

**Commentary: The (H)mong Shamans' Power of Healing  
Sharing the Esoteric Knowledge of a Great Mong Shaman**

**By**

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**Abstract**

In this work, the author clarifies and provides additional information about his anthropological work over the past several decades with Mong Master Shaman Xyooj Tsu Yob and his disciples. This commentary article is intended as a response to Dr. Nicholas Tapp's "Perspectives on Hmong Studies" published in Volume 11 of the *Hmong Studies Journal*.

Keywords: Hmong, Mong, Shaman, Shamanism

**My choice to study the (H)mong**

Contrary to most researchers on the (H)mong, whether in Laos or Thailand (except for Bill Geddes), I was a professional sinologist<sup>1</sup> trained in anthropology (student of André Leroi-Gourhan and Claude Lévi-Strauss) and graduated in sociology, ethnology and linguistics. I volunteered in 1960 to work in Laos because of its Chinese cross-border minority nationalities and especially the Miao-Yao group I had selected as a possible proto-Chinese stock in the context of my encyclopedic synthesis of the anthropology of China<sup>2</sup> In my eyes, the (H)mong were also a rare example, in the anthropology of China, of a completely illiterate society with an exclusively oral tradition.

I started studying the (H)mong in late 1960 when I finally arrived as a high school teacher in the old city of Xieng Khouang, northern Laos. Half my students were

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<sup>1</sup> I was at the time Head Librarian of the Institute of Advanced Chinese Studies, at La Sorbonne University, Paris.

<sup>2</sup> « L'Asie Orientale », 550 pages published in *Ethnologie Régionale 2*, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, Editions Gallimard, Paris 1978

(H)mong and I soon asked them if someone would show me the way to the (H)mong villages around the nearby hills. Vang Geu (Vaj Ntxawm)) was the first to accompany me to the Mong Leng village of Hoy Koy where I started field working with him as my interpreter. For me it was perfect happiness. We would head to the mountains as soon as my last Friday course ended and return late on Sunday evening, sometimes early Monday, straight into my first classroom at 8.00.h. But my bliss did not last. Having celebrated Hmong Peb caug in Xieng Khouang at Li Pa Cha's place and in the mountains, in Hoy Koy, together with Suav Vaaj, another of my students; on our way back through the Phonsavan air field, I saw an old Dragon biplane aircraft which was bound to Vientiane on the same afternoon. Remembering that we had been cut off from Vientiane since we had arrived in Xieng Khouang, receiving neither mail nor money, I asked the French pilot if he was coming back to Xieng Khouang in the coming days and on his affirmation I boarded that plane on December 28 expecting to return on December 30. I had prepared for that day but when I went to the appointment, the Vaha Akat Air Company manager said there would be no flight because he had given a day off to his pilots until after the New Year. However, just before the New Year celebrations on the 31<sup>st</sup> started, we learned that Captain Kong Le whose neutralist troops had been driven out of Vientiane, a month before, was taking over Xieng Khouang. Consequently, I could not return to Xieng Khouang until Winter 2000, 40 years later.

While I was teaching new courses at the Teachers' School of Dong Dok, my Hmong students who had fled Xieng Khouang on foot, the same night Kong Le had entered the city, first to Long Chieng, then to Vientiane, did not take long to find me and we started working together again. Yang Dao joined them beginning a lifelong friendship and collaboration.

However the end of the teaching year was soon to come. For me, it meant going back to France and entering my postponed national service in the French Navy as a signal officer and interpreter of the Chinese and Japanese languages. Back in Vientiane in August 1963 I found my Hmong friends waiting for me. But my new assignation as a linguistic adviser did not provide me any free time to go to the mountains and resume working. The first opportunity came in 1964 with the That Luang Festival holidays that I spent with Vang Geu in Xaiyaboury province. This is how I first visited Pha Hok, a huge Mong Njua village of 670 inhabitants, nestled in the forested mountains along a bend of the Mekong river. The scenery was so attractive and people dressed so beautifully that I decided that it would be the place that I wanted to study. But back in Vientiane I found again that I had no time to return until May 1965 when I was recruited by the French National Center of Scientific Research and resigned from the French Cultural Mission in Laos. In Xaiyaboury, I had found for the beginning of my research a field assistant in the person of Lis Chom Lyfoung, a younger brother of Touby Lyfoung, and Vang Geu's brother in law. Together with Lis Chom, in three long stays at Pha Hok I completed the basic investigation of my projected monograph on the 90 households, including demography, family organization, nutrition, economy, etc., that Lis Chom, a remarkable field assistant, transcribed in Hmong, household after household. After he left me and returned to Vientiane I continued another couple of years, while progressing in the Mong language. My monograph was completed in the Fall of 1967 and I returned to France to write my PhD.

### **My link with shamanism**

In the beginning, as everybody may understand, I had little interest in Mong shamanism and it was not a target of my monograph of the Mong. However when in 1963 I

was about to leave Paris for Laos, I was contacted by my colleague Guy Moréchand who had started writing a Ph D thesis on Hmong shamanism. He asked me if he could send me a few questions that I could help to solve while I was in the field and insisted that I record shamanic sessions for him. So this I did while completing my own social survey. But I was well aware that shamanic sessions in the Mong dialect would not help him, given the dialectal discrepancies with Hmong. At Peb caug, worrying that I had nothing worth sending him, I took the opportunity to visit with Lis Chom the Hmong Quas Npab villages around Pha Hok. Hmong Quas Npab (Striped Sleeves Hmong), a different tribe, speak the same dialect as White Hmong. In one village, I managed to record “the sending away of a shaman’s spirit helpers to the cave of Nyaj Yis for their one week’s yearly vacation”. I informed Moréchand but he wanted it transcribed. Father Bertrais was also involved in helping. Moréchand suggested I try a transcription in the Roman Catholic village of Huay Saek, under Father Zannoni then, with his first convert, a former shaman named Zam Nob. Again I took the opportunity over Christmas vacation and went back to Xaiyaboury with five Hmong students who had volunteered to go. It took us one week relaying to each other 12 hours a day to achieve a complete transcription word by word of the shaman’s chant, the first ever achieved. Back to Vientiane the transcription was edited and typed and finally sent to Moréchand. I was about fed up with shamanism when things suddenly took another turn. Back in Pha Hok, I was living at Xyooj Tsu Yob’s house when on a rainy day while I was drying by his fireplace he came squatting besides me and quite casually remarked:

“--It seems that you are very interested by what our shamans do”

--This is true I would like very much to know more..

--But are you really interested?”

:--If I am interested (I had perceived the irony of his question)!

--The way you take it, I should be surprised that you achieve anything.

--And how should I take it?

--Well among us, when somebody wants to be a shaman, he should first find a master.

--And this master, where should I find him?

--If you want me, I can be your master. But prior to this, you must conform to our customs and pay for the rights of initiation such as every Mong disciple does to his master.”

So it was done and faithfully, during the remaining two years I worked in his village, he showed me the symbolism of all the healing rituals I attended. I became so familiar with them that, given the name, I could describe in advance what he was going to do. It helped me a lot that when during the shooting of the film “The Meo” with a team from British Granada Television, I had to leave the village in an emergency to carry on a stretcher a very ill teenager to the Xaiyaboury Philippine Hospital -- a day long trip -- and could not attend the healing ritual Tsu Yob was about to perform. When I saw the initial prints of it in Manchester, however, I noticed that the cameraman did not miss any of the important shots I had described to him before leaving. But before the team’s return to England, I had Tsu Yob flown to Vientiane in order to review with him the sound track of the film. One day that we were listening through the tapes, he suddenly stopped explaining and, speaking slowly in order to emphasize his point, he made the following statement to me:

“I have taught you until now. However, I did not teach you the most important things. Times are hard I don’t know what will happen of us. But I would like that my children and grandchildren know what their father and grandfather was doing in his lifetime.

And because you are going to write it down for them, now, I am going to explain everything to you.”

He asked me for a sheet of paper and a pen and started clumsily tracing the kev neeb, the “way of the spirit helpers”.

