

RITUALS, ROLES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES INCLUDED IN A  
HMONG FUNERAL: A GUIDEBOOK FOR TEACHERS TO  
BETTER UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS THEIR  
HMONG STUDENTS EXPERIENCE IN A  
TIME OF FAMILY LOSS

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A Project

Presented

to the Faculty of

California State University, Chico

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Education

Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Learners Option

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by

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Fall 2009

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## DEDICATION

First of all, I would like to dedicate this project to my dear wife Kim Yang for her endearing love, financial support, and moral encouragement after all these years. Without her continuing support, this project would not have been a reality. My words alone cannot fully express my deepest gratitude for her loving and kindness.

Secondly, I would like to dedicate this project to my children: Marissa Mos Lee, Jessica Kab Lee, Kyle Khais Lee, Joyce Ntsuab Lee, Dorothy Dawb Lee, and Corey Kob Lee. We did it! This project is my reminder to you all to strive for the top; you all have the potentials and you all can fulfill them. It may have seemed selfish on my part because you all were neglected, but in actuality, I did it with all of you in my heart; whether it was day or night, in happy moments or sad times, and loneliness. Without you, I would not have gone this far.

Thirdly, this project would not have been possible without the valuable lessons, love, and support of my parents. Without them, I would not have the energy and motivation to move toward this goal. They brought me up to this world and sacrificed everything by coming to the U.S. for educational opportunities; this is one of their greatest gifts. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my four brothers: Cha, Lue, Vue, and especially Willie Yeng Lee, who is not only a role model but an inspiration, and a motivator in what seems to be an endless journey. I also want to thank my two humbled older sisters' for their trusts, which empowered me toward this endeavors. I also would

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ABSTRACT

RITUALS, ROLES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES INCLUDED IN A  
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The number of Hmong families in Butte County has increased in recent years, which has resulted in an increase of Hmong students attending local schools. However, the community at large is still unfamiliar with the Hmong culture, especially the funeral ritual. When there is a loss in the family, the students need to take time off from schools or related activities. Without knowing these students' family background and cultural custom, teachers and school staff often do not understand their students' roles in the grieving process during this time of loss.

In the Hmong culture, the funeral ritual is a very important event. During this time of passing, all family members, including children are expected to participate. It is important that the Hmong students take time off from school functions to honor their parents' tradition, pay respect to the deceased, and offer condolences to immediate family members. However, as a member in the Hmong community, I have observed students take lengthy absences from school to participate in these funerary rituals, which have raised many concerns from teachers and school staff. This project is an attempt to explain students' roles and responsibilities during the funeral rituals. At the end of this project, there are several recommendations teachers and school staff could utilize when they are confronted in these situations.

## CHAPTER I

### OVERVIEW

#### Introduction

The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 marked a period of trauma, confusion, and culture shock for many Hmong families as they traveled from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century within a 24-hour flight (Fadiman, 1997, p. 135; Falk, 1992; Lee, 1986). While it was the beginning of new dreams for the able-bodied refugees who made it to Thai refugee camps or resettled in Thailand as political refugees, it meant that many had to leave their loved ones (Fadiman, 1997, p. 186). Shortly after their arrival in the camps, many refugees had to make the difficult decision to resettle again. With an overnight flight, many of these displaced Hmong refugee immigrants traveled to the United States and many parts of the world, and were introduced to modern technologies and crowded into apartment complexes (Fadiman, 1997, p. 198). Some Hmong refugees obtained employment shortly after their arrival. For many of them, America was a dream come true; but for others, the transition was anything but smooth because they left every imaginable possession behind.

Many Hmong refugees fled Laos after 1975 and resettled in the United States, France, Canada, French Guyana, Australia, and other parts of the world (Fadiman, 1997, p. 167; Falk, 1992). The new countries might have been a haven for many Hmong families, but for most, resettlement was a test of endurance on how to retain their unique

cultural identity while assimilating into a new society. This difficulty has been especially true for the Hmong regarding whether they can retain their parents' and ancestor's traditional funeral practice. To the Hmong, there are many aspects of culture identification, and the funeral ritual is the most important. According to Her, Hmong religion is a western concept, where they "place emphasis on practice as on beliefs" (2005, p. 2). However, the Hmong people place more emphasis on "household rituals, which focus on what they do...in their homes", and is "different from region to region, community to community, and clan to clan" (2005, p. 2).

Hmong religion is confined to the ritual they practiced for generations through oral tradition from elders. Today, as much as they want to assimilate into the American society, they must adhere to their elders' way and retain their funeral ritual practices. The Hmong culture is as complex as their history, and learning about their way of life during a time of loss is a good start. It is difficult to predict what the future holds for the Hmong tradition, but to learn their culture requires one to understand their funeral practices.

