

**The Hmong '*Dab Pog* Couple' Story and its Significance in Arriving at an Understanding of Hmong Ritual**

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**ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

Many Hmong continue to believe in the efficacy, and commission the practice by shamans of, some of the more important traditional rituals, such as marriage rites (*kab tshoob kev kos*), "soul calling" (*hu plig*), healing rites (*ua neeb or khaw koob*), worshipping the "house spirit" (*teev xwm kab*), and funeral rites (*kev ploj tuag*). Certainly, however, there are those Hmong, especially among younger generations, who either choose not to participate in such rituals, or who participate in them without any clear comprehension of the deeper meaning or details; indeed, without any strongly held beliefs regarding the cosmological system which is the ritual's foundation, underpinning and supporting the call for the many actions, gestures, offerings and recitations which, in the final analysis, constitute the bulk of any such performance. This philosophical ambivalence on the part of modern celebrants renders the position of ritual in Hmong society somewhat problematic. In addition, the various Hmong clans have, in the past, of necessity resided in divergent geographical locales, and, as a result of this and other factors, have often espoused divergent, philosophically and culturally heterogeneous, beliefs. This, taken together with the fact that Hmong customs have been orally transmitted down the generations, has had the result that there may be several versions of the meaning, and method of performance, of any given ritual.

The presentation that follows will discuss the "*Dab Pog* Couple" story as it bears upon the origins of Hmong cultural tradition and embedded social values. Such a consideration will, at the same time, serve to introduce and elucidate many of the meanings behind, and values attached to, Hmong rituals in general and will thus provide a contribution to the understanding of these rituals and their relation to *Dab Neeg* (Folk Legends) within the Hmong cultural studies scholarly literature.

Briefly stated, the Hmong believe that the "*Dab Pog*" couple, residents of a richly detailed and highly populous spirit world, are responsible for bringing children to their parents on Earth. The pair is also charged with serving as 'guardian angels,' whose duty it is to protect those children as they mature. In the beginning of time, so it is said, this *Dab Pog* couple instructed the Hmong in the performance of the various rituals practiced both now and long ago,

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giving the Hmong assurances that the pair would bless the Hmong accordingly when these rituals were properly performed.

## **METHOD**

The data in this paper were collected in Colorado in 1999 in conjunction with research for a doctoral dissertation, and were assembled through ethnographic interviews with a Hmong healer who is an accepted authority on the traditional culture of his people. Nonetheless, the author of this paper wishes to acknowledge that this story may represent only one version of the associated Hmong cultural beliefs and their supporting values.

## **A HMONG CONCEPT OF GOD**

Cooper (1991), Livo and Cha (1991), and Johnson (1990), among others, have recorded various Hmong creation legends which incorporate the story of a great flood. These legends describe how the Hmong survived this flood, and how, subsequently, their clan names were adopted, but address neither the ways in which Hmong traditional customs and beliefs originated nor the significance of these customs and beliefs. Yet, an investigation into legends relative to reproduction, child rearing and Hmong continuity yields results, and, from a careful study, bits and pieces emerge. Rice (2000) describes the manner in which the *Kab Yeeb* couple is believed responsible for bringing children to their Hmong parents on earth. Cooper (1991) and Rice (2000) report that the *Saub* is associated with fertility and reproduction. Bliatout (1986), Chindarsi (1976), Lemoine (1986), Ovesen (1995), Cooper (1991), and Rice (2000) have written about the *Xwm Kab* as a household spirit, whom the Hmong worship to protect their families. Cooper (1991) briefly describes the Watery Dragon, *Zaj Laug*, who dwells in a submarine environment and controls nature. Yet, the following story, which centers around the *Dab Pog* couple and the *Xwm Kab*, has not before been recorded in the literature. The writer will present

this story of the *Dab Pog* (spirit) and *Xwm Kab* (house spirit) from an entirely emic - or self-referential, 'insider's view' - perspective. It should be noted that all of the thoughts expressed in the following pages have come from Hmong informants.