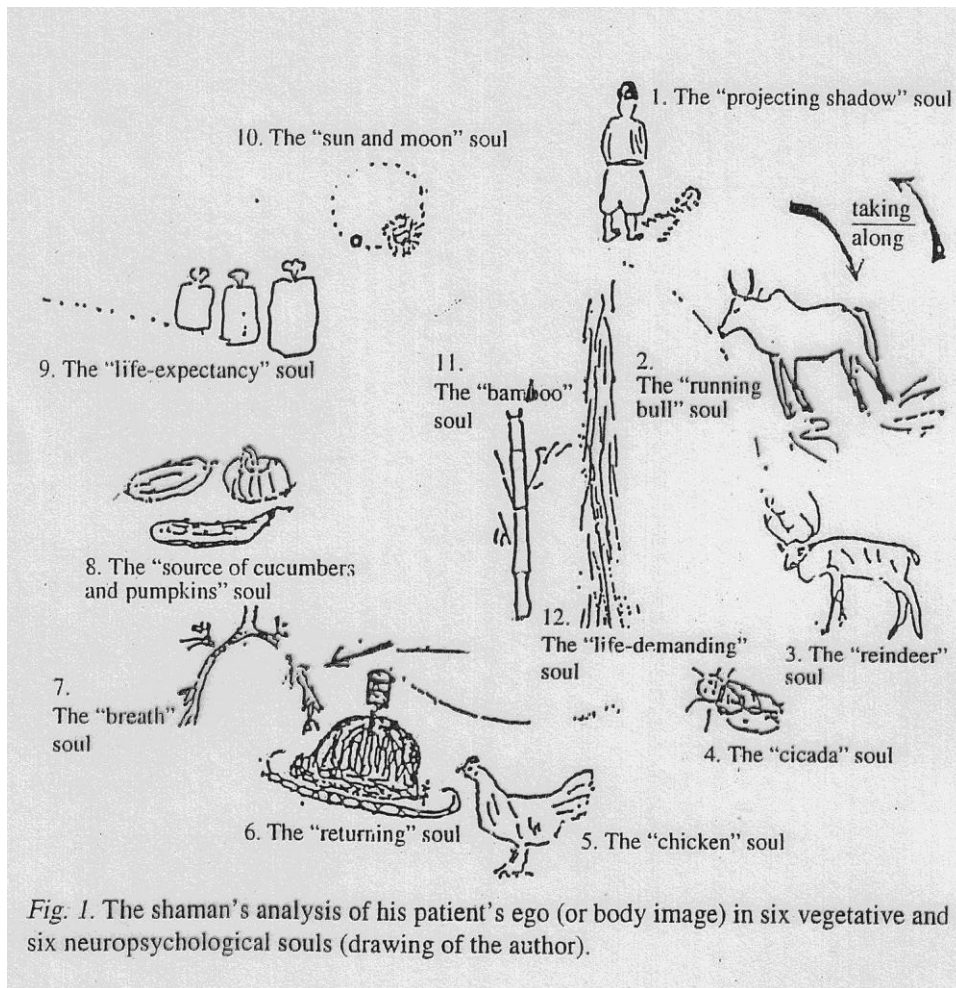
I was conscious that it was, more than another initiation, his intellectual legacy. Looking at his clumsy graph, I already knew I was contemplating in good order all I had been vainly trying to sort out. I recorded a first description of the places the shaman goes in the Beyond and a rough list of the souls he was tracking along his way. Then our roads parted again and it was only in 1977, when Tsu Yob had taken refuge in France, that we were able to resume working together each time I was visiting him in Florac or Ispagnac. In 1987, I decided to publish a first book presenting a part of the large amount of ethnographic data I already had. At that time, we had been working together for 21 years. After the book was published, I started looking at the data in a more analytical way and discovered that the kev neeb was in fact a linear equation with two unknowns: 1. runaway vital souls; 2. places where they might have gone. That is: a mathematically organized repertoire, always the same, which the shaman in trance visualizes while listening to his own automatic singing. A matter difficult to imagine for a participant observer who has the following hilarious vision of the shaman's performance: “In effect...the shaman is possessed by a kind of primordial chaos of natural, cultural and spiritual essences which destroys the boundaries of cultural identity and in which his own sense of personal identity and self is submerged”<sup>3</sup>!! Dear casual observer, the shaman in trance does not dawdle along the “primordial chaos”, he has much more to do: First, he listens carefully to his leej nkaub spirit helper while the formatted itinerary developed in his chant takes him from place to place on the way of the neeb. The

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<sup>3</sup> (Tapp 2000 p.95)

trance puts him in a state of dissociated consciousness that enables him to diagnose through a series of images the probable cause of his patient's illness.

In developing my study of the kev neeb with Tsu Yob I soon became aware that the vital souls he accounted for were 12, no less, no more. Tsu Yob's description of them was not easy to visualize. As they formed a kind of constellation in and around the patient's body, I tried to represent them in a graph such as below:



Pr. Nicholas Tapp understands them in his special way, translating ntsuj as "self" instead of "soul" as it is in (H)mong language: "In common speech, these (selves) are the chicken, bamboo and bull selves, but also a self which integrates the domestic family, its

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*animals and gardens*, (Lemoine 1987) and other elements such as the reindeer and sun-and-moon selves, which together form a shamanic 'system' of selves". Trying vainly to find the source of such a bold statement about the domestic family, its animals and garden, becoming a vital soul (or self) of a patient, I have discovered the answer only quite recently by looking at a representation of the kev neeb as a shamanic equation that I reproduce below. At the bottom of the graph in C there is a house and the explanation of C reads "house and garden", could it be that Prof. Tapp has mistaken **places** for **souls**? There is more: as I read on p. 9 of Tapp's "Perspectives on Hmong Studies" (Hmong Studies Journal, 2011, Volume 11). "A final example was a discussion between me and Jacques Lemoine which took place some years ago, or rather an argument. This time I was more on the 'Hmong insider's side than the 'outside researcher's side' and I felt we had no right to go beyond ordinary Hmong understanding into some esoteric or secret knowledge which had maybe *only originated in one shaman's understanding*"(italics are mine)." Reading this line I felt very sorry for my master that his seminal teaching could be deformed or ridiculed in such a way.

