confident proclamation — "Ya, the tree is clean and leaves are growing, and it is blossoming. The blossoms are blooming all over the tree. The fruit is growing all over the tree" — they can rejoice in their projected self-renewal. What a liberation they must feel to have their diffuse feelings of ennui and listlessness condensed, projected onto a cosmological plane and eliminated.

When the shaman triumphantly exclaims at the climax of the performance:

Ah, ah, they have been caught (the souls), they have been caught. We have caught the souls of these old people (of this family). Ai, I have caught them. I have caught the *hun* and *p'o* and they are in my hands,

he is creating a controlled reality of hope and confidence for those listening old people who may be weary with life. Simply to know that the source of their problem — depression, malaise, whatever — has been discovered, captured, and is now firmly in the hands of a powerful person must bring immediate relief.

Mary Douglas argues that rituals primarily "create and control experience." She takes issue with the handmaiden view that "ritual helps us to experience more vividly what we would have experienced anyway." She insists instead that:

Ritual does not play this secondary role. It can come first in formulating experience.

It can permit knowledge of what would otherwise not be known at all. It does not merely externalize experience, bringing it out into the light of day, but it modifies experience in so expressing it (Douglas 1963, 64).

Part of her thinking about the effectiveness of rituals was influenced by Godfrey Lienhardt's masterful study of Dinka religion, *Divinity and Experience* (1961). Toward the end of his study, he summarizes his main points in a way that helps clarify our understanding of shamanism:

The symbolic actions described above thus re-create, and even dramatize situations which they aim to control, and the experience of which they effectively modulate. If

they do not change actual historical or physical events – as the Dinka in some cases believe them to do – they do change and regulate the Dinka's experience of those events...the objective of a sacrifice is achieved in the act itself, even though it may not at once, or at all, produce some change in external circumstances which the Dinka particularly hope for... (Lienhardt 1961, 291).

V. N. Volosinov clinches Douglas' and Lienhardt's views regarding ritual and experience with the forceful statement: "After all, there is no such thing as experience outside of its embodiment in signs....It is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around – *expression organizes experience*. Expression is what first gives experience its form and specificity of direction" (Volosinov 1986, 85; emphasis in original).

The points I want to emphasize in this section can be illuminated by dealing with two questions I am asked time and time again from classes and audiences when I show videotapes and slides of Hmong shamanic performances: "What happens when a patient doesn't recover after a healing ritual?" and "The patient looks healthy already – why are they proceeding with the curing ceremony?" Both questions reveal our Western preoccupation with technical efficiency and instrumental results.

The answer to the first question follows two lines. First, to dwell exclusively on the physical illness is to miss the major thrust of a shamanic healing ritual. The meaning of the ritual – and the measure of its success – is to what extent it forms, alters, and modulates the patient's *experience* of the sickness. There is a host of more pertinent questions to ask about a shamanic performance, such as "How has it helped the patient come to terms with her condition?" "To what extent has the shaman provided the patient with an explanatory framework for interpreting his problem in an emotionally satisfying way?" "How has the shaman persuaded the patient to see her personal crisis as part of a larger moral drama?" "Has the shaman succeeded in intensifying the community's faith in basic assumptions about the universe?" "Has the healing ceremony helped strengthen the bonds of community among the attending audience members?"

The second line of response argues that even if you wanted to grant the importance of physical recovery, failure does not shake faith in the total system. No culture insists upon a 100 percent success rate. Even in our highly scientific, effects-oriented world, some people fail to respond to medical treatment. Who among us has not known or heard about someone who has died of a heart attack or of cancer in spite of medical treatment? All cultures provide safety-net explanations that can account for failure. The basic system of belief, however, remains intact.

Because ethnographic field work goes both ways, the roles of interviewer and interviewee get happily confused. Many of my Hmong consultants know about my detached retina that resulted in blindness in one eye. With great fascination, they questioned me in detail about the two three-hour surgeries I underwent. I could see the incredulity in their eyes when they learned that I had subjected myself to such a bizarre (in their view) ritual. (Traditional Hmong have an aversion to surgery or any kind of cutting on the body because they believe that tampering with the body will have negative consequences for the next reincarnation.) They were not at all surprised that the surgeries did not restore my sight. But they were truly shocked that I would allow myself to be subjected to such a patently unnatural procedure not once, but twice. Like well-integrated members of most cultures, however, I have little difficulty accepting modern medicine's failure to restore my eyesight even while maintaining my belief in most of its basic assumptions.

The second question about ostensibly ill patients who look quite healthy in my tapes and slides of curing rituals, gets at the crucial issue of timing in shamanic healing rites. This question presupposes a causal linear sequence between sickness-cure-health. That positivistic view of healing is not how it

works in the Hmong system. Jacques Lemoine explains the two-phase timing of Hmong healing rituals. When a shaman is summoned to the home of a patient, his or her first intervention is called *ua neeb saib* (divination performance). In this ceremony, the shaman explores and discovers the etiology of the problem. Having located and named the source of the problem, the shaman will often propose or pledge a solution. "If his diagnosis proves right," according to Lemoine, "the sick person will feel great relief within a few days" (Lemoine 1986, 343). In this case, the cure begins with the diagnosis; salvation from seeing. Recall that in the Graham collection text the shaman said "We will see" or "I see" fourteen times—and that is not counting the references to lighting lamps and torches. "If a patient feels no better after a few days or a few weeks," Lemoine reports, "he only calls another shaman to try his talent," and there is no payment of any fee until the patient experiences improvement (Lemoine 1986, 343).

If the patient does feel better after the diagnosis, the shaman returns to the home for the second phase of the treatment, which is called *ua neeb khu* (curing performance). Lemoine ponders:

What need is there, will you ask me [sic], to have a healing follow when the patient is already better?...When a patient feels better he wants to pay his healer who did not charge him anything yet...Then, in order to fulfill his previous agreement with wild spirits or gods, or to enforce his analysis of the disease, the shaman must perform a healing ceremony with the participation of his patients.

It is a dramatic re-enactment of his findings in the unseen a show of the various causes of the previous illness (Lemoine 1986, 343-44).

This phase of the shaman's treatment clinches the healing process that was initiated with the diagnosis. The key phrase seems to be "enforce his analysis of the disease." The shaman's work has as much to do with spiritual insights and moral interpretations as it does with physical treatments.

Lienhardt perceptively writes about a similar pattern in the timing of Dinka ceremonies that ostensibly seem designed (to the Western eye) to produce utilitarian effects:

...those symbolic acts which are regularly performed, like the sacrifices made after the harvest, take place at a time when people are already beginning to experience naturally (as we should say) something of the result which the ceremony is intended to bring about, or at least may soon expect to do so...(Leinhardt 1961, 280).

Noting that the rainmaker customarily is summoned just as the rainy season is approaching, Lienhardt wisely reflects:

The Dinka themselves know, of course, when the rainy season is approaching....the point is of some importance for the correct appreciation of the spirit in which the Dinka perform their regular ceremonies. In these their human symbolic action moves with the rhythm of the natural world around them, *re-creating that rhythm in moral terms* and not merely attempting to *coerce* it to conformity with human desires (Leinhardt 1961, 280; emphasis mine).

Like the Dinka rainmaker who begins his ceremony when moisture is in the air, the Hmong shaman reserves his most elaborate rites for the patient who is already on the mend. In this way the shaman creatively transposes the physical realm into the moral order.

Shamans are, first and last, quintessential mediators. They are threshold crossers, endowed creatures who can go between the earth and the sky. Grand articulators, shaman's special gift and mission is to bring opposites together—to bring the physical and moral worlds into meaningful conjunction. That is why they are identified with archetypal connectors such as images of ladders,

bridges, ropes, and cosmic trees that sink roots into the earth while branching towards the sky. Eliade concludes, "For the shaman in ecstasy, the bridge or the tree, the vine, the cord and so on — which, *in illo tempore*, connected earth with heaven — once again, for the space of an instant, becomes a present reality" (Eliade 1964, 486).

The dominance of logical empiricism in Western thought has produced a highly differentiated world with discrete compartments, specialties, and cause-effect relationships. Because our cognitive categories divide the physical from the metaphysical and privilege the former, it is difficult for us to grasp the way shamanism works in a primal society. We superficially observe shamans attending to sickness and then assess their interventions in purely physical terms, according to criteria derived from medical science. The shaman, to be sure, is concerned with physical ailments, but that is only half of the picture. His or her function is always to bring physical and metaphysical realities into intimate communication. Sickness in the fallen world provides the breach, the exigent opportunity to bridge these two worlds. Paja Thao expressed the relationship with eloquent simplicity:

60

The sky kingdom with its order and ways
The earth kingdom with its customs and laws
Mirror each other.