According to Mr. Chue Tria Her, a Hmong healer and authority on Hmong traditional culture, "The Hmong people are descended from a creator couple who generated the first Hmong man and woman and taught them all of the cultural beliefs and traditional customs they would be required to embrace and to observe in order to live prosperous, healthy, and harmonious lives. Since the Hmong do not have a written language, they did not make any record of the creators' names. Accordingly, as the years passed, and the Hmong dispersed throughout the world, they came to recognize this creator couple by different names. Many Hmong called them the 'Great Grandparents' (*poj koob yawm txwv or poj yawm txwv koob*). Some Hmong referred to them as but a single entity, calling them the 'King of Heaven' (*huab tais ntuj*), 'Lord of the Sky' (*vaj tswv or tswv ntuj*), or the 'Master' (*tus saub*). Other Hmong called them the 'Spirit Couple' (*nkawm niam txiv Dab Pog or nkawm niam txiv Kab Yeeb*)."

This "*Dab Pog*" couple, as the author will hereinafter refer to them, are the pair responsible for sending newborn infants to their earthly parents (Rice 2000; Cooper 1991). Inasmuch as child rearing and family life are so important to the Hmong, the *Dab Pog* have become the most-worshipped spirits in Hmong life, together with the "House Spirit" couple, *Xwm Kab*, who, according to legend, were sent to earth to watch over Hmong homes and protect them from evil spirits and sickness, as well as to watch over the household assets and ensure that those whom they guard are not only healthy but prosperous.

## A STORY OF ELOPEMENT; THE *DAB POG* AND *XWM KAB* COUPLES

According to the informant, then, "At the very beginning of time, the *Dab Pog* couple (*nkawm niam txiv Dab Pog*) and the *Xwm Kab* couple were sent to live with the Hmong as guardian spirits. As time passed, and in the natural course of things," so the story goes, "one day a Hmong couple gave birth to a daughter who, achieving her maturity, wished to marry and start her own family. Such an undertaking, of course, would have entailed the girl's departure from the family in order to live with her spouse. Her parents, however, doted upon her to such an extent that they could not, with equanimity, contemplate this eventuality, and entered into a pact with the *Dab Pog* and the *Xwm Kab* couples to forestall the girl's plans.

"Nevertheless, undeterred, the girl made up her mind that she wanted to marry. Not unmindful of the potential for parental interference, and unaware of the parents' pact with their household spirits, the girl consulted with the *Dab Pog* couple, informing them of her intentions. The *Dab Pog* couple declined to approve of her budding inclination, and referred her to the *Xwm Kab* couple, saying, 'We brought you down to your parents and we assumed the task of watching over you as you grew up. Please consult with the *Xwm Kab* couple too, since they are the ones who watch over the whole house.'

"The daughter, in turn, went to the *Xwm Kab* couple and told them of her desire to marry. After pondering for a while, the *Xwm Kab* couple said, 'If you are sure that you have grown old enough to start your own life, we will help you. Tonight, we will make your parents fall into a deep sleep so that they will not hear a thing. At midnight, you may get up, open the front door and run away to marry. But be warned; if your parents see you leave, they will not allow you to go and you will never be able to get married. If you leave quietly with the man you love and marry him, then you can start a new life.'

"The daughter was pleased with these words, and replied, 'Oh, let's do that!'

"That night, the *Xwm Kab* couple, as promised, induced the parents to fall into a deep sleep. The *Dab Pog* couple, their complicity won by the encouragement given the girl by the *Xwm Kab* spirits, and who, long before, had brought the daughter down to earth, helped her open the front door to sneak away.

"The next morning, the parents got up and looked around for their daughter, but she was gone. Furious, they called the *Dab Pog* couple and told them, 'You brought our daughter to our lives, and you are supposed to watch over her. We love her very much and we do not want her to get married. Why did you allow her to sneak away? We are not happy with what you have done!'

"The *Dab Pog* couple, hurt and saddened by these angry words, replied, 'From now on, we will bring children to their parents on earth, but we will no longer stay with them to watch over their welfare. We will return home. On the third day after a child is born, Hmong parents can kill a pair of chickens (*ib nkawm qaib*), prepare a pair of cut ceremonial papers (*ob ntshua ntawv*), and burn two sticks of incense (*ob tug xyab*), taking all these things outside the house. Then we will come and give a blessing to the child.'

"This is the reason why, when Hmong perform a naming or birth ceremony (*hu plig or txi dab pog*) for newborn infants, they must perform the rite outside their door.

