

Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights

by

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Abstract

Is there an underlying structure to Hmong cosmology? What are its components? And how might these interrelate? In this paper, I will show that the Hmong cosmos consists of three separate realms and that these are connected together by the cycle of the human soul. Using *zaaj qhuabke*, I will trace the journey of the deceased and look at how ritual movement is expressive of human agency, narrative experience and community history. My insights are based on primary fieldwork research carried out for a doctoral dissertation on Hmong funeral rites in the Midwest.

Introduction

In recent years, a number of books and journal articles on Hmong religion, cosmology and belief system have emerged. Fadiman (1997), for example, followed the life of an epileptic child as her family struggled to negotiate a balance between the demands of their traditional beliefs and modern medicine. Symonds' (1991) dissertation, which was recently published as a book (2004), on the other hand, examined cosmological cycles (birth, death and marriage), where she demonstrated that women exerted considerable influences in village ceremonial life.

Conquergood (1989), working with Hmong Shamans in Southeastern Wisconsin, discussed aspects of "life-souls" and the role of shamanism in the maintenance of bodily and community health. Bruce Thawpao (1993) outlined some of the changes Hmong Americans have made to their funeral customs. A decade earlier, the same author provided an overview of Hmong cosmology and beliefs in his analysis of Hmong sudden nocturnal death syndrome (Thawpao 1982).

In his lengthy essay, "Hmong Religion," Nicholas Tapp keenly observed that Hmong worldview is characterized by a sense of "deep pessimism" (1989:92). At the outset, he also declared that the "*Hmong are pantheists* – believing in a variety of natural and supernatural

spiritual forces in and animating all things” (1989:59; emphasis added). Although I accept his overarching explanation, the term “pantheism,” as a system of belief, is undeniably Eurocentric in origin, development and influence. Here, my concern is a simple one and centers specifically on its usage and possible interpretations: does the term largely reflect a Hmong understanding of their belief system (a native view), or could it potentially prompt us to think of some “other” cultural context in which the word has had an established history of association, Greek mythology, for example? In that context, might use of the word compel readers, especially those who are not trained in the culture, to draw unnecessary parallels or make incompatible comparisons between the two systems of belief?

It is true Hmong Americans (as well as those outside of the U. S.) do not have an official name for their religion, yet it is not entirely clear if that concern is a pressing one in the eyes of many people. I do not mean to suggest that Hmong/Hmong Americans do not think about or debate such philosophical ideals – they do. It is also clear to me that they are aware of how problematic it is in trying to summarize a set of very complex ideas into a brief statement of definition. What I have learned, for example, is that when Hmong Americans talk about “religion,” they generally tend to focus on what they do (practice), the ritual and ceremonial activities they hold in their homes. What’s more, they accept these to be widely variable, different from region to region, community to community, and clan to clan. This difference is openly acknowledged in this proverb: “Ib tsaab teb ib tsaab txuj,” meaning “Each region is governed by its own traditions.” The act of keeping up with household rituals, known as “kev teev dlaab qhuas,” is something they make central to family life. Taken together, Hmong Americans see these as equivalent to the western concept “religion.” This suggests that they place as much emphasis on ‘practice’ (ways of doing) as on beliefs, if not more so. The notion of “kevcai,” which Tapp touched on, alludes to these practical concerns. Thus, from the view of a quasi-insider, a definition of Hmong religion must include, as its central focus, the range of

household activities which are aimed at achieving one or a combination of the following objectives:

- ♦ Maintaining spiritual health and harmony within the individual and family;
- ♦ Remembering the ancestors and deceased members of the family through various offerings; and
- ♦ Ensuring continuity of the person and soul, from one generation to the next and from this life to the other.

Guided by this brief introduction, this paper is a preliminary attempt to contribute to our understanding of Hmong cosmology. My discussion will center on this question: “What are the realms of the Hmong cosmos and how might they be linked to form a coherent system?” I will show that the Hmong cosmos consists of three separate realms and propose that they are joined by the cycle of the human soul. Furthermore, I will demonstrate, drawing on the narrative of *zaaj qhuabke*, how movement is imagined and achieved within and across these three spatial domains. This knowledge is crucial, for it gives us insights into how lived experience, beliefs, habits and routines are expressed and conveyed in the Hmong ritual imagination.

Fieldwork Community and Methodology

Although I will use the word “Hmong” indiscriminately throughout this essay, the knowledge I draw on comes mainly from the funeral traditions of one specific group of blue Hmong (Moob leeg), known as Hmong Moonpheng (Moob Moospheeb). As the name implies, this group, from the Muang Phoune area, a township not too far north of the city of Vangviang in Vientiane Province, refer to themselves and are identified by others as “Moob Moospheeb.”

The Hmong Moonpheng of southeastern Wisconsin consists of the following clans: Her (Hawj), Moua (Muas), Thao (Thoj), Vang (Vaaj), Xiong (Xyooj) and Yang (Yaaj). There are about 150-200 families in this group; most of them have chosen to retain their traditional beliefs

and practices. This group co-exists with many other groups, from different parts of Laos, in a thriving community of 12,000-18,000 people, hardly visible in a city of nearly 600,000.

Fieldwork research for this project was carried out in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on and off from 2001-2003, and then more intensively from 2003-2004. During those periods, I did extensive onsite participant observations of six traditional funerals. I served as “kaavxwm” (chairperson) for one of those. In addition, I participated in many (at least ten) informal question-answer sessions with individual role participants (all were men), including kaavxwm, txiv qeej (instrument players), qhuake singer, cuab tsaav (a person who makes offerings to the deceased), and coj xai (person who sings songs of blessing and teaching). Most of these sessions occurred onsite; some occurred at people’s homes. Each person, depending on his expertise, was asked to provide his insights on one or more of the following areas.