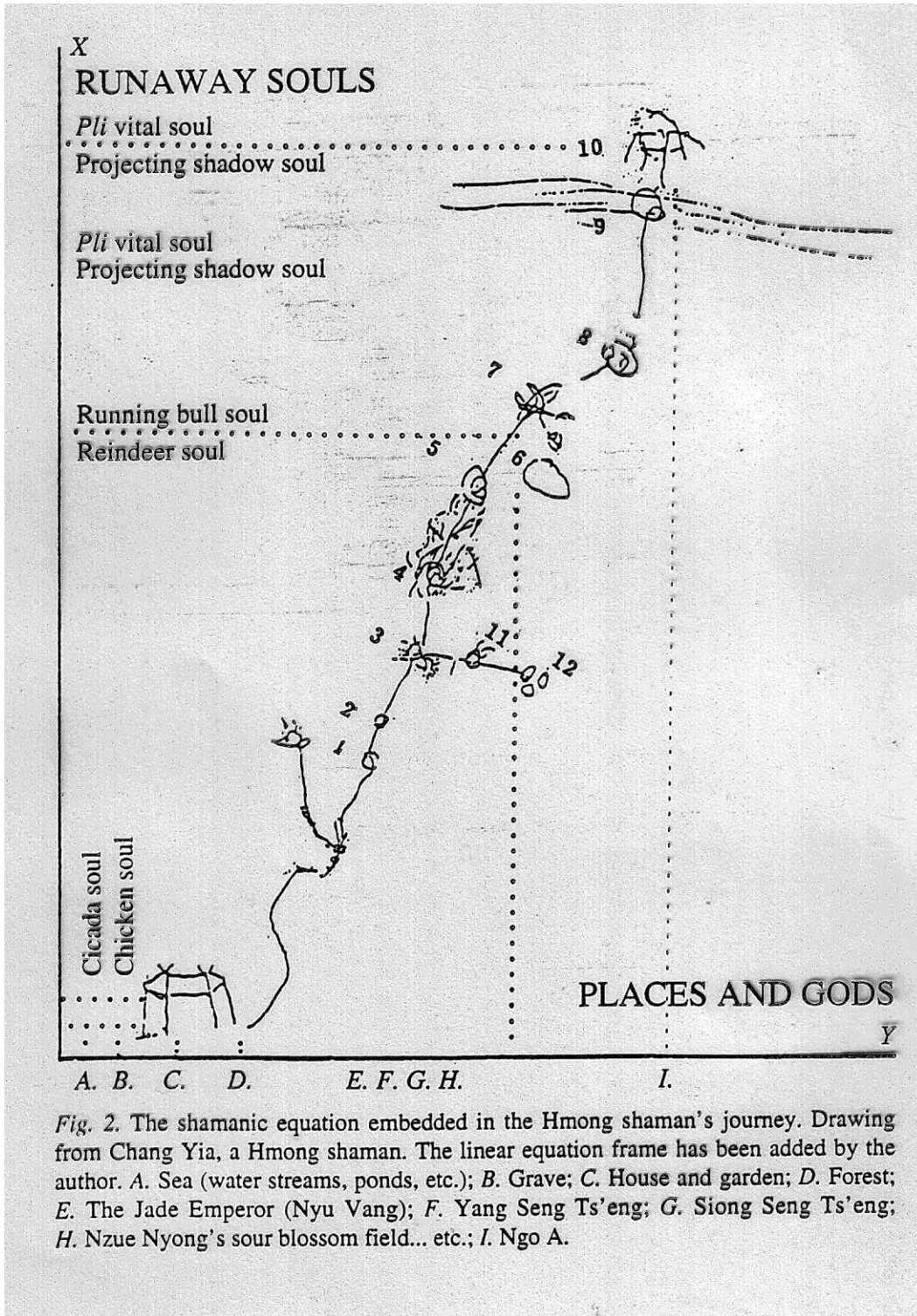


Fig. 2. The shamanic equation embedded in the Hmong shaman's journey. Drawing from Chang Yia, a Hmong shaman. The linear equation frame has been added by the author. A. Sea (water streams, ponds, etc.); B. Grave; C. House and garden; D. Forest; E. The Jade Emperor (Nyu Vang); F. Yang Seng Ts'eng; G. Siong Seng Ts'eng; H. Nzue Nyong's sour blossom field... etc.; I. Ngo A.

I also note that this argument about my only source was to introduce once and again Prof. Tapp's unabated insistence that the leej nkaub spirit helper, who never quits his master,

should be called the “parrot spirit”! For me, it still seems obvious that once two dialects of the same language have different words to refer to a parrot and the same name for calling a spirit, parrot and spirit cannot be one and the same. I concede to Prof. Tapp that I was wrong in involving Moréchand but I can explain why. In fact, I had been urged by Moréchand to ask my master about this point. He was writing his thesis and wanted a prompt answer. I asked Tsu Yob who seemed not to understand my question and, when finally he got the message that I believed his spirit was a parrot, burst into laughter and said to me: “Don’t you know that in Mong Njua we call a parrot noob yeeb kub? Leej Nkaub is only a spirit.” I forwarded his answer to Moréchand who never made the mistake, but in some kind of slip of the tongue, he remained for me linked to this parrot quest. I am afraid that mentioning Tsu Yob’s reaction has raised Tapp’s bad humors against him...Otherwise how to explain his stupendous remark about him?

However, Tsu Yob’s memory should not be involved in this scholars’ quarrel. He never wanted me to make him known. As he said initially he only wanted that I transmit his teaching to his sons and grandsons. But time was passing and his sons and grandsons were not yet able to read French. Printing was the only solution. Only now, some of his better educated grandsons thank me for having written the 1987 book that they have enjoyed reading. Tsu Yob was not a lone shaman, he had his masters and, after becoming a fully fledged shaman, his disciples. This means that all he revealed to me was an esoteric tradition shared by what we could call “the school of shamanism” he belonged to. I guess that he never thought of, in the beginning, revealing that much of shamanic secrets. Only the dire circumstances experienced by (H)mong people at the apex of the Lao Civil War made him realize what unexpected good opportunities the film he participated in and his Western

disciple represented for him to save his legacy. Anyway, whatever he revealed to me, we both knew that I could never perform and have the trance. Contrary to what a layman may think, in order to be a shaman you need to have a shaman ancestor. What I said in my book was that you could not choose a master from among your father or uncles. This is not the same thing.

Tsu Yob was a proficient shaman. When I started working with him he usually had an average of 120 successful healings a year, more than two a week. When he arrived in France, after a while he felt the urge (provoked by his neeb spirits) to resume shamanizing and asked a White Hmong shaman, the only one shaman in the vicinity, to call back his spirit helpers. I had this performance filmed and so far as I remember there was no problem of communication between the two shamans and their respective spirits. When it was known that Tsu Yob had resumed shamanizing, other (H)mong people would come from as far as Metz or Amiens to be examined by him in Florac, Ispagnac or Montargis where he finally installed his altar in his elder son's house. Together with his friend Ntxhoo Hawg, another shaman of the same tradition, in June 1983 we participated as distinguished guests at the International Congress of "Shamanism and Healing" in Alpach, Austria; then in 1984, in the International Conference on Shamanism in Chamarande, France and there, as much as in Austria, confronted with Western patients, I discovered that Mong shamans could diagnose them successfully too.

As a scientist, I inevitably felt the obligation to disclose my recent findings and analyses to international anthropologists specializing in shamanism in such places as the 1<sup>st</sup> International Conferences of the ISSR in Seoul, 1991 and the 3<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the ISSR in Nara, November 25-29, 1995. Then, I published in the BEFEO or L'Homme (see

my bibliography) in regards to my continuing investigation of (H)mong and Yao shamanism.

Xiong Tsu Yob, who died in Bourges in 1998 at the venerable age of 95, should be remembered not only as the great shaman, healing thousands of people as he certainly was his entire life, but also as the only shaman who dared disclose the inner depths of his esoteric art to a foreigner in order to help save his culture for generations to come. In all modesty, I would say I see him as a landmark figure in recent (H)mong history. Let him rest in peace

In the appendix below, I have provided a summary of Tsu Yob's teaching and my analyses of (H)mong shamanism for readers who have no access to my French published work.

## APPENDIX

### **A (H)mong Shaman's Power of Healing, its construction, its use.**

After many years of learning from a Mong shaman who took me as his disciple in the circumstances I have detailed above, I have gradually come to understand that all this esoteric knowledge was hiding a cognitive system that accounted for its continuous working and reproduction<sup>4</sup>. This is the reason why, despite the trance and his altered state of consciousness, the shaman's diagnosis of illness always follows an impeccable logic. It is all encompassed in the shaman's chant and acted out during the exploration performance called *ua neeb sai* or the use of the spirit helpers for examining the disease. As I explain below, the way of the spirit-helpers (*kev neeb*) which is developed in the course of the chant can be represented as a linear shamanic equation with two unknowns: 1. the name of the spirits or the abode from where a missing soul can be retrieved and 2. the name of the missing soul the spirit helpers are after.

The shamanic equation represents only one of the cognitive tools at the shaman's disposal. His power to heal has also to be established before he can proceed with any attempt at healing. In the Hmong shaman's metaphor, the power to diagnose and to heal lies in his troupe of spirits. He first listen to his patient's description of his disease, then prepares to perform. He wears no particular clothing except for a black veil wrapped around his head for the time being. When his altar is ready, he beats his gong two or three times while he bows to the four directions and welcomes his spirit helpers. Soon after, he sits on his bench, hands his gong to his acolyte and puts his ring-bell on his

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<sup>4</sup> All of Tsu Yob's teaching has been carefully recorded, transcribed and translated along the years. I hope being able one day to make a corpus that could be accessed by other researchers on (H)mong shamanism.

left hand. He pulls down his black veil over his face, showing that he is about to enter the unseen, and starts shivering, a signal of the arrival of his spirits. With his left hand, he shakes the ring bell, holding his rattle sword in his right hand, while his acolyte starts beating the gong. His voice is half drowned out by the sound of the gong, while he starts the roll call of his troops.