"In this way, the *Dab Pog* couple has, from that day, merely brought children to their parents on earth; they no longer stay and watch over the children. When children grow up, become very old, and find themselves near death, the *Dab Pog* couple return to take them home; the dead cannot return to the spirit realm by themselves. In the modern age, the *Dab Pog* couple are, to this extent alone, considered the creators and protectors of the Hmong throughout the

world."

But the story is not yet finished.

"The parents were also furious at the *Xwm Kab* couple. The mother and father thus called out to them, as well, scolding, '*Xwm Kab*, we worship you in our home because you are supposed to watch over our family members and our house. But you failed in your duty. You let our daughter sneak away. You are not worthy of our worship.'

"Upon hearing these words, the *Xwm Kab* couple, like the *Dab Pog* couple, were saddened.

"'Oh!' they replied. 'We have stayed with you, watched over you and protected your house. In this case, we did not do your bidding. Your daughter wanted to get married, and we allowed her to do as she wished in order to start her own life. You are not happy for what we have done. So be it. We will return home and will not stay with you or watch over your house any longer. When you want us to come back to join you, or give blessing or protection to your family, you can create an altar for us by hanging a ceremonial paper (*daim ntawv xwm kab*) on the main wall (*hauv plag*), to designate it as our place in your house. You may call us and we will come back to perform those services for you as in the past; then we will return to our own home. If you do not need our assistance and protection, and thus do not call us, we will never come back.'

"This is how the Hmong began to worship (*teev*) *Xwm Kab* in their houses, with the intent that the spirit pair protect personal wealth, the health of family members, and the household in general. This, it is hoped, will allow all who dwell within to be prosperous and successful in their lives, to avoid illness, and to raise their children in a happy and loving environment. It is why Hmong worship only the *Xwm Kab*. If there are no major problems or illnesses in the

family, the Hmong will perform only one ceremony for the *Xwm Kab* per year, considering that only on this occasion do the *Xwm Kab* visit Hmong families."

## THE ORIGIN OF HMONG MARRIAGE AND HEALING RITUALS

The story continues.

"After the *Dab Pog* and *Xwm Kab* couples left the house, there was a major dispute centered around the girl and her elopement. Was she really married? The case was argued among the highest authorities in the world, but no one was able to arrive at a solution, and, since human beings could not resolve it, the matter was taken all the way to the Dragon's Palace (*zaj zeg zaj lag*).

"The Old Dragon (*zaj txwg zaj laug*) lives under the water, and thus it was no small undertaking to induce him to come out to resolve this case in the world of mortals. In the event, the Old Dragon was prevailed upon to take judgment upon himself, whereupon the story was presented to him, after which the throng left him to consider. Once he began to apply himself, the Old Dragon traced all the details of the case in order to render his Earthly verdict. In the midst of his deliberations, his eye lit upon an umbrella that someone among the group had brought with him and left behind. The simple parasol was hanging on the wall of his palace, and he took hold of the artifact and came with it to this world.

"Holding it as he spoke, he proclaimed to the Hmong people, 'The girl is married. Moreover, today and henceforth, I will use this umbrella as a symbol for those Hmong people who would get married. From this day forward, when the marriage negotiator carries an umbrella with him as he walks fondly along the path, all the people who see him should understand that he is engaged in arranging a wedding for someone.'

"This is how the old Dragon came to resolve the Hmong dispute in this world. He sang

the first wedding song (*zaj tshoob qhib rooj tuam tsa*) created by him for marriage negotiators to sing in their marriage rituals, to be used when setting up the table for marriage negotiation. He began, 'It seems like this year, my parents on the other side have prepared well. They have captured the daughter of my parents on this side to run with their son like a herd, in pairs.'

"Since it was because of the daughter that this marriage dispute had developed, the *Dab Pog* couple came to her at the appropriate time and said to her, and to all the Hmong people, 'When you have children, you should watch your daughters. When they are ready to get married, they will know how to begin calling to the sky and to the land, and they will know how to express their feelings toward the male gender (*txawj seev hu lub ntuj daim av txiv leej tub lub npe*). As parents, you should give them more freedom when they reach this time of life, whether they are big or small.'