1. Hmong cosmology, concepts relevant to death and dying
2. Narrative of the funeral proceeding (what happens when, from death to burial)
3. Funeral personnel, their selection, roles and responsibilities
4. Sacrificial obligations and meat distribution
5. “Has Rooj” (Table) proceedings
6. Types of qeej songs and their purpose in a funeral

Of the six funerals, I sat through two performances of the “zaaj qhuabke,” where I not only listened to the song’s content, but also made detailed notes of the procedures that went with them. One of the songs was translated into English and used in this analysis. Many qeej players also made available to me their qeej recordings, some of which I have transcribed into Hmong.

Given that there is much cultural variation as a result of regional and local influences, resulting in a diverse range of acceptable practices within the Hmong American community, I must admit that this essay, which reflects my interpretation of the knowledge and traditions of one particular group of people, offers only but one perspective, which itself may either complement or contradict other points of views, and should not be accepted as a comprehensive

account of Hmong cosmology. Overall, I consider the information presented here to be a small piece of the larger puzzle, knowledge that, in the end, will help us to develop a fuller, more dynamic understanding of Hmong cosmology and spirituality. Toward that end, errors of interpretation found herein are solely mine, no one else's.

Cosmology and Cycle of the Soul

“Every culture,” Jan Vansina wrote, “has representations concerning a universe and these involve spatial connotations. Like time, space is a relative notion in that it implies a spot in relation to other spots, as grammatical uses show. Within space, some parts are more important than others and some are known while other, more distant parts, are only vaguely known” (1985:125). In the Hmong traditional worldview, the universe, the most encompassing of all space, is divided into three, interconnected realms: “Sau Ntuj” (sky or upper realm), “Nplaj Teb” (earth) and “Dlaab Teb” (spirit world) (Figure 1).

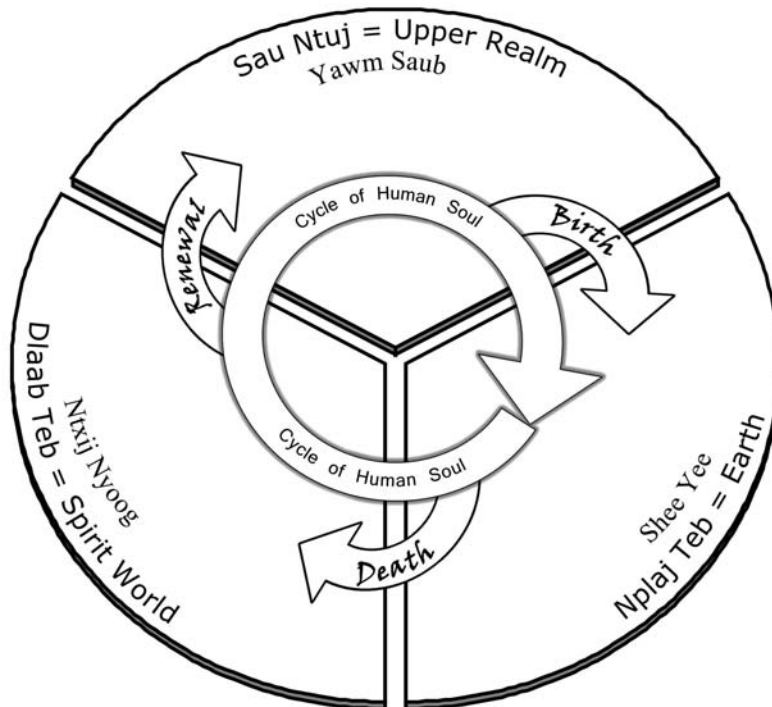


Figure 1: Domains of Hmong cosmology. Spirit world, earth and sau ntuj are linked together by the cycle of the soul. Birth, death (journey) and renewal (birth) are transition phases in that cycle. Diagram and interpretation by author.

If so, what links these spatial domains together as a functional unit? The answer is the cycle of the human soul. As shown in Figure 1, the three major figures – Shee Yee, Ntxij Nyoog and Yawm Saub – represent life, death and renewal, respectively (for an alternative view on the hierarchy of Hmong deities, see Cooper 1998:104-107; Quincy 1995:88-89; Thawpao 1982:12). The cosmos is not dead space; it is alive, inhabited and endowed with creative movement and activity. Life, death and renewal mark the transition of the soul from one realm to the next.

That movement is not random; it is structured, logically guided by zaaj qhuabke. A brief overview may be warranted here (more detail will be given in the text). First, the deceased exits the home by seeking permission from each of the household guardians. Second, he can leave this earthly realm only after he has retrieved his placenta, which is buried in the home of his birth. Once he has secured it, he then begins the journey across the Spirit Realm, where at the end of it, he would find his ancestors. It is they who would show him to the celestial ladder, where he is to climb up in order to reach the realm of Yawm Saub. There, the soul is to ask for permission to return to earth. In the Hmong worldview, rebirth is the ultimate aim. The main objective of the soul is not to go to the Upper Realm and remain there with Yawm Saub (as in Christian cosmology), but only to get permission to return to earth. In all of this, one question remains to be answered: How does the soul pass or escape from place to the next, or one realm to another? To shed light on this, we will need a basic knowledge of the role of the divining sticks and its use as a tool of ritual communication and interpretation (discussed below).