It is the special responsibility of the shaman both to celebrate and actualize the coincidences between these two kingdoms and to amplify their resonances, one into the other.

Perhaps that is why shamans do not resist prescription medicines and physical treatments. These forms of medicine do not directly compete with the shamans' manipulation of symbols and management of belief. Indeed, I saw bottles of prescription medicine resting without contradiction on shamans' altars inside thatched huts in Camp Ban Vinai, Thailand. One venerable shaman in Ban



Shaman's
altar in
Ban Vinai,
Thailand.

Vinai keeps a pedal-operated dentist's drill alongside his altar. He had purchased it in Vientiane and carried it with him among his prized possessions in the treacherous escape across the Mekong River to Thailand. He now practices dentistry, as well as shamanism, in Ban Vinai.

Shamans are not threatened by the introduction of Western medicine because its physical treatments are not comparable to the shaman's mode of healing. Indeed, even Hmong traditional medicine does not perceive all illness as supernatural and therefore susceptible to the shaman's *spiritual* interventions. They do attribute some ailments to natural causes and treat them accordingly with nonspiritual methods. Xa Thao, who translated the Hmong text for this monograph, is the son of a famous shaman (now deceased) in Laos. Xa told me that his father was also knowledgeable in the use of massage, particularly for curing children's stomach aches. Zoua Yang, a famous shaman and medicine woman now living in Milwaukee and featured in the opening section of the film documentary, *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America* (Siegel and Conquergood 1985), is a noted herbalist as well as a spiritual healer (see *A Life Synopsis of a Hmong Woman Shaman* that follows later). Lemoine's research corroborates my observation. He concludes that Hmong shamans in the West are not "opposing the use of drugs or any other therapy. They are often themselves distinguished herbalists and they always welcome the use of Western drugs in conjunction with their own magic" (Lemoine 1986, 345).

It is more common than not to find shamans alternating and combining natural and supernatural healing techniques. They will try first one technique, and then another, persisting until the patient gets relief. They see the two modes of healing, natural and supernatural, as complementary rather than contradictory.

THE DRAMATURGY OF HEALING

The most sensitive students of shamanism have recognized that it is preeminently a performance and have discussed it in dramaturgical terms. Lemoine observes, "All these actions [of the shaman] are very theatrical and contribute to prop up the patient's morale" (Lemoine 1986, 345). Levi-Strauss insists on the authenticity of the shaman's performance:

In treating his patient the shaman also offers his audience a performance...But we must not be deceived by the word *performance*.

The shaman does not limit himself to reproducing or miming certain events. He actually relives them in all their vividness, originality, and violence (Levi-Strauss 1963a, 180-181).

62

Levi-Strauss' appreciation for the ambiguity of the word *performance* could be strengthened conceptually by recent work in performance studies, particularly the anthropology of performance. Richard Schechner notes the distinction between the efficacy and entertainment functions, and frequently draws on shamanism as an example of performance as transformation, where reality is *made*, not simply imitated (cf. Schechner 1977, 1985). In dialogue with Schechner, Victor Turner extensively explored performance that aimed at *poiesis* rather than *mimesis*: "making, not faking" (Turner 1982, 93; see also Turner 1986). Shamanism is a preeminent example of performance as presencing power rather than pretense.

Eliade concludes his comparative study with this appreciation for the theatricality of shamanism:

Something must also be said concerning the dramatic structure of the shamanic seance. We refer not only to the sometimes highly elaborate "staging" that obviously exercises a beneficial influence on the patient. But every genuinely shamanic seance ends as a *spectacle* unequaled in the world of daily experience. The fire tricks, the "miracles" of the rope-trick...the exhibition of magical feats, reveal another world—the fabulous world of gods and magicians, the world in which *everything seems possible*, where the dead return to life and the living die only to live again, where one can disappear and reappear instantaneously, where the "laws of the nature" are abolished, and a certain superhuman "freedom" is exemplified and made dazzlingly *present* (Eliade 1984, 511)

Performance is so integral to the efficacy of the shaman that some performance theorists, instead of simply noting the dramatic, theatre-like elements of shamanism, go further; they actually root theatre in this ancient practice which originated in Paleolithic times, antedating the rise of drama in ancient Greece by millennia. Richard Schechner argues this position: "Shamanism is the oldest technique of theatrical performing" (Schechner 1976, 123); "There is evidence connecting the origins of theater with shamanism...it's a short step from shamanism...to the practices of Balinese trance, Noh, and characterization in modern theater" (Schechner 1985, 235).

Understood as cultural performance, shamanism is a heightened, dynamic, repeatable, meaning-giving process that orchestrates multiple media and cathects many modes of communication. Working simultaneously through multiple channels and sensory codes, it appeals to the visual, auditory,

tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic levels of experience. In *The Anthropology of Performance*, and other writings, Victor Turner features the “multivocal,” “polysemic,” “multivalent,” nature of performance:

This is an important point – rituals, dramas, and other performative genres are often orchestrations of media, not expressions in a single medium....The many-leveled or tiered structure of a major ritual or drama, each level having many sectors, makes of these genres flexible and nuanced instruments capable of carrying and communicating many messages at once, even of subverting on one level what it appears to be “saying” on another (Turner 1986, 23-24).

To forestall a structuralist dissection of multichanneled performances, Turner is quick to emphasize their processual, *interactive* dimensions:

Furthermore the genres are instruments whose full reality is in their “playing,” in their performance, in their use in social settings – they should not be seen merely as scripts, scenarios, scores, stage directions, or other modes of blueprinting, diagramming, or guiding. Their full meaning emerges from the union of script with actors and audience at a given moment in a group’s ongoing social process (Turner 1986, 24).

The dramaturgical perspective helps us appreciate a shamanic performance holistically, as a matrix of verbal and nonverbal symbols, of interacting linguistic, paralinguistic, kinesic, kinesthetic, proxemic, artifactual, and temporal dimensions of meaning.

The essence of a shaman’s performance is the dramatic reenactment of a myth. Comparing shamanism to psychoanalysis, Levi-Strauss affirms, “Both cures aim at inducing an experience, and both succeed by recreating a myth which the patient has to live or relive” (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 199). The key to the efficacy of myths is the curative powers released through these intensely experienced *performances*. This point is worth emphasizing because in our literary culture, myths are too often weakly encountered as arcane stories abstracted from life and laid out in inscribed texts. Print-biased cultures tend to confine understanding of myth to the dry husks found on the printed page. Anthropologist Edward Bruner forcefully argues for the experiential understanding that is realized through performance:

A ritual must be enacted, a myth recited, a narrative told, a novel read, a drama performed, for these enactments, recitals, tellings, readings, and performances are what make the text transformative and enable us to reexperience our culture’s heritage. Expressions are constitutive and shaping, not as abstract texts but in the activity that actualizes the text. It is in this sense that texts must be performed and experienced...(Bruner 1986, 7).

Performed as a redressive response to the crisis of sickness and misfortune, the shaman’s dramatization of myth achieves a heightened experiential intensity.

Levi-Strauss appreciates the “*language... the transition to this verbal expression*” that the shaman’s myth provides the patient (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 198). But Levi-Strauss is particularly sensitive to the way performed language extends into *gesture*, the extra-linguistic and dramaturgical constituents of meaning. Even though his analysis of the Cuna shaman’s cure is derived from a transcript published in an historical manuscript – not his own direct observation of the event – he skillfully reconstructs the important extra-textual “stage directions” of the shaman’s performance, as for example, when he notes, “When the shaman, crouching beneath the sick woman’s hammock...” (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 190). Levi-Strauss claims that “the symbolic load of such acts qualifies them as a language” (Levi-Strauss

1963b, 200). Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, he argues that "deeply buried complexes" can be reached more effectively "through acts...not through the spoken word, but by concrete actions, that is, genuine rites which penetrate the screen of consciousness to carry their message directly to the unconscious" (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 200).

Paja Thao's life story includes three rich accounts of dramatic action in healing rituals. He recounts the typical ceremony for helping a family whose members have been afflicted with repeated illnesses:

When you shake to carry away the bad things with you
You feel heavy
You do not see
You slow down as you climb the steps to the sky
Your speech slows down
You feel tired
You work very hard
So they must pay you a little

THIS IS THE WAY OF CARRYING AWAY AN AFFLICTION.

The shaman convincingly mimes the afflicted family's depression and listlessness. All the weight of their troubles, their heaviness of spirit, are purgatively transferred onto the shaman to be carried away. His or her performance condenses, focuses, and dispels the family's misery. The shaman becomes, according to Levi-Strauss:

The object of transferences and, through the representations induced in the patient's mind, the real protagonist of the conflict which the latter experiences on the border between the physical world and the psychic world. The patient...overcomes a true organic disorder by identifying with a "mythically transmuted" shaman (Levi-Strauss 1963b, 199).