"After that, such expressions as these were made into folk songs for Hmong girls to sing. This is the reason why, today, Hmong girls sing traditional folk songs when they begin to engage in courtship; calling to the sky and to the land, to the designated male, and then expressing their feelings (*ntuj teb yuas txiv leej tub cas kho siab ua luaj no*).

"The *Dab Pog* couple further advised that, when a Hmong girl reaches this stage in her development, they would no longer guard (*tsis kav*) her. They would not control her heart, but would set her free to explore as she wished. When a girl grows up, begins to show interest in the opposite sex, and begins to sing songs to express her feelings, her parents must not try to stop her. If they do, they will not be successful, because she is ready and the *Dab Pog* couple is no longer controlling her heart. She will not have peace and happiness until she achieves her wishes.

"By the same token, if she has not yet opened her mouth to express such a feeling of



interest in and readiness for the opposite sex, the *Dab Pog* couple will continue to guard her heart and control (*tswj*) her life, so that she will experience the happiness and peace of youth and innocence. Although they do not come to stay with her, as in the beginning, while she refrains from making the prescribed signs and singing in the prescribed manner, it is taken by them to be an indication that she is not yet ready to get married and they should continue to protect her. Although she may grow older and be single for many years, if she does not open her mouth to express her feelings and exhibit an interest in the opposite sex, the *Dab Pog* couple will continue to control her. People are warned that they should not worry if she appears to be getting old (*ua nkauj laug*), does not seem to dress attractively, or manifest an interest in getting married; her time has not yet arrived.

"In the course of this incident, so famous with the Hmong, the *Dab Pog* couple are also believed to have said to all Hmong sons that when they have troubles in their lives or experience sickness, they can call the couple by saying, '*Plwg ws. . .plwg ws...tam sis txheev mas tam sis leej.*' ('Npwwwww...this calling should be granted.') Whenever someone calls out in this fashion, the *Dab Pog* couple will come to help him. It is for this reason that Hmong shamans and ritual healers, to this day, when undertaking any healing ceremony, begin their chanting with these words. The *Dab Pog* couple, they know, will come back to attend, to assist, and to protect only those people who call upon them.

"In addition to the above, the *Dab Pog* couple counseled the Hmong people that there are three major events in a person's life. Two are happy events, one is sad. The first happy event is when a new baby is born. When the new baby enters this world, he cries aloud, and everyone is happy that the baby has been born, whether it is a girl or a boy. The *Dab Pog* couple, the new baby, and everyone who has knowledge of the event, are happy that the child has parents and a

home.

"The second happy event is when the child has grown up and marries. The child is now an adult, and is embarking upon a new life.

"The third, sad, event in a person's life is death. It is at this point that the *Dab Pog* couple come to bring the deceased back to their home with them, and all those who are left behind - the living - are saddened by the departure of their loved one.

"As an additional instruction, the *Dab Pog* couple said to the Hmong, 'We bring children to you, we will guide their intuition, and while we will not come to take care of them or stay with them any more, when a boy or a girl has grown and is ready to marry, if you invite us in the appropriate manner, we will intervene. You should invite us to see them not from the inside of your house, for, if you do, we will not come, but on the way to the wedding you should call us, and we will journey to view the couple, and to see who is the wife and who is the husband.'

"Therefore, when Hmong plan the customary wedding procession<sup>2</sup> to the home of the bride's parents, no matter how long or short it is to be, no matter how near or how far the destination, they must always pack a lunch consisting of a pair of cooked chickens, some rice, and beverages. At some point along the way, usually the half-way mark, the wedding troop, which consists of two marriage negotiators or *mej koob*; the bride and her maid of honor; the groom and his best man, will stop for lunch. The marriage negotiator will proclaim out loud, 'Oh, *Dab Pog*, please come to bless us! Today we are traveling to negotiate a wedding. Please bless our trip, that it may be safe and that our mission will be successful.'

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<sup>2</sup> The majority of Hmong Americans still practice the wedding rites as described in this paper. However, if a Christian Hmong is marrying another Christian Hmong, they may be enjoined by the clergy from following all of the rites. Thus, they may not pack the lunch or stop half-way for lunch. Moreover, a Christian Hmong couple will usually hold a wedding ceremony at a Christian church, in addition to the traditional Hmong wedding rite.