A soul can exist inside or outside of the body. It would leave the corpse upon death, reanimate the new human form at birth and reside in it for the duration of the life of a person. During that time, it is ideal for the soul to remain within the body. If it should become forcibly separated from it, the result is an undesirable state known as “poob plig,” or soul loss, as described by others (Fadiman 1997:100).

Some Hmong Americans hold that each person has at least three souls; others say there might be more (Conquergood 1989; Mottin 1984). A soul is thought of as mobile and could

potentially become multilocal, especially upon death. Of the three souls, for example, one is expected to journey to the ancestors; one to remain on the family altar as an ancestral guardian; and one at the grave (although it is not clear whether its presence there is permanent, for Hmong Americans do hold a secondary rite, referred to as “tso plig,” which normally takes place about a year after the funeral, to release that soul). As depicted in the model above, it is important to understand not only the spatial relationship among the domains, but also how movement is crucial to the maintenance of the system.

“Sau Ntuj” and “Ntawv Noj Ntawv Haus”

Sau Ntuj is the above realm; presiding over it is Yawm Saub. Although Hmong Americans acknowledge the presence of this being, he is not a central figure in their household practices. Rarely do they appeal to him for help, nor is he interested in human affairs. In the *zaaj qhuabke* I am using, he is the one who interrogates a soul and grants it a new destiny. A destiny is envisioned as a letter, referred to in the text as “ntawv noj ntawv haus,” or appropriately letter of provision. A soul must have this before it can return to earth.

In general, Hmong Americans accept that a person’s life follows his or her letter of provision. Like sentences on a page, it unfolds line by line from top to bottom. Death comes when the last word on the page has been read. This gloomy outlook is what led Nicholas Tapp (1989) to the conclusion discussed at the beginning. I should note that although “predestination” is an important aspect of Hmong beliefs, people do not accept their fate (death) passively.

Hmong Americans say that a person’s *ntawv noj ntawv haus* (and hence his or her life) can be re-negotiated and extended. Shamans have traditionally been involved in that process and continue to be so, but in a much lesser role now than in the past.

Views of the Spirit World

In *qhuabke* and *qeej* prose, the Spirit Realm is described as “*saab ntuj nrau u*,” meaning the “world on the other side.” It is distant and remote, but reachable. *Ntxij Nyoog* is Lord of that

Realm. Equivalent to Satan (Lucifer) in Christianity, he is associated with death and human suffering. For this reason, Quincy has referred to this deity as “The Savage One” (1995:88).

Hmong Americans envision the Spirit Realm to be a harsh, desolate place, lacking and devoid of life. They refer to that condition as “ntuj qhua teb nkig,” literally “parched skies and withered land.” Accordingly, occupants of that world constantly suffer from hunger and starvation. This harsh view is what motivates living descendants and relatives to hold rites, to offer food to deceased members of the family. It is also what compels a soul to reincarnate, to return to earth.

Unforgiving views of the Spirit Realm have also influenced other aspects of Hmong social life. For example, the idea of “desolate lack” has prompted people to place “kev noj kev haus,” or plentifulness (food) very high on the list of cultural core values. Moreover, the thought that those in the other world depend on offerings from living descendants in order to adequately cope with day-to-day needs has partially contributed to the cultural emphasis for families to have sons. Because Hmong social structure is organized patrilineally, only men can make offerings to deceased siblings, parents and grandparents. Those who have no male descendants in the lineage are thus believed to endure more distress. In this way, the value placed on boys in Hmong society clearly has a spiritual or ritual basis.

“Shee Yee” and Hmong Shamanism

According to many qeej songs, Shee Yee (Siv Yig) was a powerful shaman who once lived on earth.¹ Possessing special kinds of knowledge, he could cure all forms of sicknesses and even revive the dead. This ability made his younger brother and archrival, Ntxij Nyoog, envious. One day, Ntxij Nyoog, with a wicked plan in mind, implored Shee Yee to perform a healing ceremony for his ailing son. While the shaman was in his trance, Ntxij Nyoog captured his only son’s soul, transformed it into a pig, sacrificed it and served it to him. Not realizing what Ntxij Nyoog had done, Shee Yee consumed the meat. On his return home (to earth), Shee Yee would

¹ For another account of the origin of Shee Yee, his life and work, see Quincy (1995:89-93).

bump into the soul of his son and realized what had just happened. Once home, he immediately initiated a performance to revive him. But as he had consumed the flesh, Shee Yee was not able to bring him back. Saddened by this loss, he decided to forgo his place on earth among his fellow humans and returned to a place called “Toj Tsua Laj, Peg Tsua Luv,” or Mountain of Hawks and Swallows, believed to be located somewhere in the upper dimension of the universe.

Just before he left, however, Shee Yee managed to sprinkle his magical water over the earth and anyone who came into contact with it would become a shaman, possessing the power and knowledge to heal. Such is the mythical origin of Hmong shamanism, a healing practice known to them as “ua neeb.” Nowadays, before becoming a practitioner of the art, a person must go through a chronic health ordeal and then meticulous training. This combination of education (training) and personal experience of living through an illness would transform a shaman into a compassionate and sympathetic listener, someone capable of helping others to cope with their own sufferings. In a performance, an established shaman refers to himself or herself as “Shee Yee” (Conquergood 1989; Mottin 1984). In trance, he or she enters an “altered” state, occupying the betwixt and between of two worlds, and is endowed with power to establish harmony between the spiritual and physical. As in the past, his or her role in the Hmong community is as a spiritual healer, diviner, consultant and counselor.