### **The spirit helpers**

The spirit helpers, or *neng*, constitute a task force divided into two groups: the vernacular spirits and the Chinese spirits, which the shaman calls separately, using a different idiom for each. He first calls the Hmong spirits. These appear in pairs rather like commandos trained to reach specific targets. They are briefly described so that they not only arrive on stage in a definite order, but as parts of a strategic system in which all eventualities have been accounted for. First to come is the ancestral master spirit, the group leader. He is a direct male ascendant of the shaman (his father or grandfather), who, at the time of his terminal illness, had enjoined the present shaman or one of his descendants to be the new "father" of the particular group of spirits which had belonged to him in his lifetime. The ancestral master spirit is followed by female spirits holding iron and silver brooms with which to clean the altar where most of the other spirits are going to land. For the rest, a spider spirit stretches a magic thread, while the first-woman and first-man couple, Njua and Nang, assisted by Chinese blacksmiths, throw a "copper and iron" bridge for the numerous Chinese infantry and cavalry to come--a historical reminder of the Chinese Courts' campaigns to suppress the Hmong, but also a legacy from the Chinese masters. In the shamanic metaphor, this thread and this bridge also establish a direct connection between the altar and the Nya Yee Cave (Nyaj Yig Koov

Tsuav) from where all the spirit helpers come. The Great Yee, or Shee Yee<sup>5</sup>, was the first shaman. The thread and the bridge will also be used as a takeoff runway when the shaman invites the spirits to hunt for his patient's missing souls. Next, he summons his flexible springing bench, his "dragon-horse" "of wind and clouds" which he is already riding, and then, his couple of venerable dragons who can "encircle the sky, and surround the earth" in order to stop the volatile "projecting shadow soul". The dragons' place to the left of his altar is represented by a bowl of water which the shaman calls "the dragon pond". Identified with the rainbow, the dragon is indeed able to encircle the horizon. In folk culture all around the Chinese world, the dragon symbolizes imperial power. No wonder then that next to the dragon couple comes the Chinese Imperial couple "whose strength rises to the heavens and stretches to the extremities of the Earth", they will "hold the chicken soul back and block the projecting shadow soul's way".

At this point, the shaman's altar has been symbolically set up. When the setting is the patient's house, it consists of a board resting on a support, or of a small table, on which are aligned from left to right the bowl of dragon water, a basket of maize grain to feed the horses of the cavalry, an incense burner to please the spirit helpers in the middle of the altar, and, a little farther right, a bowl of husked rice in which an egg and two joss sticks are stuck. These are especially intended for the spirit of the trance (txeej xeeb) and the "clear-sighted" (leej nkaub) spirit, the seer-spirit who guides and informs the shaman who will remain behind his veil, blind in the unseen. It is to be noted here that Hmong shamans do not pretend to be seers themselves; on the contrary, they say that they

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<sup>5</sup> I have shown in Lemoine 1987 that, Shee Yee, the first shaman of the Hmong tradition, could well be the same as She Yi, the good archer of Chinese ancient mythology. If my analysis proves correct, Hmong shamanism could be linked to a very archaic tradition of Chinese shamanism.

only "see in their mind" and are informed of what is going on in the unseen through the constant narration of their seer-spirit. What this means is that while in a state of altered consciousness, they induce a dissociation to become the receiver and not the transmitter of their own chant.

After the altar is installed, the shamanic accessories must also be introduced. The shaman's elder son carries his exorcising sword, and his "elder daughter the gong and cymbals". "Trance" and "Clear-sighted" spirits will carry his rattle-sword. This lance point with a large round handle to which 9 iron discs and 10 twisted rings have been strung becomes a multi-functional symbolic tool as circumstances require: it is the reins of the shaman's horse, a magical sword to cut devils in twain, a cast net to catch the souls, a magic mirror to distinguish those belonging to this World (*Yaaj-Yang*) from those of the Otherworld (*Yeeb-Yin*), good from bad spirits, and finally, a telescope to see far away.

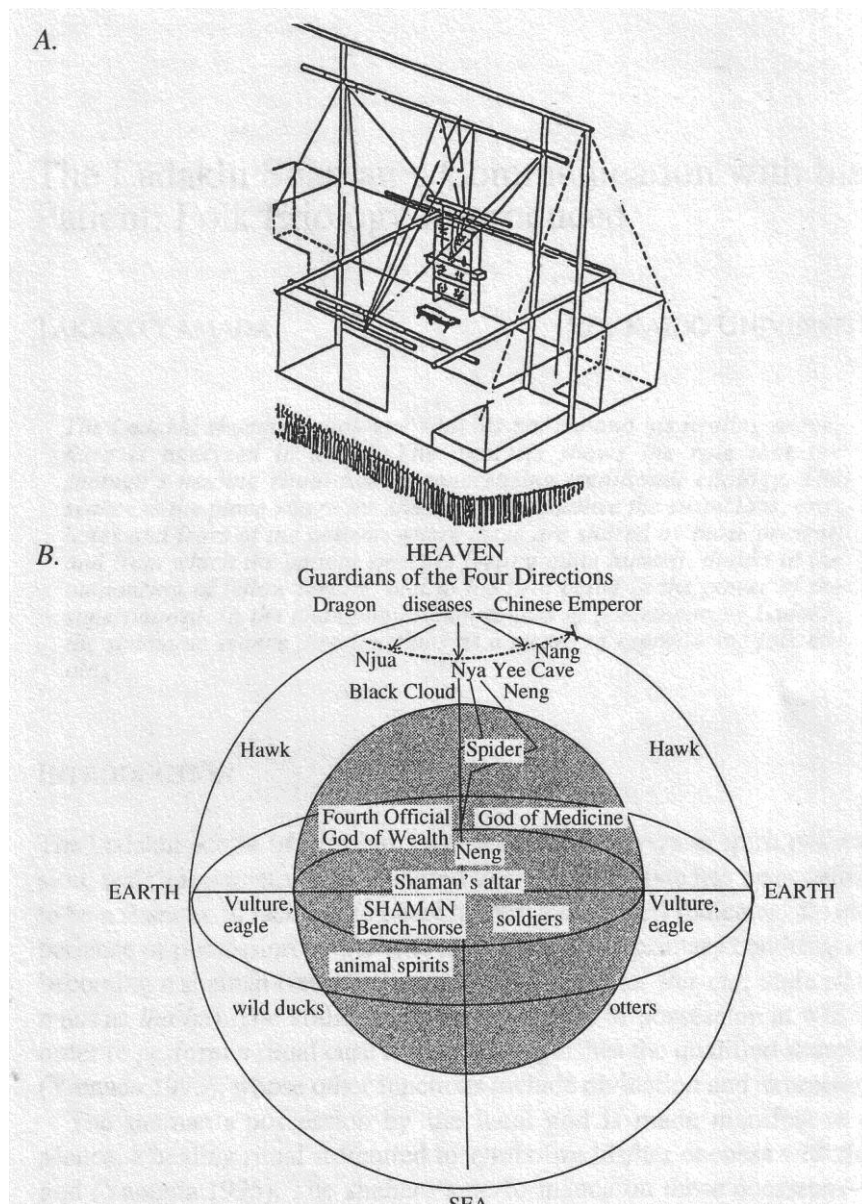
The following *neng* all have special functions. There are the "awesome red-hot eaters and boiling drinkers... who spread all over the earth, eating the devils of epilepsy, swallowing the mice-spirits they encounter"; the Dragon-thunder's daughter, "Miss Black Cloud, who carries a shamanic umbrella to shelter the souls and the *neng* "; the lady "who cuts the reincarnation process with copper and iron scissors"; and the "naive lady who carries the scales for weighing souls" upon their return back home. There follow the Lady and the Gentleman who anchor life and energy so that they be "as sturdy as the cliffs, as strong as a stone bar", and the spirits of the gourd of immortality "who blow their magic medicine while circling around the patient in order to resuscitate the projecting shadow soul". Then there are the spirits who can call back the chicken soul; the strong soldiers who roll rocks and trunks to block the patient's grave after

replacing the image of his laid out body with a sacrificed piglet; the pair of soldiers who roll stones, copper, or iron to crush wounds and restore the missing parts of the body image. With a few exceptions, all the spirit helpers are parts of a dynamic mental imagery system, and have no other reason for being than the functional role of personifying and executing potential commands.