"Since this call is made from outside the home, the *Dab Pog* will come to see and to bless the couple. When the *Dab Pog* hear the call, they will respond thus, 'Oh, today they call us to see a couple getting married. Let's go down to look at who is marrying whom.'

"When they come to see the young couple, and find them well dressed and well prepared, they will take a picture of the couple, so that they will know who is the wife and who is the husband, being pleased to see these two individuals join their lives in marriage.

"When the wedding troop returns from the bride's parents' house, those parents will pack a lunch for them. Once again, along the way, the party will stop for lunch, and once again the marriage negotiator will call the *Dab Pog*, 'Oh, *Dab Pog* couple! Today the wedding is completed. Everything went well. There were no problems. Please come to bless us and make our trip home safe. Please protect us from all dangers, harm, evil, and trouble.'

"Hearing this last call, the *Dab Pog* couple will come to look at the marrying couple again and take another picture of them, desiring to ensure that the wedding was real, and that the bride and groom, and their parents and relatives, have completed the wedding negotiations and all have agreed that this couple are properly married. In the case that the *Dab Pog* couple was properly called to bless, protect, and take a picture of the couple together as husband and wife, their married life will be happy, prosperous, and long lasting. The pair will love, trust, and respect each other until death.

"With regard to these marriage rituals, the *Dab Pog* couple have instructed the Hmong male, 'You are the man. You go and search for a woman as your bosom companion. You are the one who initiates the relationship. You court her and importune her and persuade her to love, believe in, and trust you. She does not come looking for you. She lives with her parents, while you try everything to win her heart and to make her fall in love with you. Therefore, in the

course of your wedding, you must make a vow and you must do it freely and from your heart; no one can help you make this vow. When you invite another person into your life and bring her to your home, it is different from having a relationship with an animal. Therefore, you must make a vow to the sky and to the earth that you will do as you have promised. Even though the sky stays high above, the earth does not. The earth lies beneath your feet. If you do not do as you have sworn, the sky will not punish you because it is so high, but the earth will pull you down until your life ends beneath it. You must make the vow by yourself.'

"The *Dab Pog* couple told the Hmong marriage negotiators, 'You are enjoined from assisting the groom in any way with making his marriage vow; he must do it himself.'"

It is traditional, although it is not often honored in more modern times, that when a Hmong wedding begins, the groom and his wedding troop come to the house of the bride's parents. Upon their arrival, the marriage negotiators tell the groom and his best man to stand in a pair facing the main wall of the house, and to pay their respects to the household spirits of the bride's parents.

After this, the marriage negotiators say, "Pay your respects to the mother and father (*nrog niam nrog txiv xyuam lub hlis lauj*)."

At this point, the groom and his best man must kneel down by placing their knees on the ground, bending their heads, and make fists with thumbs protruding. They must then make thumbprints on the ground. This is done quickly, whereupon the groom and best man once again stand up. The Hmong not having a written language, there is neither paper nor pen to sign a written certificate of marriage. Thus, the thumbprint is made on the earth both to seal the vow and as a promise to the earth that such a vow will be honored. If the groom does not thereafter honor this vow, the earth is thereby empowered to rise up and punish him. Likewise, if the bride

does not keep her vow, the earth will accord her the same treatment. Therefore, in marriage, one has the right to choose his own partner. Whether one marries a pretty or handsome partner or a homely one, it is one's own choice, luck or fate. In view of the consequences should he take a misstep, when a man has made (*tau pe*) his thumbprint on the ground, he must understand the commitment he is making; to fail in this commitment is considered very dishonorable.

According to the informant, "The *Dab Pog* couple tells the marriage negotiators of the bride's family to give the bride away at the wedding, saying, 'We are representatives of the bride's parents. Today we give our daughter to you, the marriage negotiators of the groom's parents. You take her with you. Your family must promise to protect and love her. As her birth parents, we love her very much. But since she is a female, we can only raise her. Due to the custom of our people, she cannot live with us for the rest of her life. We cannot marry her. We allow her to go with you because our customs allow your son to marry her. Wherever she may go, you must watch over her, protect her, care for her and love her. If you take her to live with you, but you do not protect and love her, we will not be happy when we hear of it. If our daughter goes with you but does not listen to you, if she does not behave like other people, but creates trouble for you, you may bring her back to us. We will talk to her and advise her to improve her life. You must not mistreat her or say bad or untrue things about her. If you do, and we hear about it, we will not be happy.'"