Zaaj Qhuabke as Mnemonic Practice

“Qhuabke” means ‘to teach the way’ – the way to the ancestors; the way of tradition, beliefs and practices; the way of community life and history. As a definition, zaaj qhuabke is a winding, multi-stanza song that guides the deceased on his journey, from his place of death to his reincarnation. Lemoine (1983) has referred to it as a death initiation song; many Hmong Americans see it as the ‘Bible of Hmong religion,’ representing the core of their belief system.

The singing of zaaj qhuabke is obligatory in a traditional Hmong American funeral; it is always the first event to take place. Qhuabke is done by a trained individual, who is given the official funeral title of “taw kev,” meaning the one who points the way. In addition to the song

itself, his most important tool is a pair of divining sticks called “txheej ntawg.” This is simply a short piece (2-3 inches) of round bamboo that has been split down the middle into equal halves. A *taw kev* uses these to communicate with the deceased. He would hold these in his hand as he sings each stanza. At the end of a stanza, he would release the sticks with a quick jerk of his wrist and decipher their landing. Each landing has only one of three possible outcomes: two halves face up; two halves face down; one half faces up and the other down. This last scenario is the only acceptable one. It signals that the deceased has accepted the instruction he has just received. In this way, he is guided stanza by stanza on a long journey. Here, movement is communicative and symbolic.

Although many versions of *zaaj qhuabke* exist, they all share some basic underlying themes. Each song, for example, addresses in varying detail: (1) creation and origin of life and death; (2) return journey to the ancestors, which itself is divided into three segments; and (3) regeneration or renewal of the soul (person). Each *qhuabke* performance can last several hours or longer.

“Memories reside in many mnemonic sites and practices – in language, songs, and ceremonies, bodies and bodily practices, places and things” (Climo and Cattell 2002:17). As a mnemonic practice centering on the body (deceased), *zaaj qhuabke* serves as a narrative, providing a logically established structure for a community to recount its life history, and in the process, keep intact its cultural memory, even when lives are fragmented by forced migration and displaced across villages, countries, or continents as in the case of first generation Hmong Americans. Thus, its performance is noteworthy in three ways. First, it allows knowledge of the culture to pass from one cohort (generation) to the next. Second, it encourages Hmong Americans to reflect on the history of their community, as told through the life experiences of the deceased. Third, it provides an occasion for people to re-affirm their values and beliefs, as these are enacted in practice. Hence, the efficacy of *zaaj qhuabke* lies in its ability to evoke memories invested in myth, stories, space, places (dwellings) and landscapes, geography and terrains of

lived experiences. Guided by this song, each person, upon death, would embark on a lingering journey across the three domains of the Hmong cosmos, first making his or her way out of the family home.

Home as a Microcosmos

Mircea Eliade has noted, “For the religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others” (1961: 20). Consistent with his observation, a Hmong traditional home may be viewed as a microcosmos. Its internal space is not homogeneous, but differentiated into conceptually bounded areas. These include: bedroom(s), altar, earth oven, central house pillar, hearth, main entrance door, and the immediate vicinity of the home called *plaag xuas* (Figure 2). Each area (indicated by number in diagram) has an imagined border and is guarded by a gatekeeper (whom the singing addresses). Collectively, these gatekeepers are referred to as “*dlaab vaaj dlaab tsev*,” literally household guardians. Their role is to keep out harmful forces and maintain positive energy inside the home, ensuring the spiritual health and bonds of the family.

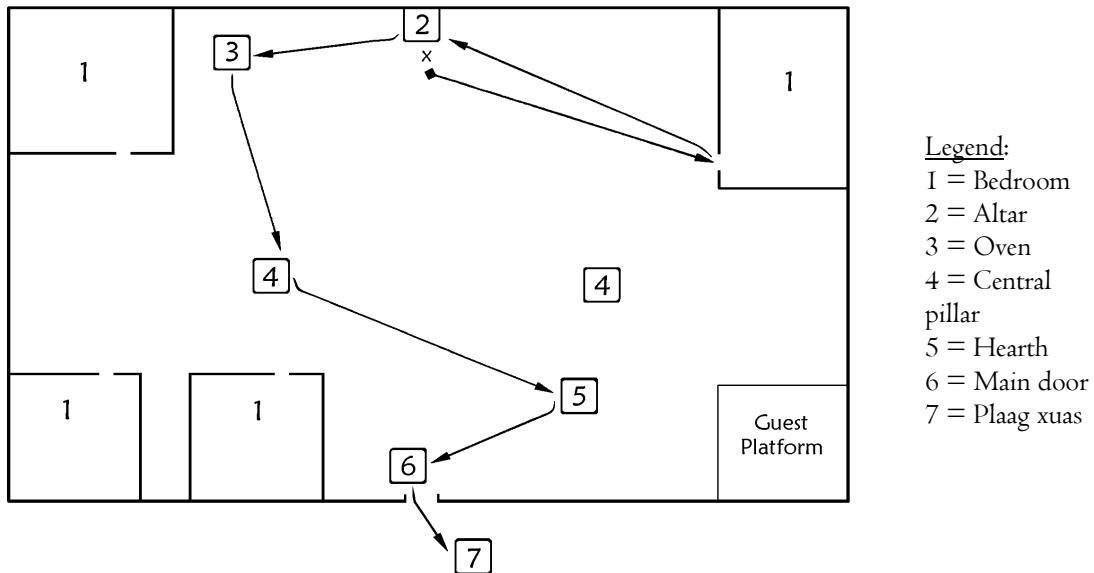


Figure 2: Schematic diagram of a Hmong traditional house. The altar (2) is directly opposite the entrance door (6). The earthen oven (3) is commonly located on the left side of the house. Arrow indicates a possible path of movement of the soul out of the home. X marks placement of the body during the performance of *zaaj qhuabke* (and throughout funeral).