A genuine catharsis is achieved as the afflicted family is able to objectify its diffused and protracted sufferings and project them onto the shaman who first appropriates, and then disposes, them through the transformations of his miming performance.

The second example is even more dramaturgically elaborate. Paja Thao takes special pride in his ability to help infertile couples conceive and have babies. As part of his professional biography, he includes:

From the time I became a shaman until now
I have helped four to five women
Women who are barren.

First, of course, there is the diagnosis, the performance "to see if the wife has a bad spirit/Which comes to her and makes her barren." After the divination to discover the source of barrenness, there is the proper propitiatory sacrifice.

Then you speak softly to the good spirits
And promise them an animal offering
They are happy with your vow.

And then there are the offerings of ritual animals used "to make a fence/And shelter the wife from the evil spirit." It is interesting to note the procedural exactitude of these offerings:

You take a cat
And a black dog
With white around the muzzle
And white markings above both eyes
And a red chicken.

Depending on the divination results,

Sometimes you use a red male dog
Or a chicken with curled feathers
Or a black sheep.

This highly developed sense of order, clarity, and precision communicates an underlying message of *control* over the situation.

But the following part of the ceremony is extraordinary in terms of concrete dramatic images and, especially, staging:

The first time you shake
You shake to build the bridge to the sky
So that the baby can come to the earth.

The shaman brings the bridge into the bed of the husband and wife
He puts the bridge inside all the pockets of the clothes
Of the husband and wife

He sends his shaman-spirit with a baby-carrier up to the heaven
To bring the baby to the earth
And give to the husband and wife....

You shake to build the bridge to the sky for the baby
You must pull the white ropes over the door across the roof
To the bench of the shaman's altar
Then you sit in the parent's bed (emphasis mine).

What a powerful example of environmental staging—the shaman coming to the home of the sterile couple and actually sitting in the nuptial bed while he pulls the rope bridge that will carry the delicate soul of the baby from heaven over the doorpost and across the ceiling down into the parents' bed. How reassuring it must be for the unfortunate couple to see the shaman identify so concretely with their plight and vigorously strain and shake and “pull the white ropes” from heaven on their behalf (cf. Eliade 1964, 482-486).

Paja Thao's third element is a theatrical *tour de force*. He describes vividly the healing ritual for the one whose “soul sinks deep into the ground.” This ailment is a particularly severe and chronic form of soul-loss. The life-souls have not just wandered away, or been kidnapped by bad spirits; they have fallen deeply into the underworld, far below the ground into a watery abyss. Their recovery demands an extraordinarily intense and risky rescue performance. Paja Thao describes this extremely demanding performance for the shaman as the one “when you lay down your life on the ground.” He sets forth the dramaturgical techniques of this performance as follows:

The people put one big jar of corn on your chest
And one big jar of water
And the top grindstone
And the sick one sits on the grindstone
All pressing down on the chest of the shaman

Two men stand at your head and feet striking gongs
And a four-hands pig⁴ by your side
Then you shake three times

The sick one sits on top of the water jar
The people carefully steady the water jar while he shakes
If the water splashes on the shaman it is bad

*THE WAY OF THE SHAMAN FOR SAVING THE SOUL WHICH SINKS DEEP
INTO THE GROUND IS LIKE THIS.*

66

This remarkable healing performance combines projective identification with participatory theatre.

The shaman becomes the proxy for the chronically ill and depressed patient. To "shake" the patient out of his chronic depression, the shaman confronts him with a mirror of his discouraging condition. The dramatic images acted out on the shaman's prone and passive body are highly evocative. The heavy jar of corn pressing down on his chest makes it hard for him to breathe. The big jar of water on top of the shaman not only adds to the weight but represents the watery depths into which the life-souls are sinking and drowning. And what could be more richly evocative of the debilitating pressures and disintegration of prolonged illness than "the top grindstone?" (That image is used in the same way in American popular parlance when we talk about "grinding pressures," and life becoming a "grind.")

Capping this multitiered edifice of concrete images is the patient himself: "the sick one sits on the grindstone." The patient becomes actively involved in the performance. He or she must rise from the languishing sick bed to participate in the cure of the self, to experience directly the danger, intensity, and ecstasy of the performance. Friends, family, and neighbors also get caught up in this participatory theatre. "The people carefully steady the water jar while he shakes" because "if the water splashes on the shaman it is bad." The dramatic meaning of the water jar in this performance is complex. It represents both danger and its control. Drowning waters, however threatening, are not harmful as long as they are contained inside a holding vessel. The dramatic assistants standing at the head and foot beating drums, frame this electrifying scene. One can imagine how this participatory performance intensely focuses the energies and perceptions of all those engaged. Everyone gets involved with the risk, strain, and suspense of the shaman's dangerous descent into the watery underworld.⁵

The image of the patient sitting on top of all the weights, literally surmounting the scene, is meaningful on many levels. The shaman and the sick individual perform reverse mirror images of one another. The spiritually powerful, active healer is rendered passive and inert. He takes on himself, quite literally, all the patient's burdens, including the patient's full body weight. He becomes the voluntary victim and "lays down his life on the ground." He descends into the murky underworld so that the sick one can be released and rise from the depths of despair.

The patient, the powerless one, on the other hand, now sits astride the grindstone, the dangerous water, and all the other weights. There is something very positive, even triumphant, about this staging. The Hmong, a mountain people, have an appreciation for vertical, top-down hierarchies,

and the symbolism of the summit. This performance situates the patient in a position of empowerment, a reversal of his heretofore helplessness.

Another reversal occurs in the performance. The strong shaman, who has allowed himself to become weak and oppressed with all manner of weights, breaks out of this imposed passivity and begins to tremble vigorously in ecstatic trance. Even under the crush of weights, he has not one, but three, episodes of exquisitely controlled ecstatic performance. As Paja Thao says, "You shake three times" while you are underneath the weights. Indeed, the audience has to steady the water jar on the shaman's chest because of the forcefulness of his shaking. How thrilling it must be for the audience, and particularly the sick one balancing himself on top of the weighted-down shaman, to experience viscerally the shaman's irrepressible power as he defiantly shakes and heaves, resisting the laws of gravity and physics.

This performance actualizes again the triumph of the spirits over natural forces. Paja Thao explains:

When he is lying down on the ground
He does not feel the heavy weights on his chest
Because he has the spirits to help him.

The people help the shaman move from this deep state of trance to another level:

Then the people take the shaman to the altar-bench
He is stiff
The people flex his arms and legs
They spray water from their mouth on him
Then he begins to shake and speak to the spirits.

The severity of the shaman's exertions is manifest in the aftermath. The performance is extremely exhausting and the shaman has to replenish his strength and pace himself afterwards. Paja Thao explains:

When you lay down your life on the ground
With weights on your chest
You have to stay at home for thirteen days

If someone calls you to shake
You do not go
After thirteen days you can go.

No doubt it is very meaningful for the patient to know that someone has extended himself to such lengths on his behalf. Many times I have seen shamans retire in near exhaustion soon after a performance. Once after a vigorous four-hour healing performance for a small boy, I saw the shaman and the boy take a nap together in the loft. Michael Harner explains insightfully how this emotional bonding between healer and patient functions as part of the cure:

The shaman shows his patients that they are not emotionally and spiritually alone in their struggles against illness and death. The shaman...convinces his patients, on a deep level of consciousness, that another human is willing to offer up his own self to help them. The shaman's self-sacrifice calls forth a commensurate emotional commitment from his patients, a sense of obligation to struggle alongside the shaman to save one's self. Caring and curing go hand in hand (Harner 1980, xiv).

Indeed, in every shamanic performance there is the risk of death. The shaman entering a

trance is made acutely vulnerable because he or she has released the life-souls from the body so that they may go on a supernatural journey to heaven, or sometimes to the underworld, on a mission of salvation for the suffering patient. When I started observing shamanic performances, one of the first things I was told is that if a shaman falls down while performing, she or he will die. That is why during episodes when the shamans leap from the flying horse bench, you often see assistants balancing them during these precarious celestial flights. Further, I was told that if any thoughtless person walks between the performing shaman and the facing altar, the shaman will die because "that cuts off his road, and he falls and dies." I was taught the emergency resuscitation treatment should this happen anytime during my research. To revive the shaman, you must put water in your mouth and blow it first on the back of the shaman, then on both sides. Also, shamans should not walk over ropes. When Taggart Siegel and I were filming the *Between Two Worlds* documentary, we had to be careful where we placed cables on the floor.