The bride must then follow the same vow that the groom has made by sealing his thumbprint on the ground. If she does not follow this vow, the earth under her feet may pull her down, as well. If she cheats on her husband, mistreats him or divorces him, her life is over. She can remarry and start another marriage, but it will not be as good, and will not last as long, as her first marriage. This is the punishment of the earth beneath her feet.

Accordingly, married women do not have the right to love other men or to divorce their husbands. If a woman knows of and understands these traditional marriage customs and commitments, and if she follows these traditions and laws, her marriage will be safeguarded. The Hmong have a saying, 'The law may be as fine as a hair, but no one can cross over it.'

As is the case with the woman, if the man understands the importance of these marriage customs and commitments, he will not create trouble in the marriage. The couple will not argue over little things and will not create problems for themselves or each other. Both the husband and wife will be happy, and, thus, they will both find it easy to behave well.

### **CHANGES TO AND LOSS OF MARRIAGE RITUALS, BELIEFS, AND VALUES**

In the distant past, the Hmong practiced these wedding rituals according to the words of the *Dab Pog* couple, and maintained faith in the blessings they conferred. Thus, it is widely felt, they lived happy and long lives together. Their marriages were stable. There were no divorces. However, as the centuries passed, and since the Hmong did not have a written record of these instructions, some among later generations either lost faith in the authority of these blessings or began to do things according to whim or the dictates of their own desires. It is from pride that people come to think they may do whatever they want, and, at some point in time, the majority of the Hmong forgot, altered or lost their faith in or their understanding of the meaning of these marriage blessings that the *Dab Pog* couple bestowed upon their forebears.

The informant who provided the tales and information related above strongly believed that it is crucial to the well-being of the Hmong to abide by these ritual practices. He stated, "Every parent has sons and/or daughters, and each of these offspring needs to be protected; all parents desire to prevent their children's marriages from being short-lived. If parents are ignorant; if they are not careful; if they do not follow tradition; they can ruin their child's life.

When a daughter gets married, parents should not force their son-in-law to drink so much alcohol that he falls down or becomes unconscious and unable to participate in the whole wedding ritual. Nevertheless, it is the case that, these days, should the groom become so sick that he cannot attend to his duties, a male relative of his, either an older or younger man, will be conscripted to substitute for him."

This informant believed that such a substitution for the groom plays an important role in the failure of a marriage.

"When all the wedding rituals have been performed at the home of the bride's parents," the informant continued, "the wedding troop will travel back to the home of the groom's parents. On the way, in accordance with the above mentioned tradition, they will stop for lunch. The marriage negotiator will call the *Dab Pog* couple to come back to bless the newly wedded couple. If it should be the case that a conscript has been substituted for the groom, the *Dab Pog* couple will notice that the groom is not the same person as before. Should the groom be with the troop, he will appear so drunk, and look so terrible, that he will be judged ill-prepared for a lifetime of marriage commitments. The *Dab Pog* couple will take their picture of the returning party and compare it to the initial picture, taken as the party embarked. They will note that, in the first picture, the couple was well dressed and well prepared, and looked serious and happy. But in the second picture, they will see that the groom is not the same well-dressed and well-prepared man as before, and, observing this inconsistency, they will withhold their blessings. As far as they are concerned, this bride and groom have neither found their true marriage partners, nor made a lasting commitment to each other. In the eyes of the *Dab Pog* couple, the bride is already as good as a widow or a divorcee.

"Without the blessings of the *Dab Pog* couple, the hearts of the two newlyweds will not

settle down as they begin their life together. They will be dissatisfied with each other, and find fault with one another and their married life, until they break off the arrangement or one of them dies. They will not be happy, and their marriage will not last long."