The register of the Chinese spirit helpers is even more "functional", with battalions of fierce soldiers arriving in eight or nine ranks of four in a row, adding up to impressive numbers (90,000 soldiers, 80,000 officers) of anonymous troops. This spirit army and cavalry belong to the shaman's masters. Of all the shaman's masters, certain characters are singled out: the spirit of the trance, for instance, the four guardians of the four directions with their celestial and terrestrial troops, and all the emperors and empresses of China for 88 generations. Specific also are his blacksmith masters, and all the tools of the forge which are listed as spirit helpers: the bellows, the pin at the door of the melting pot, the anvil, the coal shovel, the drill, and the tongs, whose main function is "to silence disputes and quarrels". Last of all, the shaman installs the divinatory blocks, the gouge and the punch with which spirit money is cut and carved; and the domestic gods of folk culture, the Fourth Official, the god of Wealth and the god of Medicine, all of whom have places of honor on shelves hung on the uphill wall of any (H)mong house. In a Mong shaman's house, their individual altars are incorporated in the sides of the two-tiered shaman's altar. This might be the reason for including these three generally positive gods among the Chinese spirit helpers; another explanation might be that they are actual borrowings from Chinese culture. The shaman's metaphor, it seems to me, actually pools all possible Chinese spiritual assets to "betray" a basic connection between

(H)mong shamanism and the Chinese sources. The validity and authenticity of the Chinese spirits are also attested. The coexistence in the shaman's metaphor of two registers, one vernacular and the other borrowed from the dominant other culture, guarantees the mastery of all healing knowledge in the shamanic strategy of empowerment. And this, I believe, is a crucial aspect of what constitutes its healing power. It also reflects the condition of (H)mong folk culture as a marginal tribal culture in contact with and in overall opposition to Chinese imperial "civilization". Hmong folk culture has borrowed the domestic gods that protect the family and, in funerary rituals, the Jade Emperor who controls everybody's life span. Specifically shamanic borrowings are limited to a few highly technical astral evil spirits such as the Heavenly Dog or the White Tiger, and to symbols of power such as all the Emperors and Empresses of the past, the spirits of the forge (an actual technological borrowing from Chinese civilization) and the myriad of spirit soldiers inherited from generations of Chinese and (H)mong masters.

By the end of the roll call, the shaman has set up his symbolic healing power. The power accumulated with his having recited the two registers of spirit helpers puts the shaman at the center of a tremendous symbolic force. The roll call takes place in the relatively limited space of the house. The altar, whether permanent or makeshift, is always close to the uphill wall and faces the front door. If the patient is in another shaman's house, the makeshift altar for the guest shaman is set up before the permanent altar of that house.



*Fig. 1.* The Hmong shaman's symbolic sphere of power. In A, the ritual space is comprised by the altar, the bench, and the spirits' thread between the altar, the bedroom and the front door; in B, the inner sphere represents the ritual space in A, surrounded by a cosmic outer sphere.

The bench is installed before the makeshift altar and the shaman sits on it, his back facing the front door. During the trance, the shaman, holding in his right hand his jingling rattle-sword and in the left a chinking ring swings on his flexible bench, miming a breath-taking horse ride. His assistant beats the gong to summon the spirit helpers when

necessary, and stands ready to help him when, in the midst of the action, he suddenly stands up and jumps backward onto his bench and continues to swing while standing on the bench, then jumps forward onto the ground.<sup>6</sup> The ritual space is strictly confined to the altar, the shaman's bench and the assistant behind him. However, this space is extended upward to the thread and eventually, to the bridge of the spirit helpers. Both of them go to and fro between the altar and the front door and alternately provide the shaman's troops with a landing place and a runway to take off from. The shaman's troops are so numerous when he summons them that it is difficult to believe that they can all enter the house, and this suggests that the ritual space indoors is only the small-scale model of the real symbolic sphere that the shaman has set up around his own body. The boundaries of this sphere of power are set by the functional range of the spirit helpers' interventions. It thus appears that they are intended to reach up to the sky, down to the bottom of the sea, and horizontally, to the ends of the earth (Fig. 1). The strategic organization of these spirits into attack and defense commandos reinforces the intervention power of the task force at the shaman's disposal. In terms of the phenomenal world, this means that there is no place that is out of his reach, not even the abode of Ngo A (Nkauj Ab), mother of mankind, which is also the death's threshold.

### **The analysis of the patient' self into 12 vital souls**

Among the special instructions transmitted from master to disciple, there is a thorough analysis of the self in terms of the dynamics of life. The analysis is in terms of a set of metaphors for various measures of the body's vitality conceived as a distinctive set of "souls". In using the word "soul", I have translated the vernacular appellation. In fact, the shamanic analysis of the self is a part of the esoteric tradition of the initiate, and is

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<sup>6</sup> These are true feats of skill on account of the fact that, with the veil, he cannot see the targets.

only distantly related to the concept of "soul" as it is ordinarily used. It is a development of the idea of reincarnation, an admitted notion of Hmong culture. The shamans have done no more than invert the order of the two terms, death and reincarnation, postulating that the craving for reincarnation (the life-and-death pulsations of the patient's souls) can actually initiate the process of dying, instead of being only its consequence. The patient's self is thus divided into 12 souls or vital functions, each expressing a crucial aspect of human psychosomatic life, which falls into two major groups according to their nature and behavior: the sedentary-and-domestic, inside-or-around-the-body, souls; and the unstable, elusive souls. They are worth detailing here in inverted order.

The sedentary, *vegetative* souls controlling the body are:

-(12) The "life-demanding" soul (*long tzu long lao-looj txwv looj laus*), incorporating health and wealth in a joint stock of good fortune. For the (H)mong, the "life - demanding" soul is the person's individual destiny. When it is exhausted, the shaman burns spirit money in order to rebuild it.

-(11) The "bamboo" soul (*nju siong nju ndong-ntjuj xyooj ntsuj ntoo*) grows in the marrow of the backbone. It holds the body upright. When worms enter it, it may lean over and even lie down. The patient becomes very weak. His "breath" soul becomes loose, cut off from its support.

-(10) The "sun and moon" soul (*ngao nu njau li-nkauj nub nraug hli*). This soul never leaves the body even after death. It stays on the forehead when a man is in good health, but moves towards the back of the head when he is weak or ill.

-(9) The "life-expectancy" soul (*krau na khau siong-qhauj naj qhauv xyoo*, literally

"of the years of rice to eat") is the embodiment of appetite and of the life span. If the food reserve it symbolizes is exhausted, the shaman must buy a new (symbolic) stock of food wherewith to sustain his patient's life.

-(8) The "source of cucumbers and pumpkins" soul (*mang tli mang tau-maab dlib maab tau*). It stays in the veins; it is the source of health and fertility, and a companion of the vital soul, as in the expression "*nju pli nju mang*".

-(7) The "breath" soul (*nju pang fua siue-ntsuj paaj fua xyw*), regulates breath and blood circulation. The Hmong call it "the satin thread". When it is torn, the person dies. The first symptom is difficulty breathing. The shaman has to send his spirit helpers to help the patient to breathe again.

In contrast to the above six vegetative souls embedded in the body, the Mong shamans of my master's tradition know of a set of six more-or-less *unstable* souls, which illustrate the fundamental volatility of life. These souls correspond to the idea of "spirits", which can be good or bad according to what psychologists used to call "the humors":

-(6) The "returning" vital soil (*nju pli si-ntsuj plig xw*) is the soul that reincarnates. If the shaman cannot bring it back, the patient will die<sup>3</sup>.

-(5) The "chicken" soul (*nju kr'a nju nong*) is very much a home bird: even when it goes away for two or three days, it always returns to the body by itself. It leaves the body at death.