So it is that a shaman risks death in every trance performance. The shaman's performance balances among opposites, reversals, and paradoxes. During performance, shamans are simultaneously acutely vulnerable and specially empowered. They embrace death to bring life; to control a life-threatening disorder, they release themselves into an out-of-body experience, an involuntary trembling trance, a specially controlled kind of chaos. They hang suspended between earth and heaven, betwixt and between human and spirit. They are both here and not here. The veil that shadows their face signifies that they have left the side of reality that is seen. They are structurally invisible, and yet they fill the room with their presence, their charisma.

To complement Paja Thao's descriptions of shamanic dramaturgy here is a case example from my field work in Camp Ban Vinai. I was invited to witness a healing ceremony for Xiong Houa, a 22-year-old man who was my friend and a principal consultant for my research. I had met Xiong Houa at a funeral ceremony my first week in the camp. He invited me home to one of the longhouses built by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In this tin-roofed building, fifteen families, totaling 104 people, shared the ten flimsily partitioned rooms. Throughout my stay in Ban Vinai, I came to enjoy the Hmong's hospitality and slept many nights in this building, which resembles nothing more than a long shed.

Seven active shamans lived in this one building, which indicates to some degree the ratio of shamans to the general population. Indeed, Ban Vinai has a high density of shamans. The fabric of camp life is suffused with shamanic performance. As I walked daily through the camp, I could often stand in one place and hear three shamanic performances coming from different directions. Most mornings I was awakened before dawn by the drumming and ecstatic chanting of shamans. Regarding the ratio of shamans to Hmong population, my field work experience differs from that of W. R. Geddes who asserts, "Relatively few persons become shamans.... Shamans even of average capacity are fairly rare" (Geddes 1976, 99). My field work experience is more consonant with Lemoine's observations:⁶

The people who worked in refugee camps must have noticed a large number of shamans at work, making an almost continuous musical background all the day long. This may be indicative of a high degree of anxiety and psychic vulnerability for the Hmong in the refugee camps. But I must stress that it was already the case in the context of a traditional village [where Lemoine did fieldwork]. I remember counting no less than 30 shamans in a cluster of 90 households (Lemoine 1986, 346).

Xiong Houa's mother and father, as well as his grandmother and grandfather, are practicing shamans.

Xiong Houa suffered from chronic malaria. Periodically he would come down with fever, chills, and generalized weakness. The Hmong had a different explanation for the etiology of his illness,

however. On the occasion of my visit, the shaman's divination/diagnosis was that marauding, malevolent spirits were molesting Xiong Houa's life-souls and trying to carry them off to the sky. If they succeeded in this kidnapping mission, Xiong Houa would die. That night his shaman-grandfather would intervene.

Earlier in the day, the family had purchased a small 200-baht (U.S. \$8) pig from the Thai market just outside the camp entrance. All day the pig had been tied to the centre-post of the family's section of the building. In the late afternoon, the shaman, family, and neighbors made the pre-ritual preparation. They dressed the altar, lighted the oil lamp, set the incense joss sticks, prepared the paper spirit-money, roasted the altar rice that would be thrown during performance to feed the legion of spirit-helpers, and stabilized the shaman's flying horse bench by driving wooden wedges around the legs so that it could support and withstand the shaman's acrobatic leaps and rhythmic dancing. Just before sunset, at about 6:00 p.m., Xiong Houa was summoned to the altar and directed to sit on the shaman's sacralized bench, facing the altar. The pig was unleashed from the centre-post and led to Xiong Houa and tied to his body, behind his back. Then the shaman took a long, moderately thick, reddish rope and ceremoniously tied the pig and patient together, making several loops around Xiong Houa's torso. The pig did not struggle at any point, but appeared surprisingly calm. Perhaps the day spent inside the house tied to the centre-post had acclimated the pig to the household. The shaman draped Xiong Houa with a spectacular cascade of white, origamied spirit paper.

Wearing his veil, but with it thrown back over the head so that his face was visible, the shaman picked up his ring of rattles and with it traced a circle in the dirt floor, enclosing Xiong Houa and the pig. He lifted the bowl of water from the altar and chanted over it these words:

You are the good water
You are the strong water
You are the good water
You are the powerful water.

Then the shaman took big draughts of water in his mouth and blew them three times on Xiong Houa. First he stood in back and sprayed him, and then he walked to both sides and blew water on him. He punctuated these water sprayings by repeating lines such as:

This is the good water
I will blow for this good person
Who sits on the bench
He is a good person
I will blow the good water for you
I am strong and not afraid
Don't you be afraid of the bad spirits
Don't be afraid of the snake
Don't be afraid of the tiger
And the wild jungle spirits
Be strong
You are a good person.

Then the shaman gently talked to the pig about its purpose in this healing ritual. He explained that it had been chosen and purchased to help sustain Xiong Houa in his present difficulty, and now its life-souls would be released and offered in service to the spiritual needs of this suffering man to whom it is tied. While Xiong Houa's father, brothers, and cousins held the pig tightly, another relative deftly

cut its throat, releasing the blood into the basin a neighbor held.

The spirit paper draped over Xiong Houa's shoulders was then burned to buy the pig's souls which would be exchanged for Xiong Houa's kidnapped souls. The offered pig was removed for cleaning and gutting. Xiong Houa left the shaman's bench and came to sit beside me, joining the ring of observers. The shaman now lowered his veil and mounted the bench. An assistant began beating the shaman's gong vigorously. The shaman began rocking back and forth as he rode his dragon charger up to the sky to confront the bad spirits that were menacing Xiong Houa. As he mimed galloping on the flying horse, he called to his legion of spirit-helpers, triumphantly mustering a spiritual army of thousands to back him up as he led the way to the enemy's hideout.

Soon the shaman was deep into trance and talking to the spirits. At first he talked to his battalion of spirits, giving them directions. He also talked to Xiong Houa's spirits, encouraging them to take heart and not to be afraid. Finally, he talked to the evil afflicting spirits. He both threatened and negotiated with them, and the shaman made a pact with them. At this point, the audience felt free to divide their attention back and forth between the shaman and small talk among themselves.

After about an hour of ecstatic chanting and strenuous exertions, the shaman returned from his trance state and once again summoned Xiong Houa to sit on the bench. Then the sacrificed pig was laid out on a basket platform and positioned once again behind the patient. Again, pig and patient were bound together with the red rope. The pig's carcass was displayed behind the patient as a protective witness to seal the arrangement the shaman had made with the spirits. The pig had provided a ransom for Xiong Xoua's kidnapped souls and the red rope tying them together displayed their intimate bond.

The healing ritual was capped by a communion meal. Everyone attending the shaman's performance—immediate family, clansmen, neighbors, friends—shared in the feast for Xiong Houa, partaking of the consecrated pig that had been cooked into a tasty vegetable soup. And of course there was rice. The meal consummated the curing ritual and provided closure for the ritual performance.

These postperformance feasts extend the sacred into the realm of sociability. Important transitional frames for the ritual, they clinch and seal the spiritual event with this communal sharing of a life that has been sacrificed "to mend or strengthen a collapsing soul" (Lemoine 1986, 344). At the same time, these hearty meals are affirmations of basic life processes through which ritual participants are returned to the homely human needs and pleasures of food, drink, and fellowship.

At the end of the ritual, Xiong Houa looked much better, his fever had abated, and he said that he felt strong. When I asked him why he thought this was so, he replied, "Because they killed the pig for me."

Perhaps the most difficult part of the dramaturgy of this healing performance for Americans to understand is the sacrifice of the pig. I want to emphasize the respect and reverence with which this meaningful act is performed. The souls of sacrificial animals are precious and vitally connected to human souls. Animals are not considered to be as far removed from the human species as they are in our world view. According to Lemoine, the shaman typically works with human souls that need to be fortified and refurbished, therefore:

He needs to use a similar substance, spirit to back spirit, life to strengthen life. What he does in a pig sacrifice is to take hold of the pig's soul and use it to support or protect his patient's soul. Both human and animal souls are thought to be made of the same substance and man can reincarnate in a domestic animal (Lemoine 1986, 344).

The pig offered as a ransom for Xiong Houa's life-souls had to be female, the opposite sex. Since the bonding between the life-souls of the patient and sacrificed animal is so intimate, it is likened

to souls being wedded together. When the patient is female, the pig must be male.

Later that night there was another shamanic ceremony in the same building. Xiong Houa's neighbors, two partitions down from his room, had received money from relatives in the United States to buy a huge pig and perform a proxy ceremony for the grandfather now resettled in California. They explained the patient's symptoms and failure to find satisfaction with Western health practitioners on the tape cassette that accompanied the money. Because it was more difficult to perform these rituals in the United States than in Ban Vinai, and also because they wanted the Ban Vinai relatives to share in the healing ceremony and feast, they were arranging this "long-distance" cure. The shaman in Ban Vinai, Thailand, would perform for the patient in California.