I should note that even though Hmong Americans now live in homes that are vastly different from the traditional type, they continue to employ the “representation” above in their ritual repertoire. Physically, they have also re-configured the urban home so that certain aspects of it would resemble the “archetypical” model. For instance, they would place the household altar on the wall that has the most direct line of sight to the front (main) entrance door. An item that is not physically present, such as a hearth or central pillar, still gets mentioned in the ritual singing. Thus, in Hmong American funeral practice, the traditional home continues to exist in what Bachelard (1964) termed its “psychic state.” Here, as it is for him, the memory of “home” constitutes one aspect of the cultural self.

Qhuabke: Leaving the Home

Through a procedure known as “taij dlaab qhuas,” to ask the guardians, the *taw kev* guides the deceased out of the home (funeral home), making stops at each of the locations listed above. He is to get permission from the guardian of each place before leaving its boundary and space. The first stop is at the Guardian of the bedroom door, where this exchange takes place:²

You are a person who belongs to this household.
Every day you walk about, flexing your body, moving about.
Today, why are you lavishly dressed, lying across the middle of the floor?
In the old days, you moved about, shifting your poise, full of energy.
How is it that you are now so richly adorned, sleeping on the ground, occupying the length of the floor?
Why do you not stay and prepare the harvest for the arrival of brothers and cousins?
Or raise animals, expecting visits of other relatives?
You are a person of this household.
Why are you brilliantly dressed and taking leave, for what purpose?

The deceased answers:

I am a member of this household, a person of this family.
But *Ntxij Nyoog* is unkind; he has unleashed the fruit of death onto the earth, scattering it on the far side of the mountain.
Unaware of it, I have picked it up to eat.
Sickness has swept over me, engulfing the essence of my liver;
Chills spread slowly, invading the vessels of my heart.

² This stanza, not shown in its entirety, is repeated seven times, one for each of the household guardians; the appropriate reference (name of guardian) is inserted into the text each time around.

My body has become frail and fallen in bed; my head rests lifeless on a pillow.
My brothers, sons and daughters have requested nine shamanic performances, but none has
brought cure;
They have sought eight kinds of herbal remedies, but my health could not be restored.
As the pillars of life collapse, my veins weaken and wither.
When the columns of life crumble, my veins and vessels sever.
My flesh disintegrates, melting away like honey and bee wax;
My bones decay, becoming as fragile and brittle as the stalks of dry hemp.
In this way, the road has opened up for me to be on the way.

Here, the deceased acknowledges he is a member of the family and belongs in the home; he is leaving only because of death. Permission is granted when the sticks have landed favorably – one half face up; the other down. In addition, before he sings a stanza, the *taw kev* would tuck several squares of golden and silver paper, called “*xov txheej*,” into the deceased’s left hand. He then proceeds with the singing. When he finishes, makes his toss and the sticks confirm, he would remove the papers and immediately burn them in a metal tray, located in front of him. As he does this, he would say: “Here, you offer incense and gold paper as a gesture of thanks to the Guardian of the bedroom door. When you have done so, he will let you go; you can then be on your way to your ancestors.” The burning completes the agreement between the deceased and the Guardian of the bedroom door. He is then free to move to the next stop, where he must re-negotiate his passage. Each border crossing, hence, requires the deceased to take action and make his presence “official.” Each guardian serves as a witness, approving his departure. Overall, the landing of the sticks is what signals to the *taw kev* whether he can move on to the next household structure or not.

Consequently, how is this movement important and useful in interpreting Hmong social experience? First and foremost, it tells us something about Hmong belief in the afterlife, specifically what happens at each stop of the soul’s journey out of the home. Second, it shows how, in Hmong creative thought, social life is bounded, protected and enclosed. The home, as indicated, is partitioned into discrete areas. The soul must pass, in sequential order, from one location to the next. That movement itself is closely guarded and carefully monitored. In this

way, the transit of the soul (deceased), passing through the established and recognized spaces of the home, is really a subtle and creative way of portraying the rhythms of every day experience. It is a stop-ask-and-go process.

Quabke: Moving Through Places Lived, Retracing Path of Migration

Besides household guardians, Hmong Americans also acknowledge the existence of what they called “dlaab teb dlaab chaw,” or guardians of the land. Each village or town is believed to be protected by one such being. As before, the deceased is to thank and get permission from each of these. The first stop is at the Guardian of his place of death, Milwaukee, Wisconsin:³

Long ago, you spent a segment of your life in Milwaukee, a place in the land.
There, you depleted a portion of the soil;
Drank from a section of its river;
And cleared an entire forest for firewood.
As you leave, offer paper and incense to thank the Guardian of this place.
When you have done so, he will let you be on your way.

From Milwaukee, he is led across the U. S., covering six cities in five different states:

Milwaukee, WI; Manitowoc, WI; St. Paul, MN; Missoula, MT; Portland, OR; Sacramento, CA



Figure 3: A map plotting the deceased’s return journey across the U. S. In a series of stops, he makes his way from the Midwest to the West Coast.

³ This verse is repeated for each of the places the deceased has lived, eventually taking him to his birth village.

Places are recited chronologically. Each is noted for its contribution to the survival of the person. In the past, for example, surrounding areas of a village would provide fertile land for farming; water for consumption; firewood for fuel and energy, and much more. These natural resources were vital and life sustaining. Although Hmong Americans in the Midwest no longer work the land directly as before, they still see the food they eat and energy they use (also no longer firewood) as originating from it. Therefore, in much the same way, the deceased is indebted to the guardian of each city or place.