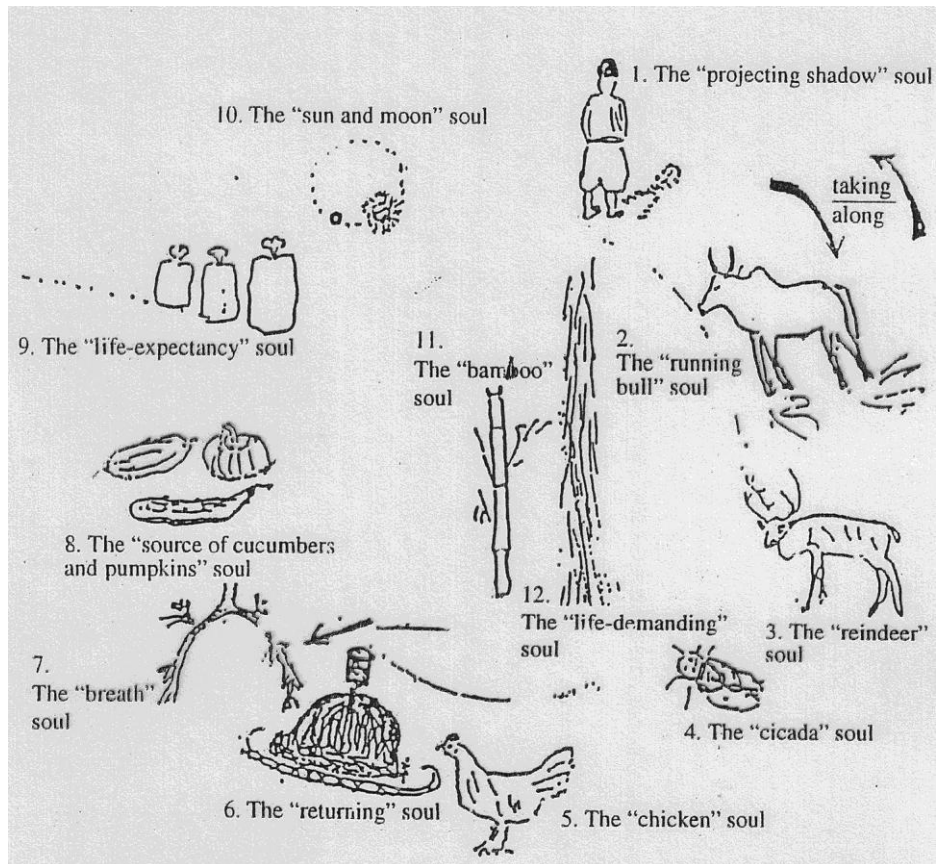


Fig. 2. The shaman's analysis of his patient's ego (or body image) in six vegetative and six neuropsychological souls (drawing of the author). I have symbolized the "returning" soul (6) by a *kauj vaab kauj le*, a representation of the soul of the dead set on a winnowing basket comprising a standing shirt having belonged to the dead topped by a turban. It is used for the last separation ritual when that soul is set free to reincarnate (*tso plig*).

-(4) The "reindeer" soul (*niu Chiang niu kau-nyuj caab nyuj kau*) is also domestic and very sedentary. But sometimes the Door guardian deity or the Fourth Official, another god protector of the house, sells it for money to some wild spirit passing by. When it is gone, the patient feels pain all over his body, and cannot get up. The shaman's spirit helpers organize a search party. When the "reindeer" soul is found, the shaman has to redeem it from its abductor.

-(3) The "cicada" soul (*nbau kang kr'or ndzue-npauj kaab qhov ntxwv*) should stick to the body as cicadas do to their tree. But it likes to join other cicadas in the

forest and sing with them. "Cicada" souls do not follow the vital soul after death, to reincarnate in another body of the same clan as the dead. They fit around until they find the right body to dwell in. It can also happen that a cicada soul belonging to a living person settles into another individual, especially a fetus. The person will lose his appetite and weaken rapidly. The shaman's job is to interrupt the reincarnation process, and bring the cicada soul back to its original body. If he fails, the patient will die. If he succeeds, the mother pregnant with the baby in whom it had settled will miscarry.

-(2) The "running bull" soul (*niu tjang niu plu-nyuj raag nyuj pluj*) is like a bull: it is easily frightened, and then bolts headlong down the path to death, taking along the "shadow" soul.

-(1) The "projecting shadow" soul (*nju tlua nju hlau-ntsuj dluab ntsuj hlau*) is unstable by definition, moving around the body and disappearing at any moment on the path to death and perdition.

The mental imagery involved here builds both on metaphor and a holistic view of life as a dynamic constellation of energies and humors. The result is a complex image of the body, a yardstick of sorts by which the shaman is able to precisely measure how far his patient is healthy, and how far he is ill, and analyze in detail the nature of the illness. This analysis reveals that illness, whether caused by symbolic blows or the loss of runaway souls, consists in the disintegration of the body image, leading to what psychologists call psychosis or, sometimes, simply neurosis. The aim of the Hmong shaman's ritual of healing is to restore this body image. One could argue that the disintegration of the self and the body image is merely a consequence of illness and of

the aura of isolation that it creates around the patient, the first step in the direction of the ultimate disintegration of the body after death. What we think of as the natural order of cause and effect, however, is irrelevant to the shaman's intervention, and he proves to be right whenever the recovery of the body image is a concomitant of his patient's relief from pain.

### **Mythical pathology**

Hmong shamans operate with a whole gamut of evil spirit images associated with the specific symptoms of an illness. If a patient is suffering from epilepsy, they will distinguish, according to the gravity of the fit, between a "cow", a "horse", a "goat", a "pig", a "dog", and a "chicken" devil of epilepsy. This is coded metaphorical language, and does not mean that these evil spirits have the appearance of any of these animals; what it provides is a scale by which the shaman can measure the gravity of the fit. A cow-size attack is considered the most severe, and is practically incurable. If a patient, showing some sign of nervous degeneration, is suspected of having come into contact with dragon or thunder fluid, the shaman will identify the dragon's size and abode (pit or pond or lake) according to whether the dragon's skin color is white, black, yellow or red. Some of the most dreadful spirits that the Hmong shaman will unmask as being behind the corresponding symptoms of illness are the "raw-flesh-eater spirits", who, like vampires, suck the life of infants; the "nine-headed devils", who, walk inadvertently on somebody's head, and cause his sudden death; the "mice-like devils" who, running into somebody's head, obsess his mind and vital soul; the *incubus* and *succubus* devils, who induce miscarriages in women and night terrors in men; earth devils, water spirits, noxious vapors, ghosts, nightmares, bad omens and evil spells. Most of this

catalogue originates in folk culture; the shaman merely incorporates this demonology in his analysis. Some highly colorful characters have been more or less borrowed from the Chinese tradition: the Heavenly Dog, who assaults young children; the Red Killer, who bites babies in the shape of an insect; the Puj Ntxoog *Pu Ntzong*, the tiger's companion, who, under the appearance of a long-haired teenage girl, leads the tiger to its prey, etc. More than likely, these characters have become a part of folk tradition through the mediation of the shamans, who are still the authorities on how to deal with them. No further details of this demonology are needed for us to understand that, in the shamanic metaphor, it generally stands for taxonomy of illnesses and symptoms.

Besides these uncontrolled evil powers roaming through the unseen, ready to swoop down on their human prey, the other world is full of deities in control of a specific place or in charge of a particular office: the lord of the village territory, for instance, or the Jade Emperor (Nyuj Vaaj-Yu Huang) in charge of the book wherein the life span of every human being is registered. These functional actors of the supernatural are all listed in the shaman's chant, which is mainly a stereotyped narration of his journey to the Beyond. When, with the assistance of his spirit helpers, he has identified which of his patient's souls is in trouble, the shaman already has half his diagnosis; what he still doesn't know is what exactly happened to it, and, if the soul is gone, where and under whose jurisdiction he will find the missing part of the patient's body image.

**Kev neeb - the Path of the Spirit Helpers - or the shaman's journey in the Beyond.**

His journey through the Beyond at the head of his task force of spirit helpers will answer these questions. This journey, and the paths of the Beyond that the Hmong shaman must take, are a fixed repertoire of places and characters that he needs to investigate in the

course of his breath-taking emergency ride through space on his flying horse "of wind and clouds". The metaphorical space of the Beyond is one which ordinary mortals cannot see. It is a closed space encompassing the human community, one inhabited by a whole range of wild spirits whose attacks induce various specific diseases, and also one with its own protective territorial deities able to help the shaman with information. It is above all a space that opens onto the paths to death and reincarnation. Once this environment has been thoroughly explored and nothing special has been found, the shaman and his spirits rush down the paths of death and reincarnation. There, they meet divinities and encounter places where souls are held in custody or may be hiding. The shaman's account of his metaphorical flight along these traits is organized in a fixed order, a progression corresponding to an increasingly serious and possibly terminal illness.