This symbiotic relationship between Ban Vinai refugees and resettled relatives in the West is quite common. I first became aware of the practice when I attended healing rituals where no patient was visibly present. In response to my question, "Where's the patient?" the officiants would reply, "In Iowa," or "Paris," or "St. Paul." The Hmong in the West have greater access to cash but more difficulty in carrying out these elaborate rituals. There is no lack of shamans and appropriate contexts in Ban Vinai, but money to purchase the sacrificial animals and accessories is hard to come by. The Hmong on both sides of the world benefit from this cooperative arrangement. The Hmong resettled in Western countries are able to maintain their traditions and meaningful connections with their relatives left behind. The resident Hmong in Ban Vinai profit from the protein supplement to their diet that comes from the sacrificed animals. Moreover, they are deeply satisfied knowing that they are performing an important spiritual service for the Hmong in the diaspora. They become, in effect, stewards of the sacred practices of their people.

To close this section on the dramaturgy of healing, here is a brief case example of a ceremony in which I achieved an "inside view" as the patient. The months I spent doing field work in Ban Vinai were extremely special to me. Much of the time I was exhilarated by the experience because of the warmth of the people and the ethnographic richness of the place. However, the living conditions were a bit rough. The sanitation level of a crowded refugee camp with no running water and inadequate sewage disposal facilities was problematic, to say the least. I frequently contended with intestinal disorders. For security reasons, I had to sleep in a different hut or longhouse every night, which was tiring. I contracted dengue, an acute febrile disease often referred to as "The Bone-Masher's Disease," because even though you recover with no chronic side effects, for a week you feel like you have been run over by a truck. After four months, I had lost 18 pounds and was running a low-grade fever. My Hmong friends noticed that I was "getting skinny." They took the initiative and invited me to a hut on the edge of the camp where one of the most respected shamans lived. He determined that some of my life-souls had escaped from my body and were beating a path back home to Chicago. He explained that my spirits missed my family, friends, and students back at Northwestern University after such a prolonged separation, and therefore had wandered off. (Actually, there was a certain logic to the shaman's diagnosis.)

To perform the soul-calling ritual, *Hu Plig*, the shaman positioned me on a low stool at the door of the hut. Two chickens were sacrificed and placed at my feet in the doorway on a platter with candles, eggs, and incense to entice my departed life-souls. The shaman, a dignified old man, stood at my side in the doorway and called back my souls. He talked gently and persuasively to my truant life-souls, entreating them to return. "Come back! Come back to live with Doua [my Hmong name] in Ban Vinai," he exhorted. "We know you miss your parents, and family, and all your relatives and friends in America. You are going to Chicago—but not yet. You must come back to Doua. Soon you will see your brothers and sisters in America, but now you must return to Doua. You must return to Ban Vinai!"

Many of my friends had decorated the interior of the hut with festive paper hangings and had gathered in the hut. They set out an elaborate feast and placed one of the chickens and several of the eggs before me, saying that they were mine because they had been used to call my spirits. Kue Thao, who had initiated this soul-calling ritual for me and called on the services of his uncle, the shaman, came and sat beside me. He said that now they were going to tie the strings (*khi tes*), and that he and I would be tied together "to make us brothers." I sat on his right side, so my left arm and his right arm were crossed. On my right hand the shaman balanced the ritual plate holding the chicken, a candle, eggs, and rice. First the shaman, and then dozens of the assembled people, came up one by one and while tying my and Kue Thao's wrists with cotton strings, chanted blessings something like this: "Today is a good day, it is a strong day." Then while miming sweeping motions with the string over my left hand, palm down, they said, "Sweep away all the bad things, all the worry, all the harmful things." Then with my palm turned up, they intoned, "Keep every good thing, all the success, good health, and long life."

72

The shaman trimmed the bundle of strings with scissors. As he cut the strings, he said that he was cutting away all the bad things. He then burned the "bad" strings and dropped the charred refuse in a glass of water. A person designated from the group carried the water outside the house and threw it away. As he threw out the water, he said, "Carry the misery and all bad things far away to the end of the earth. The bad things will go away. Keep all goodness." He went back inside the house and was given a drink of alcohol as a reward for performing this service.

From the perspective of the patient, I can report that such healing ceremonies do work on many levels. Granted I was not seriously ill at the time this soul-calling ritual was performed for me, but I was far from feeling robust. To be steeped in this supportive context saturated with care and humankindness is an uplifting experience. You really do feel better after one of these ceremonies. I was impressed by how attentive and solicitous everyone was for my well-being. Such occasions where friends can gather to dramatize publicly their care and affection for one another are restorative.

THE POLITICS OF SHAMANISM

Shamanism becomes a site of struggle for cultural identity, power, and meaning in the confrontation between ancient traditions and modern forces (Taussig 1986). For many Eurocentric types insensitive to other ways of experiencing the world, shamanism epitomizes "the primitive," "the superstitious," "the irrational," even "the barbaric." In short, it stands against reason, science, progress. Some Christians associate shamanic trance possession and animal sacrifice with heathenism and link it with the devil. Too many interest groups claim that in the name of science, progress, and Christianity, shamanism should be stamped out. Sadly, the resistance to shamanism that the Hmong resettled in the United States now experience, recapitulates a history of oppression that traditional people everywhere have been subjected to when confronted with Western powers. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's summary of the destruction of sacred traditions in Africa rings all too true for the Hmong: "The missionaries in their proselytizing zeal saw many of these traditions as works of the devil. They had to be fought before the bible could hold sway in the hearts of the natives" (Thiong'o 1986, 37).

73

Paja Thao's life narrative is filled with the tensions and pain a practicing shaman experiences in a milieu that assaults and erodes his core beliefs:

I still believe Hmong religion
In my country Laos none of my cousins changed to Christians
But now all my cousins come to America
And all of them change to Christian

Now only my son and I
Hold to Hmong religion
But I am not sure how much longer
Before my son changes to Christian

As for me, I will never be Christian
Because my father and mother gave birth to me
I am not the only one
There are many from every clan
Who still believe Hmong religion.

It is clear from his repeated affirmations that he sees the practice and preservation of traditional rites to be deeply connected with his cultural and personal identity. They represent the continuity with a past from which he still defines himself and continues to draw meaning and motivation for present circumstances:

I shall never forget my own culture
I am a Hmong
My father and mother gave me birth
I shall call to feed their spirits.

He resists the dispiriting and corrosive forces of domination through these declarations of steadfastness to his convictions.

Most shamans in the United States with whom I have talked actively resist the assiduous

attempts to undermine and disconfirm the ritual practices that enact and sustain the Hmong system of beliefs. You do not have to talk very long before the tensions surface. Here is a segment from an interview in Milwaukee with Yang Lau, the Hmong male shaman who performed the opening ceremony in the *Between Two Worlds* film documentary:

In the past, in Laos, we didn't have any Hmong who were Christians, but recently in Xieng Khouang there have been a few families becoming Christian, but many still hold their own Hmong religious beliefs. Right now in the U.S., we Hmong are not against Christianity. Some of us are becoming Christians now because we think we must be accepted by Americans. But as for myself, I will not become Christian because that means giving up my beliefs and the Hmong culture. If I become Christian there will be no one to pass on the Hmong culture to my children and their children. That is why I keep practicing Hmong religion...If all of the Hmong were to become Christians we would lose Hmong culture forever...We Hmong who believe in Hmong culture still have shamans...Now I'm very old but I hope my children and the generation following won't forget Hmong culture. I tell you this to remember for the future generation.... A long time ago we were born to have shamans. My grandfather was a shaman and my father was a shaman also...I want to pass this on to the future generations so that they will know about the shaman. This is all I have to say.

74

One cannot help but be impressed with the articulate self-awareness and simple forcefulness of this old man's words. He has a clear-eyed view of the present situation of his people. He understands the vital tie between culture and its expressive traditions. He firmly resists, therefore, all attempts to stamp out shamanism. It will be a sad day for Hmong people if the time ever comes when the last shaman dies.

Lemoine pointedly reminds us that Hmong refugees "did not come to our countries only to save their lives, they rather came to save their selves, that is, their Hmong ethnicity" (Lemoine 1986, 337). He confronts the struggle for the "selves" of the Hmong that hinges on shamanism, and notes, "I must say that I was shocked to hear in St. Paul last year that the religious sponsors of some of my Hmong friends would allow them to practice recalling the souls, but not shamanism" (Lemoine 1986, 346).

The *Between Two Worlds* film documentary also addresses this conflict between traditional Hmong and Christian evangelists. The documentary tells the story of one young man who went to great lengths to arrange and enact a shamanic ceremony involving the sacrifice of a cow for his critically ill infant son. At the consummation feast following the ceremony, he was deeply hurt that many of his relatives and friends did not come to share in the celebration of his baby's restored souls and health. They had been forbidden by a Christian minister to eat the sacrificed animals. The documentary includes a revealing interview with a fundamentalist missionary who concentrates his efforts on proselytizing Southeast Asian refugees in Chicago. He characterizes the Hmong as idolators, and their religious beliefs as nothing more than "a rock, a piece of a rock" that they made up. The documentary includes a scene where he is in Paja Thao's apartment trying to convert him.