As before, the *taw kev* would place several squares of paper in the deceased's hand and burn them when the sticks certify that a guardian has accepted the "thank you." After he has accounted for all of the U. S. cities, the *taw kev* would take a few more sheets of paper from a pile on the floor and light them. Holding the burning papers in his fingers, he instructs the deceased as follows:

You have now reached an open ocean. I will lead you across it. Do not be afraid. Use your paper money and incense to pay the foreigners, to rent a boat, or get on a plane. If you do just that, you can safely be on your way to your ancestors.

With this urging, he resumes the singing, retracing the journey overseas, stopping first in Ban Vinai, the refugee camp in Thailand where thousands of Hmong refugees stayed before coming to America. At the end of that stanza, he lights several more sheets of paper to remind the person (soul) to cross the Mekong River, to make his way back to Laos.

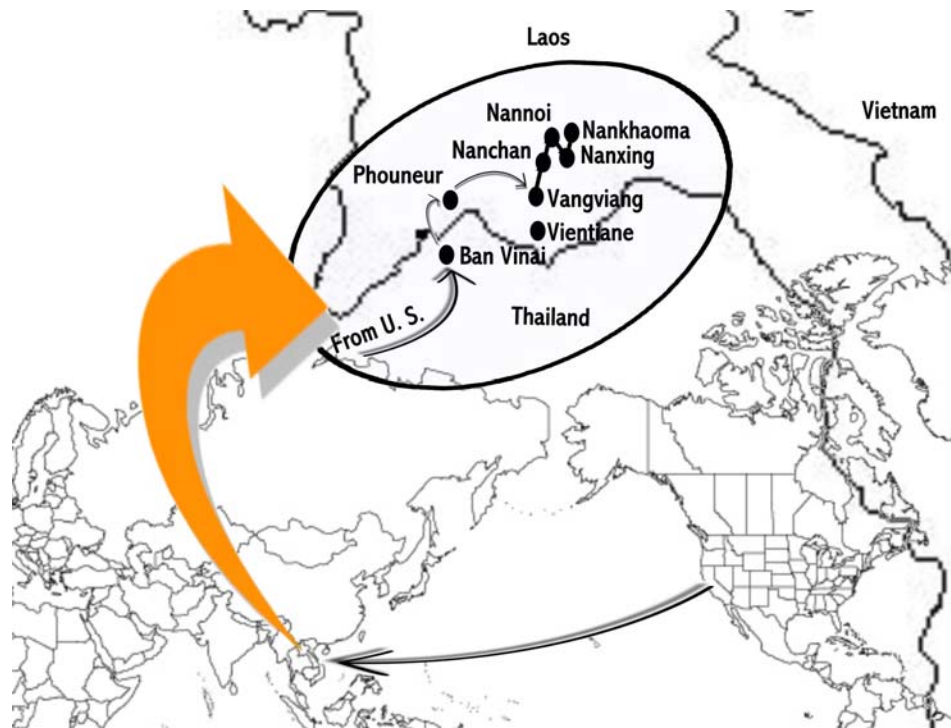


Figure 4: Deceased's path of migration in Laos and the spatial relationship between each of those villages. Last village shown is the place of birth of the deceased.

In northern Laos, the deceased passes through a series of villages: Phou N̄neur, Vangviang, Nanchan, Nannoi, Nanxing and Nankhaoma (Figure 4). This last place, located in northern central Laos, was where he was born. The stanza devoted to it reads:

Your life has come to an end and you are now on your way.
Your rooster squalls loudly as it pushes ahead;
Decently dressed, you trail closely behind.
When the sun shines, take cover under its wings;
If it rains, seek refuge under its tail.

One stride at a time, you have finally arrived in Nankhaoma.
Long ago, your mother gave birth to you there.
You spent a portion of your life in that place, fuzzy like a dream.
You exhausted a share of its soil;
Drank from a section of its river;
Depleted an entire forest of firewood.

Now that you have returned, make offerings to the Keeper of the Land.
Only then will he let you search for your "tsho tsuj tsho npuag."

Qhuabke: Locating Placenta, Locating “Root” in Birth Home

Once in his village of birth, the deceased is to locate his birth home, the site where his placenta was buried. Referred to as “tsho tsuj tsho npuag,” meaning ‘sacred coat,’ this structure is vital to the cycle of the soul. Ritually, it makes the deceased physically whole again, as his life has just come full circle. Mircea Eliade (1971) argued that a ritual re-enacts an original event; it achieves meaning by reproducing that experience, giving people the opportunity to relive its intensity, immediacy and intimacy in the present. The visit to the birth home accomplishes this aim, allowing a community to remember the deceased’s birth and what his parents did with his tsho tsuj tsho npuag. It is also the last stop before he enters the realm of the cosmos to be on his way to the ancestors. Again, the divining sticks mark this departure.

In Laos, it was a common practice for Hmong parents to bury a girl’s placenta under the bed in their bedroom; a boy’s at the base of the central pillar or *ncej taag*.⁴ Placement of the placenta was thus gender specific. The act marked the person’s physical connection to the home; it symbolized his or her “root.” It is possible then to locate the origin of the “self” by tracing the path of the deceased to those precise locations in the family home. In *zaaj qhuabke*, the placenta is a crucial piece of information in reconstructing a person’s life story. The deceased is told to look for his placenta as follow:

Just now, you have arrived at the home of your birth.
Long ago, your mother and father took your tsho tsuj tsho npuag and
buried it at the base of the central house post, below the shelf on the wall, or
in the ground under the bed.