The search starts with a (mental) grave where the vital soul, dominated by the death wish, has taken refuge. Next to it, in a cavern, the shaman comes to the office of the Jade Emperor, the controller of the book of all destinies, who sends death warrants to those who have exhausted their life span. Further on, there is the house of Yang Seng Ts'eng (Yaaj Xeeb Txheeb du chinois Yangsheng Qing ) and Siong Seng Ts'eng (Xyooj Xeeb Txheeb, Songsheng Qing ), respectively:: the "Pure who feeds life" and the "Pure who sends life" represented as a female deity), that is the pair who controls birth and reincarnation. Further on still, the shaman comes to the Sour Blossom Field of Nzue Nyong (Nxwj Nyoos), the "Cruel Raw", the Hmong vernacular god of death and epidemics. He has a corral where he keeps "reindeer" and "running bull" souls before he kills and eats them. Sometimes, the shaman's troops meet souls that have dodged Nzue Nyong's corral, or are still grazing young tender grass on a "scorched slope". Further on, the shaman's

party comes to the Court of the Master of Inferior Heaven (Xob Theeb Tim Tswm), a place to which the reindeer and bull souls may have been abducted. If they find a soul belonging to their patient, they have to redeem it from the god or recapture it, if the god does not agree to set it free. Finally, even if the patient's souls have already been eaten, the shaman can still send his dragon and eagle spirits to search the pile of bones thrown all around the place and gather those belonging to the souls of his patient. If they can assemble them all in the right order, they can spray them with *kua mua tshua* (kuab muaj tsuag), a magic drug of immortality, and they will mend together, regaining flesh.

This is as far as the "reindeer" and "running bull" souls would wander. If the spirit helpers did not find them by this time, it means that the deadly suffering is actually caused by the vital soul's continuing its journey to reincarnation. The search party then crosses the mountains until, in a narrow pass, they come upon a huge slicer which blocks the way. If a soul can show papers from the Jade Emperor's office proving that its life span is exhausted, it is allowed to cross. If it can provide no such proof, it stays there until the shaman and his spirit helpers come to fetch it. If it has managed to cross the slicer, the shaman and his spirits, who are determined to follow it, have to find a way either to wedge the blade with iron staffs, or climb over it with ladders. On the other side, they can rush down to the *Kong Tong* Bridge, which links this World to the land of the dead. No spirit helper can cross this bridge, because they belong to this world, the world of the living. Only a few shamans dare to undertake an action so bold, crossing alone, after having exchanged their spirit horse for a stretcher, the "horse of the dead". On the other side of the bridge, they will find the missing vital soul by a sweet water pond, the abode of Ngauj Ab, the mother of mankind. If she has already washed the soul, and it has lost all memory of its past

links with family and friends, it is ready for rebirth to a new life: death is irrevocable, and the shaman's patient is already pronounced dead by the time the shaman and his troops return from their journey. Here, as in many cultures of the Chinese world, memory is acknowledged as the ultimate shield of the self. If it has not been washed yet, then the shaman negotiates the soul's safe return to this World and life.

"Travelling through a landscape both physical and metaphorical", to quote Desjarlais (1989)<sup>7</sup>, the Hmong shaman plays with burning symbols. Characteristic of this Hmong journey to the beginning and end of all life is that the shamanic metaphor is explicitly symbolic of the Ego's wounds. Suffering and sickness are always the result of external aggression by the supernatural agents of disease and decay, or/and of an internal disintegration when a part of our self, a soul, "does not like us anymore" and quits. In this metaphor, health and life emerge as only guest soul of our body. They will survive us. In order to save the self, the (H)mong shaman has to heal, clean and restore all its defective parts, and to arrest and expel the image of our own death which we are all consciously or subconsciously nurturing. If his intervention comes late in serious or desperate cases, this image is also shared by the members of the family, who unconsciously put social pressure on the patient to hasten the fatal ending which they reasonably expect. In his quest to save his patient's life, the shaman has to do away with this collective premonition. That is why, between Nzue Nyong's corral and the *Kong Tong* Bridge to the land of the dead, there is a short way which leads straight to this bridge: it is to the right of the other, across the highest mountains. Along this path, the search party comes upon the rhawm nyaaj rhawm kub

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<sup>7</sup> Desjarlais ; Robert R. 1989. Healing through Images: the Magical Flight and Healing Geography of Nepali Shamans. *Ethos* 17, N.2. 289-307

“Jar of silver and gold”, in fact the "Jar of tears and cries", those which the family will shed when the patient is pronounced dead. If somebody is about to die, the shaman will find that it is full to the brim. His intervention is to try to empty the jar, or to close it with a big stone, thus preventing its overflowing. A similar action is undertaken when the search party comes to the Vale of Hemp further on. In folk culture, hemp is used to make the bandage with which the dead is tightly tied to prevent a swollen body from exploding in the course of funerary ceremonies lasting a minimum of three nights and three days. When the shaman and his party arrive at the Vale of Hemp, and find that the hemp is high, they will pull up as much of it as they can. Here again, they try to drive back an image of imminent death, before rushing to the *Kong Tong* Bridge in the hope of catching the vital soul in time.

The (H)mong shaman's journey is a fixed repertoire embedded in the matrix of the shaman's chant. The shaman listens as much as he sings. Visual and auditory images come to him from his own voice, but, at some point, it is disguised as the voice of his seer-spirit who is supposed to narrate the action to him. *This voice* supports and guides his trance, enabling him to carry out a systematic investigation of his patient. This seer-spirit, named *leej ngaub* "clear-sighted", is the shaman's eyes in the unseen where the shaman, like any ordinary human being, cannot see by himself. He listens to his seer-spirit's narration and simultaneously visualizes the action "as in a dream". But he is not a possessed medium, despite this splitting of his personality. What is more, the trance is induced by yet another spirit: *txheej xeeb*, the "spirit of the trance". Both spirits remain permanently at the shaman's side, unlike the other spirit helpers who have to be summoned before each

performance.