The informant argued that, "In the modern era, even though the majority of Hmong still practice these marriage rituals, many of them do not know the meanings and purposes of these traditions. Many times the people who pass on the knowledge of these traditions make mistakes, so that they pass on the wrong way of doing things. Other times, the proper way has been forgotten or was never well known, so that the rituals must be performed as well as may be. Sometimes people in authority fool themselves, thinking they may do whatever they want, and ignore the traditions, adding to the momentum of cultural loss. Since the Hmong do not have a written language, they do not record their traditions in ritual texts. Many of the performers are actually doing things from which they have been enjoined, continuing blindly to follow the mistakes laid down by previous generations. For example, many, if not the majority of Hmong today will force the new son-in-law to drink so much alcohol at wedding rituals that he passes out before the wedding is over. These people are more concerned with having fun and generating excitement, with making an extravagant display at the wedding than with following proper rituals in order to maximize the blessings bestowed upon the living by the spiritual entities. In the United States, moreover, Hmong Americans seem to be even more abusive of the wedding rituals than others, since they can afford to buy a great quantity and variety of drink. Alcohol has thus come to be utilized no longer as a symbol employed for ritual procedures, but as a symbol of wealth and a sign of ostentation."

Many Hmong in the modern world do not care to know, and would not understand, the traditional Hmong wedding rituals, and do not wish to follow them as originally laid out. Often,



Hmong marriage negotiators (*mej koob*) and parents do not follow all the steps of these rituals.

The informant believed that, "Many Hmong marriages end in divorce, preceded, occasionally, by adultery, because of the failure of the Hmong people to follow proper wedding rituals and to prepare their children to fully understand both the spiritual and physical aspects of the marriage commitment.

"If proper wedding rituals are followed, on the other hand, and the newlyweds have been well-prepared for their married lives," he felt, "the marriage will not break up so easily. As an example, in the case wherein the *Dab Pog* couple has blessed the union, the husband may, at some point in the course of the marriage, see a pretty lady and think to himself, 'I like her; I want to flirt with her.' But should he set out to cheat on his wife, he will meet with failure, foiled by the *Dab Pog* couple, who will control his mind and heart. They will remind him, by forcing him to reflect on his actions, that he is about to create an abundance of trouble and embarrassment for himself and his family. In such a manner, his marriage will be saved. The same thing holds true in the case of the woman whose marriage has been solemnized according to all the traditional rituals, and been blessed by the *Dab Pog* couple."

"It is thus important," according to the Hmong informant, "that all Hmong respect and follow their traditional marriage rituals; an important part of Hmong culture from the very beginning of time."

The informant who related all of the above said that, "In the modern Hmong American community, the majority of Hmong either decline to teach, or do not know how to teach their children about the meaning of marriage rituals and commitments. They do not know that violating the rituals and laws or traditions of marriage can affect the living as well as the spirits. People think, 'I love you, and you love me, so let's get married. If things work out and we get

along, we'll stay together. If not, we can go our separate ways."

The informant added, "It is the fault of Hmong adults that they do not take the time to teach their children carefully the proper ways to think about and consecrate marriage, and that is one reason so many Hmong marriages end in divorce. When the meaning of Hmong marriage tradition is carefully explained to all Hmong, of all ages, they can fully grasp the significance of those traditions, and, with this understanding, they will behave well and treat each other with respect. They will not fight over little things, but enjoy each other's presence. They will learn how to improve themselves over time so that they will be happy."

According to the informant, "Since the *Dab Pog* couple has blessed these ageless traditions, it is incumbent upon all Hmong parents to teach their children about them so they will more fully appreciate their lives. Moreover, Hmong parents must themselves learn the importance of these traditions, so they will better understand their own lives, their own culture and their own traditions, and so that they will be in a better position to teach their children."

It is certainly true that all Hmong, no less than any other people, must preserve their marriages in order to achieve family stability, and to live happy, emotionally and psychologically healthy, lives.

## **SUMMARY**

The above *Dab Pog* story illustrates the interweaving of Hmong beliefs with the major events of Hmong life. The Hmong informant who told this *Dab Pog* story seemed to imply that when Hmong do not understand the significance of their cultural traditions, failing to observe those traditions and to accord them the weight they merit, they will be misled on the path of life, and tend to fail at whatever they set out to accomplish. This will be, simply, the direct result of the refusal of the *Dab Pog* couple to bless their efforts. By the same token, when Hmong

maintain and observe these cultural traditions, their lives inevitably will improve.

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