Grab your tsho tsuj tsho npuag and shake off the dust.
Put it on as it is tossed by the wind.
Reach for it and give it a good, brisk shake.

Wrap it around you as parts of it hang loosely behind you.

⁴ In traditional Hmong society, placement of the placenta also conveys important information about the roles expected of boys and girls (or men and women). A son was and still is expected to “tuav ncej dlaab,” meaning to uphold the central pillar. By associating their placenta with this structure, boys were reminded of their duties and responsibility to the paternal lineage. Socially, they were obligated to maintain and continue it. On the other hand, as a result of marriage, a daughter would eventually leave the home. Burying her afterbirth in the bedroom relieved her of that responsibility.

Put on all of the pieces and you can then be on your way,
To find your ancestors, in the Other realm.

After acquiring the placenta, the deceased then enters the next phase of his journey – the movement across the Spirit Realm to the ancestors. As above, passage through each of these sites is ritually mediated – the landing of the divining sticks determines whether the deceased can leave one place and enter another. Movement is thus achieved not so much in a physical way as we know it, but rather in a creative and communicative sense.

Qhuabke: Journeying Across Cosmos, Visiting Foreign Places

“Many different kinds of places hold memories, for example, the natural world, created landscapes, and urban spaces and other sites of human habitations” (Climo and Cattell 2002:21). In addition to places familiar to Hmong social experience – home, village or town – zaaj qhuabke also speaks of dangerous places found along the path to the ancestors. These include the following: Field of Sharp Grass Blades (in the lowland); Three-forked Trail; Mountain of Perpetual Sunshine; Land of Giant Caterpillar; Cliff with a Gnawing Jaw; Mouth Gaping Dragon; Field of Crops (beans and onions); and Bitter Lake.

At each location, the deceased is instructed to carry out a specific task, to overcome an obstacle and avoid delay. At the Three-forked Trail, he is to take the path in the center, not the one leading to the left (up) or right (down). In the Land of the Giant Caterpillars, he is to put on her shoes made of hemp, so as to prevent injuries to his feet. To keep the Dragon occupied, he is to throw three knots of hemp into its mouth; as it chews, the deceased is free to pass. When he reaches a place called ‘Field of Crops,’ strangers will beg him to help with the work. He should refuse their requests, saying it would deter his return to earth. At the Paag Dlej Ab, or Bitter Lake, he is to scoop three handfuls of water and throw them away. If he cannot resist the urge and drinks from this lake, he would lose all memories of his past life.

Hmong elders speculate that their ancestors might have encountered these sites as they moved across China or migrated to Southeast Asia. No one can say for sure. Whether these

places actually existed or not is not central to this discussion. What should be emphasized is the creative role they play in the journey of the deceased. Landmarks found along his path help to establish the past as a place that was once inhabited, traveled and tamed. It is not empty, devoid of knowledge. It has been mapped out, with prominent features in its territory identified, experienced and remembered. As a whole, the narrative suggest that in order to journey into the past, to discover oneself, to find one's cultural roots, the deceased must first sift through the memory of those before him. Finding his way through their stories, fragmented and contested, is part of the process of his self discovery, to finally come to recognize that the ritual sites encountered on his spiritual journey, on the way to the ancestors, are essential to his cultural identity. They are not only his connections to times and places of long ago, but also a testament to the living memories of his culture and community, both of which continue to thrive in the present. Moreover, could the journey through this obstacle-filled territory be interpreted as a way of expressing a Hmong desire to venture beyond the boundaries of their own society, to experience places foreign and cultures distant? There, the account is not so much about the past, but about the ever-elusive present, as a place that has yet to be fully discovered.

Quabke: Memory of Village Life, Locating Hmong of Ancestors

As stated, one of the purposes of the deceased's journey is find his ancestors, to look for his social roots. If that is the case, when he has finally arrived, how does he know where to look or what to look for in order to locate them? Which home is theirs? Are there clues? The answer to these questions lies in this brief passage:

You are on your way to find your ancestors.
You have arrived in the lowland, a place with no hills or mountains.
There, the ponds in the paddies glitter brilliantly, reflecting in the sunlight.

Houses dot the landscape; their jagged roofs point to the sky.
You dare not enter.
These are the homes of the Chinese and foreigners.

Direct your gaze midway up the slopes.
There, you will see simple houses, roofed with just thatch and twigs;
Sitting humbly above the ground, those are the homes of your ancestors.

Traditionally, Hmong preferred to build their houses on slopes rather than on flat fields. To find his ancestors, the deceased is instructed to look “up the slopes” and seek out “simple houses, roofed with just thatch and twigs.” This knowledge is essential as it would allow him to differentiate “Hmong” from “Others.” Here, the “Hmong self” is encoded in the architecture. To be Hmong is to live in a certain type of house and to have a memory of where that house is located in relation to other houses in a community. This visual cue, the lay out of a village, remains integral to the life experiences (and hence cultural identity) of those Hmong Americans who were born and had lived overseas.

This passage also suggests that the “home” of the ancestors is not really found in the other realm, but in the memory of a culture. Thus, the self can exist as far as social, cultural and historical knowledge of the past remains retrievable or accessible in the present. The deceased, for example, is given basic facts about the physical setting of a village. His ancestors lived in homes marginal and peripheral to those of the “Chinese and foreigners.” In this way, *zaaj qhuabke* prompts collective remembering by allowing the life experiences of the deceased to be told. His passing is an occasion for people to remember themselves, and in the process, to construct multiple narratives of the life history of their community. From what I have witnessed and experienced, knowledge and memory of self can consistently be achieved through each performance of *zaaj qhuabke*.