Even before the Hmong set foot in Western countries of resettlement, they must cope with the disconfirmation, in both subtle and overt ways, of their shamans. A recently published report of a state government team that toured refugee camps in Thailand includes this witness of repressive practices, subtle forms of cultural control and domination:

A very large traditional medicine center operates in Panat Nikom and it houses the traditional healers of all ethnic groups except the Hmong shaman. The Hmong in the camp will not visit the shaman when located in the TMC for fear of ridicule and the

suspicion that they may not be able to go [to] the U.S. if they are seen visiting the shaman (Minnesota Governor's State Advisory Council for Refugees 1986, Appendix B-2).

Panat Nikom is the transit camp, the "processing center," where refugees accepted for resettlement in the United States spend months of intensive preparation and cultural orientation for American life. The refugees at Panat Nikom are particularly vulnerable to pressures to conform and adapt because they are in a transitional state and are expectant, anticipatory, and apprehensive. The Hmong are the majority in this camp, representing 44 percent of the population, yet they are the ethnic group denied access to their shamans, even in a "traditional medicine center" that claims to be open to non-Western methods of healing.

One could elaborate the examples of cultural control and domination that are perpetrated against the Hmong and their shamans. People in the West need to understand that shamanism is not just some exotic, superstitious practice that can be excised easily to promote the Hmong's adjustment to American life styles. Shamanism is deeply embedded within the tissue and texture of Hmong culture and belief.

What is needed is a dialogical understanding of and appreciation for cultural difference and diversity. Rather than being threatened by and hostile to genuine difference, the encounter with "otherness" can be replenishing. Mikhail Bakhtin spent most of his life arguing for the emancipatory benefits that radiate from genuine, mutually struggling encounters between self and other, where two world views, two voices are brought together in dialogue to test, challenge, and invigorate one another. The ideal is an enlivening conversation, an ongoing exchange of ideas and viewpoints, where neither voice is silenced or collapsed into the other. Monologue, the sealed-off adherence to a totalizing, unitary viewpoint destroys the other, and is ultimately debilitating for the self (cf. Bakhtin 1981; Buber 1970; Theunissen 1984; Todorov 1984).

Two excellent examples of dialogical integrity are found in the relatively brief history of the encounter between Hmong shamanism and American culture. The first is in the *Final Report of the SUNDS Planning Project* (Holtan et al. 1984). This exemplary project arose as a response to the crisis of SUNDS (Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome)⁷ which has now claimed more than 100 lives in the United States since 1975; Hmong, mostly young men, have been the hardest hit ethnic group. SUNDS has reached epidemic proportions and is being monitored by the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia. Under the direction of Dr. Neal Holtan, the investigative team drew on the expertise of physicians, scientific researchers, epidemiologists, and public health professionals to assemble state-of-the-art knowledge about the problem and make recommendations for research and community action.

In their pursuit of information and insights into this baffling health crisis, the team members did not limit their search to the knowledge and methods of medical science. They talked to Hmong suffering the effects of this epidemic and seriously considered their ideas along with the hypotheses and methods of scientific investigation. With extraordinary openness and balance between radically different world views and explanatory frameworks, the investigative team used the best of modern medical science and respected the authenticity of native beliefs. So extraordinary is their achievement of dialogical balance and cultural sensitivity, that their first three recommendations merit quotation in their entirety:

1. Further study is needed of refugee religions and traditional healing practices, so that cross-cultural understanding and improved quality and appropriateness of refugee health care can be achieved.

2. *Traditional rituals should be considered therapeutic. Shamans should be befriended to gain their assistance in reducing refugee stress.*
3. Compromises can be found so that refugees interested in animal sacrifice can be accomplished [sic] while abiding by legal restrictions. Animals may be killed outside of the city limits for ceremonial purposes and afterward brought into the city (Holtan et al. 1984, 40-41; emphasis mine).

This kind of tough-minded commitment to difference and dialogue should serve as a model for any group working cross-culturally.

The second positive example of dialogical understanding is found in a sensitive report and discussion of a Hmong shaman's cure published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (Tobin and Friedman 1983, 439-448). Following an excellent dramaturgical description of a ceremony that included the patient crawling through a hoop and between two knives to divert the afflicting spirits, the authors offer this insightful interpretation:

76

...we should not let the exoticness of Mrs. Thor, of Vang Xiong, and of people like the Hmong interfere with our appreciation of the transcultural, universal aspects of anguish and cure. In many ways Mrs. Thor functioned in a manner analogous to that of Western psychotherapists. She represented herself to Vang Xiong as a specialist, a professional with long years of training and experience in dealing with similar cases. She showed compassion, but maintained a professional detachment, neither pitying nor scorning her patient. She avoided making premature diagnoses, she offered herself as the chief instrument of care...As is so often the case in Western therapy, her ability to help her patient understand (become conscious of) mysterious (unconscious) forces proved to be the key to the cure (Tobin and Friedman 1983, 441).

By bringing Hmong shamanism into dialogue with modern psychotherapy, both practices are rendered "anthropologically strange" so that new insights and fresh perspectives can be mutually achieved and sharpened. The similarities enable comparison, but the differences challenge and stretch understanding.

The capacity to hold different ways of knowing in productive tension is both possible and desirable. Tobin and Friedman encourage this struggle to embrace difference in the mode of "both/and" openness rather than "either/or," which eliminates categories. They confirm that from the patient's point of view, the shaman's "interpretations and ministrations on his behalf were intelligible, desired, and ultimately successful" (Tobin and Friedman 1983, 441). Nonetheless, they insist that this openness to "the other" does not entail a denial of one's own beliefs. One can embrace "the other" without forsaking one's own convictions:

But how are those of us who do not believe in spirits...to view Vang Xiong's illness and cure? Cultural relativism requires that we acknowledge and respect beliefs that differ from our own, but not that we necessarily subscribe to these beliefs. We can appreciate Mrs. Thor's skill and recommend her to our Hmong clients without agreeing with her understanding of what underlies her clients' suffering, or why her cures work (Tobin and Friedman 1983, 442).

Actually, this willingness to articulate different world views in a way that respectfully preserves the integrity of both is epitomized by the Hmong shamans who place bottles of prescription medicine alongside the spirit baskets on their altars.

To acknowledge respectfully the beliefs and practices of people different from ourselves is simply human decency and deserves no special praise. To use these other beliefs to question our own assumptions is a step toward the development of a critical consciousness. Ultimately, a genuinely dialogical encounter with "the other" should deepen self-understanding. Lemoine takes the dialogical encounter between shamanism and Western psychology to this next level of self-critique:

Comparing his work to psychiatric procedure, I noticed that while the analyst tries to provoke self-analysis by scratching the wounded part of the self, a Hmong shaman will provide an explanation which avoids all self-involvement of the patient. He is always represented as a victim of an assault from outside powers of an accidental separation from one part of his self. When this situation has been identified and overcome by the shaman, health is recovered. At no point has there been a feeling of guilt associated with suffering. Maybe in the healing power of the Hmong shaman's art there is a lesson which the psychotherapist could learn (Lemoine 1986, 348).

We enlarge and enrich ourselves through dialogue with others—others whose differences challenge our complacencies and open to us new boundaries of human experience in our shared world.

A LIFE SYNOPSIS OF A HMONG WOMAN SHAMAN

To conclude this ethnographic commentary on Hmong shamanism, Zoua Yang, the remarkable shaman and medicine woman now living in Milwaukee, voices the last words. Her personal narrative is briefer than Paja Thao's, but it resonates with similar themes such as unstinting dedication to helping people in difficulty and devotion to the welfare of the community. Interesting differences are apparent as well. Her experience as a practicing shaman complements Paja Thao's and enriches the ethnographic record because of her emphasis on herbal healing and plant medicine. Her last line, phrased as an imperative, provides the motive for publishing this monograph. Perhaps it will help inspire more research on Hmong culture and other cultures threatened by absorption within dominant systems.

78

Both Zoua Yang and her husband, also a shaman, are featured in the opening scenes of the *Between Two Worlds* film documentary. This is how Zoua Yang summed up her life when the film team met her in August 1984:

Now, and in the past, the ancestors became shamans

Because long ago one person was very sick

And no one could help that person

And they said to themselves

What can we do

To make the sick person get better?