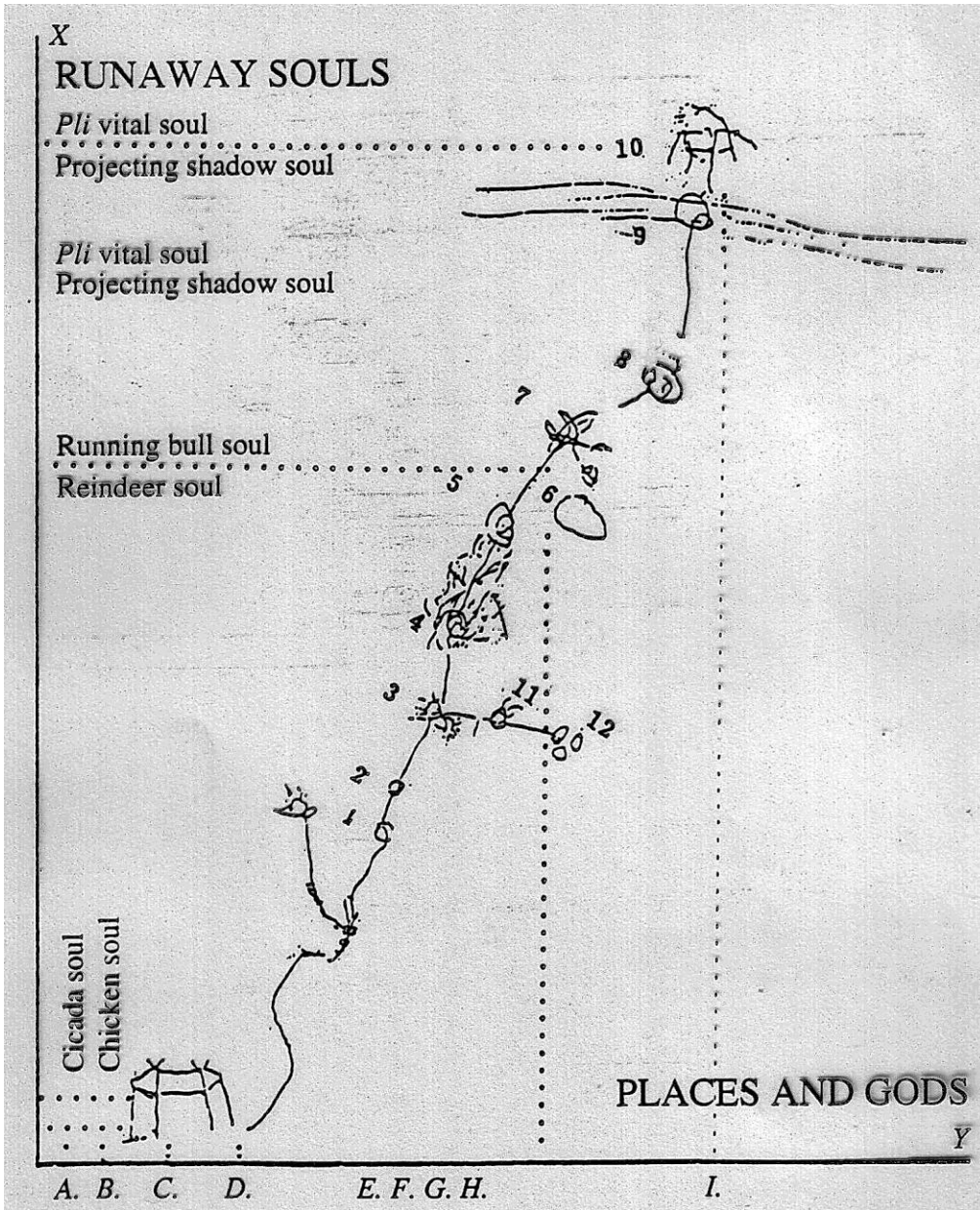


Fig. 3. The shamanic equation embedded in the Hmong shaman's journey. Drawing from Chang Yia, a Hmong shaman, disciple of Tsu Yob. The linear equation frame has been added by the author. A. Sea (water streams, ponds, etc.); B. Grave; C. House and garden, D. Forest; E. The Jade Emperor (Nyu Vang); F. Yang Seng Ts'eng; G. Siong Seng Ts'eng; H. Nzue Nyong's sour blossom field... etc.; I. Ngo A.

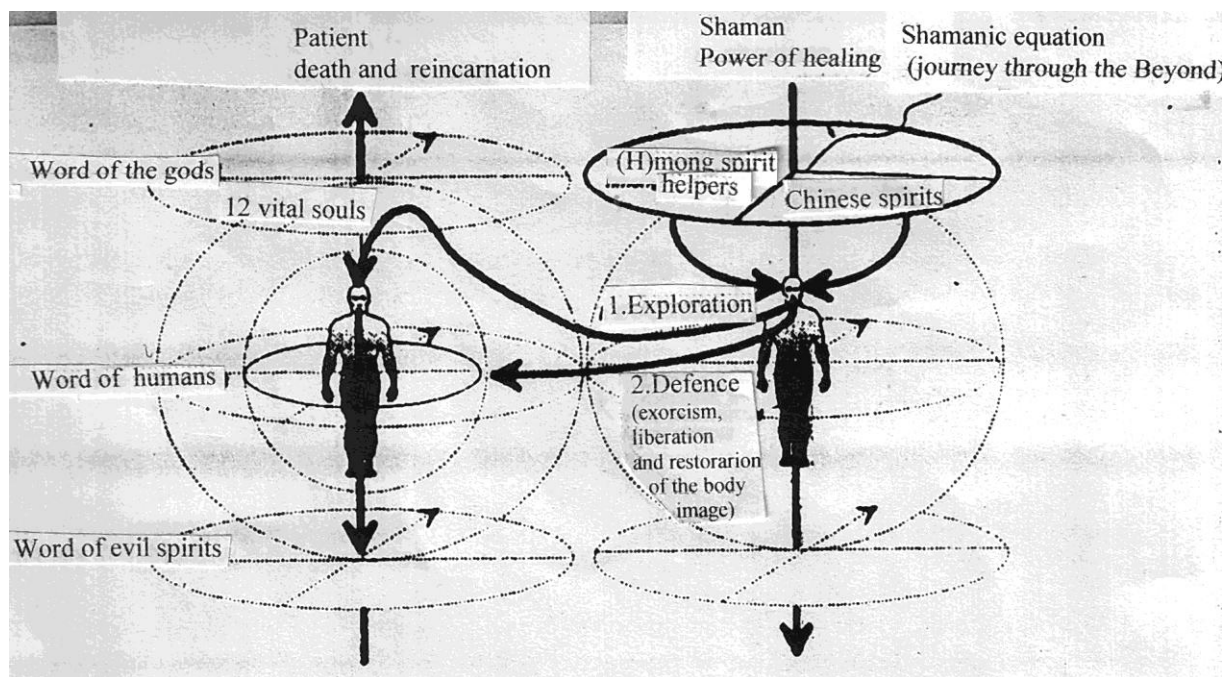
The various parameters of the shaman's journey can be ordered along two axes: the analysis of his patient's self into 12 different souls; and simultaneously, the systematic checking of the places where one of these souls is possibly in trouble, maybe in the hands of supernatural agents. The journey, which provides all the possible answers in serial and progressive order, is the symbolic tool of the shaman's thinking. At some point, he will find the inspiration which he has been looking for, and try to solve his patient's problem from inside the metaphor into which he has inserted himself. If he has been well inspired (that is: informed) by his spirit helpers, the diagnosis brought back will be congruent with his patient's illness, and the latter will start recovering.

Because there are only two unknowns - the part of his patient's self that is to be restored, and the place and agency whence it is to be rescued - I have documented the Hmong shaman's search in a linear "shamanic equation" (*Fig. 3*); the shaman's path is nothing more than the graphic representation of this equation in space. It will be clear from now on why it is so important for a Hmong shaman, in a trance, to sing out the details of his journey precisely and in their entirety, for the journey serves as the guidelines for his examination of his patient in the unseen.

**(H)mong shamans' use of their healing power.**

Let us now consider the cognitive process involved in the use of a (H)mong shaman's healing power. At the end of the Journey through the Beyond, the shaman has diagnosed the cause of his patient's disease and undertaken some provisional repairing of his state. Having built his own sphere of power with his spirit helpers, he has added to it the essential cognitive tool of the Journey through the Beyond that gives him a way of solving his patient's problem. In order to make it work he has, through the examination of his patient's vital souls in the

course of the shamanic equation, construed a sphere of suffering, where his patient is locked up in the solitary confinement that is the anteroom of death. Both his healing power sphere and his patient's suffering sphere are opposed during the journey until the sphere of healing by the strength of its cognitive tools finally penetrates the sphere of suffering and controls it. The seclusion of the patient ends and it will remain for the shaman to restore his patient's body image. This cognitive action can be best shown in the following graph:



*Fig.4* Communication and intervention of the shaman's power sphere in respect to his patient's sphere of suffering. The (H)mong shaman uses his three sets of cognitive tools: the two registers of (H)mong and Chinese spirit helpers and the handling of the shamanic equation in order to diagnose the disease, retrieving his patient's lost souls, expelling the illnesses agents and reconstructing his body image.

Confronted to the disintegration of the body image -- the first step in the direction of the ultimate disintegration of the body after death -- the aim of the Mong shaman's ritual of curing (ua neeb khu) that is performed once the patient is

relieved is to restore this body image in re-enacting in the conspicuous world the process the shaman has followed in the unseen. In the curing performance, the patient and his family usually take part in the action. The shaman's successful diagnosis in the unseen is re-enacted in front of the household's members; the sacrificed pigs, chicken, goats and dogs are real and their blood is used to add their living souls' energy to that of the patient or to build a live fence around him and his family.

The curing rituals have been more popularly known because of the visibility of the shaman's action. However, the true cognitive performance lays in his exploration of the unseen along the way of his spirit helpers when he succeeds in controlling the sphere of suffering where his patient is secluded.

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Dr. Jacques Lemoine has conducted anthropological fieldwork with the Hmong/Mong, Yao Mien and Yao Mun; Lue; Tai Dam; and secondarily, with Tai-Kadai and other Chinese ethnic groups in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Southern China since 1960. From 1965 through 2002, he served as a Research Officer for the French National Centre of Scientific Research. He is a Founder and former Director of the Centre for the Anthropology of South China and the Indochinese Peninsula. He has also served as Visiting Professor at the Department of Anthropology of the Chinese University of Hong Kong; Vice-President and President of the International Association for Yao Studies, Anthropological Adviser and Coordinator of the joint research project: "Ethnographic Data Bank of Laos", at the Institute for Cultural Research and the National Academy for Social Sciences, Vientiane, Lao P.D.R.; and researcher and consultant for several UNESCO projects on HIV-AIDS vulnerability and trafficking among different ethnic groups (including the Hmong) in Lao P.D.R. Dr. Lemoine has published several books and numerous research papers related to Hmong and Mong culture and shamanism as well as the cultures of other minority ethnic groups in Southeast Asia and China.