Qhuabke: Choices of Reincarnated Life

After meeting the ancestors, the deceased is then led to the celestial ladder and instructed to climb up in order to reach the realm of *Yawm Saub*.⁵ Once there, he is to ask for a new Letter

⁵ The organization and content of the *zaaj qhuabke* is quite variable, resulting from different traditional schools of thought as well as the level of creativity of individual singers themselves. Some of the people I have spoken to, for example, indicate they frequently rearrange stanzas in a *zaaj qhuabke* in order to

of Provision, to return to earth. In that final stanza where the exchange between the deceased and Yawm Saub takes place, we gain a number of insights on the renewal process, including whether a person [soul] is given a choice when selecting a new *ntawv noj ntawv haus*. That is, how does he know what to become, or what life form is ideal:

In good spirits, you have finally arrived in the Upper Realm of Yawm Saub.
You will now seek a new letter, a document to begin fresh life on earth.

If Yawm Saub presents you the life of a chicken, you should refuse, stating: “As a chicken on earth, the fear of having my throat slit is constant and assured. I would rather not be one.”

As he assigns you the life of a pig, reject it: “As a pig, death by the blade is certain. I cannot accept that.”

When he offers you the life of a dog, clearly state: “On earth, a dog faces frequent beatings. I do not want such a fate.”

As soon as he hands you a document to live as a bull, you should tell him: “As a bull, how could I tolerate the harsh work on the field, pulling the plow that rips open the earth?”

If he makes you a horse, quickly decline it: “A horse is an animal people would ride. I must refuse that offer.”

Finally, he will then inquire: “What is it that you want to be?”

You will reply:

I want to be a “*npauj kaab quas ntxi*,” a moth.
On rainy days, I could just hang leisurely on the underside of a house beam.
When the sun rises, I can fly away, drifting freely in the wind.
Just like that, I can return to see my children as they toil the land.

I want a document to be a beautifully colored moth.
When it rains, I could just rest, clinging to the underside of a thatch leave.
As the sun reappears, I can take flight, soaring through the air.
Like so, I would be on my way to visit my children, to see them work, trying to satisfy the needs of this earthly realm.

achieve a narrative that makes most logical sense to them. This suggests there is some degree of freedom in how a person performs *zaaj qhuabke*; he may add as well as omit. Thus, I have no doubt the version of *qhuabke* used in this analysis, because it reflects the training and tendency of one singer, will differ from those published elsewhere (Symond, 1991) and Lemoine (1983). Furthermore, this particular song does not make China the final destination of the soul as one of my anonymous reviewers has cogently pointed out. As far as I am aware, references to China are generally more common in songs of “*zaaj xai*,” particular those that address concerns of “*meem toj*.”

The deceased's rejection of each fate is based on the collective memory of the role each animal has played in Hmong traditional culture and society. The passage also indicates that even after receiving a new Letter of Provision, the desire to be with one's children remains strong. One of the reasons for returning to earth is to be united with them, spiritually if not physically. Thus, the family continues to serve as a point of attachment, anchoring the movement of the soul. Concerning the desire to be a moth, a point raised above, I have sought the opinions of many qhuabke singers, and one interesting point they have made was that a moth can "plhis," or undergo metamorphosis. The ability to transform from one stage to another is symbolic of a life without eternal suffering. A moth faces no death, whereas for people, it is inescapable.

Conclusion

In the Hmong traditional worldview, the universe consists of three domains: earth (nplajteb), spirit world (dlaab teb), and the upper realm (sau ntuj). I have suggested that the cycle of the human soul – the processes of birth, death and renewal – is what links these together as a functional system.

Using zaaj qhuabke, I have shown that death is not a finite event but a winding journey in search of the ancestors and hence the past. That journey, guided by the person referred to as tau kev, takes the deceased through (1) the home and its shared, functional spaces; (2) villages and towns scattered across the landscape as sites endowed with shared memories of lived experiences, and (3) landmarks located along the path to the ancestors in the cosmos. The passage of the deceased from one location to the next is ritually and symbolically communicated through the divining sticks. When one half lands face up and the other faces down, it signals the deceased to proceed to the next stop on his route.

In this journey, we have also learned that the deceased does not travel alone. His path mirrors that of the group to which he belongs, as they drift from one village to the next, or one country to another. Their journey covers many places, spanning local, national and even international boundaries. This movement shows how the Hmong social experience, similar to

those of many other ethnic groups, is characterized by mobility, dispersion and displacement on the one hand, and temporary stasis and belonging (in the form of attachment to places) on the other. This knowledge is crucial to a people's awareness of self and history, making it possible for them to locate, situate and place themselves in time and space, giving them a keen sense of being here and there at once.

Overall, zaaj qhuabke is a narrative of "being in places," living in, moving across and traveling through them. In this account, the individual is a mobile, conscious being with a complex narrative history. The return journey allows his or her life to be told, to be used as a point of reference in reminiscing about places that have influenced people's lives and events that have forever changed their community. As such, zaaj qhuabke is more than just a ritual performance. It is also social memory, a concept defined by Crumley as the "means by which information is transmitted among individuals and groups and from one generation to the next" (2002:39). In precisely this way, the song gives continuity to community life, allowing people to stitch together memories of who they are, where they have been, and how far they have come in their transnational journey. Its performance makes bearable the anxieties that always accompany change.

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