Shao⁸ said

You must set up a wooden bench

And shake to go and bring the soul back

Because the soul wandered off

You shake to go get the soul back

Then the sick person will get better

Shao said

Get a veil

Put it over your face

And then sit on a bench

Chanting the holy words

You go to bring back the wandering soul

In order for the sick person to get better

So our ancestors took the veil

And put it over their eyes

Then they took a bench

And put it in the middle of the room

And placed some incense close to the wall

Then the ancestors called the soul back

But they did not see the soul

You just sit there and say you want the soul to come back



Zoua Yang in
traditional Hmong
dress.

Then you finish shaking
This is the way the shaman was created
So we have done it like this generation after generation

The way of the shaman is like this
We say that when a person is sick
The evil spirits take away the soul
The shaman shakes to get the soul
So the sick person gets better
Hmong believe that if your soul is in your body
You won't have any sickness
But if your soul is not in your body
You will get sick
When the shaman shakes to get the soul back
You won't have any sickness

So I just want to say like this
When we shake
Our heart tells us which step to heaven
The soul has wandered
The shaman calls the soul at that step
So the soul comes back
You throw the buffalo horns
To make sure the soul has returned

If the horns are not like this [she mimes configuration of horns]
The soul has not yet returned
If the soul returns
The sick person gets better

Before I became a shaman my soul
Wanted me to become a shaman
So my soul ran away from my body
Then I became very sick
A shaman shook for me
To bring back my soul
The shaman told me to become a shaman
So my soul was very happy
And returned to my body
Then I got better
After that I became a shaman

Before I became a shaman
I was very sick for three years
Since I became a shaman
I have been healthy
I sacrificed some chickens for my shaman spirits
To open my altar
When someone is sick you must shake
To go get the soul back
So the sick person will get better
This is the way I became a shaman
I want to pass this on to all Hmong children
And to their children

In my country [Laos] there are no doctors
I was the only one
Who took care of the sick ones
I could heal any sickness
 Backaches, broken legs and arms
 Depression, and so forth
All the people I heal
Always get better
All of my plant medicines I left in Laos
I couldn't bring all the medicine with me
When I was escaping from Laos
I took a lot of plant medicines with me
But while escaping the Communists shot at us
And blocked our way
So I had to leave my medicine behind
I was only able to save a small amount of medicine

But there were many people escaping with me
So I used some of my medicine to cure the sick
When I finally made it to the refugee camp in Thailand
There were many sick people
So I used the rest of medicine to heal
So there wasn't any medicine left
To bring to the U.S.
Now I don't have any medicine
To cure the sick people

In my country sometimes you might disturb the evil spirit *dab ntxaug*
That lives in the forest
I have a special medicine that protects us against these evil spirits
So the family and the village won't get sick

In my country when we run into evil spirits
While working a field around the hill and streams
Where the evil spirit lives
The spirit makes the whole family sick
The *dab ntxaug* evil spirit makes you sick
After you have set the table and are ready to eat

If the evil spirit makes you sick
Then you put three drops of medicine in each corner of the house
After you have set the table
When you have finished eating the chicken-pecking medicine
Then you see the chicken pecking the baby mice
Because the medicine kills the baby mice
Then we know that these were evil spirits
After that, everybody gets well

I am a very good herbalist
Many people come from far away to see me
In my country I took the whole day
To gather plant medicines from the jungle and streams
After I gathered the plants
Then I cut them into thin slices and let them dry out
When they are dried
I store the plants in a dry place
So I can use them when sickness comes
Some plants you chew
And some you cook with chicken

In my country I was the best medicine doctor
I could cure any kind of sickness
No one could equal me
Some couples who wanted to have a baby
Would journey ten days to be cured by me

Some years while working in the jungle fields
There are many evil spirits
If you want protection from the evil spirits
You take some medicine and plant it around the field
This way you won't have any sickness

I want to pass this on to all Hmong children
And their children
So they will always know how to use Hmong medicine
All the Hmong in the world should contact each other to use this medicine
There is no plant medicine in this country

I have medicines for birth control
For example, a woman has a lot of children
And doesn't want any more
I'll give her a medicine so she won't get pregnant again
Absolutely no more babies again
A couple who had two children came to me and said
They could not have any more children
So I gave them some plant medicine
And they had more babies

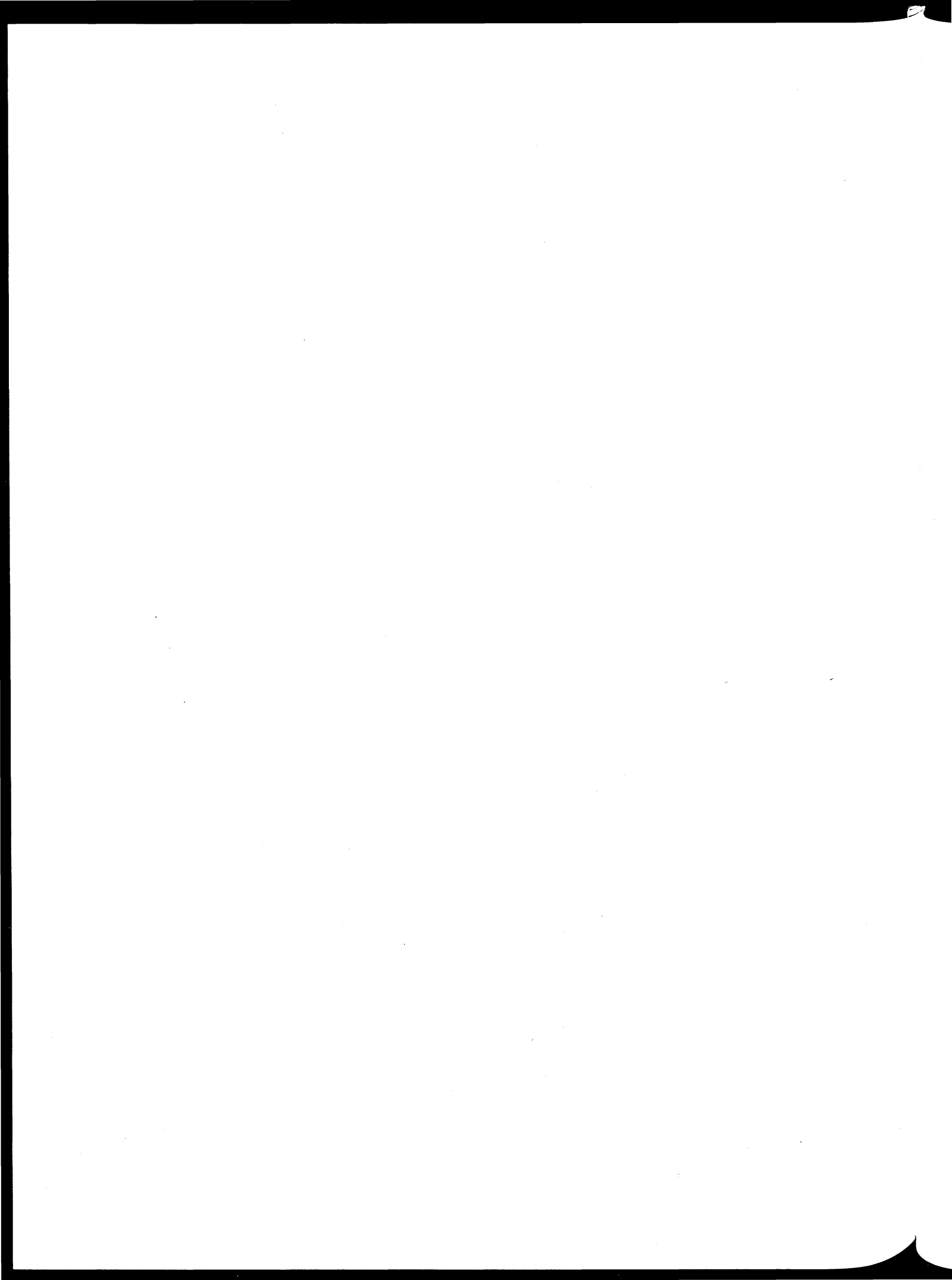
Some people can't have babies no matter what medicine I give them
Because they were born without bringing babies from the sky
These women need shamans to shake for them
To climb to the sky
To bring the baby back to them

Those people that don't want to have any more babies
Must pay me so I can give them medicine
If not, I won't give them medicine
Because they will give it to another person
Who does not know how to use it
And therefore it could be poisonous to them
I just want to say this to Hmong children
And their children
To research this medicine so that they can use it
In the future in case there's no doctor

*YOU MUST WRITE THESE THINGS DOWN SO YOU CAN
REMEMBER WHEN I PASS AWAY.*

NOTES

1. For a personal and gripping account of this experience, see the life history written by May Xiong and Nancy Donnelly entitled "My Life in Laos," *The Hmong World*, 1, Brenda Johns and David Strecker, eds. New Haven: Yale University, Council on Southeast Asia Studies, pp. 201-244.
2. Geomancy, the selection of auspicious burial sites through interpretation of the mountain landscape, is an important part of the Hmong ritual system (see Tapp 1986b; Johnson 1985, 14).
3. Cf. Zahner-Roloff (1985) for an insightful discussion of the therapeutic dimensions of poetic chant-performance.
4. This refers to a traditional Hmong measurement of length. A *hand* is the length of a spread hand, from the thumb to the tip of the extended middle finger.
5. For a fascinating example of this particular kind of performance, see "Service Chamanique au Cours Duquel 'On Descend Dans La Mer'," in Jean Mottin's collection of shamanic texts (1982, 325-351).
6. Dr. Gary Y. Lee, a Hmong anthropologist, insists in a personal communication that in the overall society shamans are much less common than I found in Ban Vinai. His point that Refugee Camp Ban Vinai is a very special setting and should not be taken as representative of Hmong villages is a good one.
7. Since the publication of the *Final Report*, the project team has changed the name of the syndrome from SUNDS (Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome) to SUDS (Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome), dropping the "Nocturnal" to account for recent cases in which the victim was afflicted during the daytime. The 107-page published report is truly excellent. I encourage health professionals, especially those who work in cross-cultural contexts, to consult this document. Copies can be obtained by writing the Asian Sudden Death Information Center, St. Paul Ramsey Medical Center, 640 Jackson Street, St. Paul, MN 55101, or telephoning (612) 221-3539. Professionals interested particularly in the SUDS, which has claimed more than 100 victims in the United States since 1975, can contact the SUDS Surveillance Program, Division of Environment Hazards, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, GA 30333, or telephoning (404) 454-4780.
8. In Hmong folklore and mythology, Shao is a wise counselor, a seer.



REFERENCES

- Austin, J. L.
 1975 *How To Do Things With Words*. 2d ed., eds. J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M.
 1981 *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist; ed. M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bellah, R. N., et al.
 1985 *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Bliatout, Bruce Thowpau
 1983 *Hmong Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death: A Cultural Study*. Portland: Sparkle Enterprises.
- Bruner, E.
 1986 Experience and its Expressions. In *The Anthropology of Experience*, eds. V. Turner and E. Bruner, 3-30, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Buber, E.
 1970 *I and Thou*. Trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Catlin, A. ed.
 1987 *Textiles As Texts, Arts of Hmong Women from Laos*. Los Angeles: The Woman's Building.
- Cerquone, J.
 1986 *Refugees From Laos: In Harm's Way*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Refugees, American Council for Nationalities Service.
- Chindarsi, Nusit
 1976 *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*. Bangkok: The Siam Society.
- Clifford, J. and G. E. Marcus, eds.
 1986 *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Douglas, M.
 1966 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
 1982 *Natural Symbols, Explorations in Cosmology*. Original 1970. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Eliade, M.
 1963 *Myth and Reality*. Trans. W. R. Trask. New York: Harper & Row.
 1964 *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Trans. W. R. Trask. New York: Bollingen Foundation.

Fine, E. C.

1984 *The Folklore Text: From Performance To Print*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Frye, N.

1982 *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Gazzolo, M. B.

1986 Spirit Paths and Roads of Sickness. A Symbolic Analysis of Hmong Textile Design. M.A. thesis, University of Chicago Program in the Social Sciences.

Geddes, W. R.

1976 *Migrants of the Mountains: The Cultural Ecology of the Blue Miao (Hmong Njua) of Thailand*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Glassie, H.

1982 *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Graham, D. C.

1954 *Songs and Stories of the Ch'uan Miao*. Smithsonian Institution, Miscellaneous Collections 123 (Publication no. 4139). Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.

Halifax, J.

1982 *Shaman: The Wounded Healer*. New York: Crossroad.

Halifax, J., ed.

1979 *Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives*. New York: E. P. Dutton.

Harner, M.

1980 *The Way of the Shaman*. New York: Harper & Row.

Hendricks, G. L., B. T. Downing, and A. S. Deinard, eds.

1986 *The Hmong in Transition*. New York: Center for Migration Studies.

Holtan, Neal, et al.

1984 *Final Report of the SUNDS Planning Project: A Summary of the Current State of Knowledge about Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome Occurring in Southeast Asians with Recommendations for Research and Community Action*. St. Paul: St. Paul-Ramsey Medical Center.

Hymes, D.

1981 *In Vain I Tried To Tell You: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Johnson, C. ed.

- 1985 *Dab Neeg Hmoob, Myths, Legends & Folktales from the Hmong of Laos*. St. Paul: Macalester College, Department of Linguistics.

Langness, L. L. and G. Frank

- 1981 *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography*. Novator, CA: Chandler & Sharp.

Lemoine, J.

- 1983 *Kr'ua Ke (Showing the Way): A Hmong Initiation of the Dead*. Trans. K. White. Bangkok: Pandora Press.

- 1986 Shamanism in the Context of Hmong Resettlement. In *The Hmong in Transition*, eds. G. L. Hendricks, B. T. Downing, and A. S. Deinard, 337-348. New York: Center for Migration Studies.

88

Levi-Strauss, C.

- 1963a The Sorcerer and His Magic. In *Structural Anthropology*, trans. C. Jacobson and B. G. Schoepf, 167-185. New York: Basic Books.

- 1963b The Effectiveness of Symbols. In *Structural Anthropology*, trans. C. Jacobson and B. G. Schoepf, 186-205. New York: Basic Books.

Lienhardt, G.

- 1961 *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Minnesota Governor's State Advisory Council for Refugees

- 1986 *Thailand Trip Report*. St. Paul: Minnesota Refugee Program Office, Department of Human Services.

Morechand, G.

- 1968 Le Chamanisme des Hmong. *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient* 54: 53-294.

Mottin, J.

- 1982 Allons Faire Le Tour Du Ciel et De La Terre: Le Chamanisme Des Hmong Yu Dans Les Textes. Bangkok: White Lotus.

Ong, W. J.

- 1982 *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.

Peek, P.

- 1981 The Power of Words in African Verbal Arts. *Journal of American Folklore* 94, no. 371 (January-March): 19-43.

Rothenberg, J.

- 1985 *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Said, E. W.

1978 *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.

Schechner, R.

1977 *Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976*. New York: Drama Book Specialists.

1985 *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Schechner, R. and M. Schuman, eds.

1976 *Ritual, Play, and Performance: Readings in the Social Sciences/Theatre*. New York: Seabury Press.

Searle, J. R.

1969 *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Siegel, T. and D. Conquergood, producers

1985 *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America*. Video-documentary. Chicago: Siegel Productions; New York: Third World Newsreel.

Tambiah, S. J.

1968 The Magical Power of Words. *Man* 3(2): 175-208.

1981 A Performative Approach to Ritual. *Proceedings of the British Academy, 1979* 65: 113-169.

Tapp, N.

1986a *The Hmong of Thailand: Opium People of the Golden Triangle*. Indigenous Peoples and Development Series Report No. 4. London: Anti-Slavery Society.

1986b Geomancy as an Aspect of Upland-Lowland Relationships. In *The Hmong in Transition*, eds. G. L. Hendricks, B. T. Downing, and A. S. Deinard, 87-95. New York: Center for Migration Studies.

Taussig, Michael T.

1986 *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tedlock, D.

1983 *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Theunissen, M.

1984 *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*. Trans. C. Macann. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Thiong'o, N. W.

1986 *Decolonising the Mind*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books Inc.

Tobin, J. J. and J. Friedman

1983 Spirits, Shamans, and Nightmare Death: Survivor Stress in a Hmong Refugee. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 53 (July): 439-448.

Todorov, Tzvetan

1984 *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*. Wlad Godzich, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Toelken, B. and S. Tacheeni

1981 Poetic Retranslation and the "Pretty Languages" of Yellowman. In *Traditional American Indian Literatures, Texts and Interpretations*, ed. K. Kroeber, 211-235. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

90

Turner, V.

1982 *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.

1986 *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.

Turner, V. and E. Bruner, eds.

1986 *The Anthropology of Experience*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Volosinov, V. N.

1986 *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Xiong, May and Nancy Donnelly

1986 "My Life in Laos." In *The Hmong World*, 1, Brenda Johns and David Strecker, eds., pp. 201-244. New Haven: Yale University, Council on Southeast Asia Studies.

Zahner-Roloff, L.

1985 The Therapies of Performance: The Dionysian, Hermetic and Appollinian Archetypes of Poetry Therapy. *Psychotherapeia and Psychiatry in Practice* 39 (March): 15-21.



CENTER FOR URBAN AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS

University of Minnesota
330 Hubert H. Humphrey Center
301 19th Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

(612) 625-1551