### Background

The Hmong people are an agrarian ethnic minority indigenous group (Falk, 1992). The Hmong originally migrated from China in the 1800s to escape Chinese oppression and search for fertile slash-and-burn soil. They settled in Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and Thailand (Fadiman, 1997, p. 17; Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 81; Thao, 2006). After many years under French rule, the Vietnamese defeated the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu and forced the French from Indochina in 1954 (Lee, 1990, p. 4; Fadima, 1997, p. 124). The United States covertly entered Laos and took over the role

with the intent to prevent the spread of Communist influence in the region (Lee, 1990). To help the U.S. intelligence and advisors in the rough terrains of Laos, Hmong men were recruited as secret fighters to cut off the North Vietnamese advance along the Lao-Vietnam border and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which extended well into Laos (Fadima, 1997, p. 125).

The fighting in Indochina from 1962-1975 resulted in countless Hmong casualties, estimated at anywhere from 12,000 to 35,000 (Lee, 1990, p. 10). During the 1960s, the population of Hmong living in Laos numbered more than 300,000, but nearly 50,000 Hmong secret fighters and civilians died in the conflict (Fadiman, 1997, pp. 132, 159). After an agreement ended the war in 1975, the United States withdrew from Laos and left thousands of Hmong fighters and their families behind enemy lines; many fled Laos fearing political reprisal and resettled in Thai refugee camps (Lee, 1990, p. 12). During the exodus, countless families and people lost their lives and loved ones as thousands of Hmong families fled Laos by crossing the Mekong River into Thailand to settle in refugee shelters. While in the Thai camps, many Hmong sought resettlement in other countries such as the United States, and many families quickly jumped at the opportunity whenever the host country could issue clearance. Many families moved out to avoid potential persecution and the harsh conditions in the camps (Lee, 1990). Many reluctantly stayed in the camp and held on to the slight hope of returning to Laos someday (Fadiman, 1997, p. 72).

With an overnight flight, Hmong families literally took a giant leap from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and “crash landed into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” (Fadiman, 1997, p. 135), ending up in cities with unimaginable technological advances, skyscrapers, and wide-open

roadways with speeding cars (Falk, 1992; Lee, 1986). The majority of families were sponsored by church groups, scattered throughout different parts of the United States and all over the world, such as France, Canada, Australia, Argentina, and French Guyana (Fadiman, 1997, p. 167; Lee, 1990, p. 13). Many refugees also immigrated to Germany and China, while some returned to Laos. For those who immigrated to the United States and other countries, many families experienced tremendous culture shock: transitioning from cooking in mud stoves to switching on a button for cooking; from burning wood to turning on a button for heat (Falk, 1992). Initially, many families struggled. However, many others made great strides, transitioning from their nomadic lifestyle to working on assembly lines (Fadiman, 1997). Many parents assumed the role of students where the majority had never held a pencil or could not read, fitting a common Hmong metaphor, *nyeem tsis tau tug ntawv luaj twm* (“can’t read letters as big as oxen”), to graduating from prestigious institutions with advanced degrees.

From these great advancements in educational opportunities, careers, personal growth, and forming community organizations since arriving in the 1970s, one thing remained intact, though slightly modified – the Hmong funeral ritual. The overall Hmong funeral practices have been largely preserved as parents and grandparents orally passed on significant practices from one generation to another: the roles people play and responsibilities of the individuals involved.

#### Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to make a detailed observation of traditional Hmong funeral rituals, provide accounts of the process, and present my experiences to

peoples of other cultural background so that they become aware of the rituals, roles, and responsibilities during a time of loss. In addition, as a result from the findings, this project will serve as a guidebook for teachers to better understand their Hmong students' grieving process during a time of family loss. From my experience, it is common that many Hmong students take time away from school functions to honor their parents' tradition, pay respect to the deceased, and offer condolences to immediate family members. As a member in the Hmong community, I also observed students take lengthy absences to honor and pay respect to these funerary rituals. This has raised many legitimate concerns from teachers and school staff. This project is an attempt to explain the significant roles their Hmong students have during funeral rituals.

#### Significance of this Study

The Hmong funeral ritual is the most important event in the Hmong culture (Falk, 1992). This tradition goes back thousands of years (Thao, 2006), but has recently surfaced in the United States within the last three decades. The funeral ritual is an important tradition to the Hmong. Even though other cultures considered death as the end of life, it is considered the beginning of a new one in Hmong culture. Although it is not universal, there is a common belief that after a person dies, the soul is reincarnated through a series of traditional rituals (Lee, 1985). Like most cultures, Hmong funeral rituals strive to fulfill certain obligations. The family's primary desire is for the deceased to receive a proper burial that will ensure "health, safety, and prosperity for the deceased and descendants" (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 83). Family members and relatives must hold the ritual in a way that does not offend the surviving descendants and

spirits of the deceased. The responsibilities of the family and the roles of each member are carefully carried out during this process.

#### Limitations of this Project

Since the issues in this project mostly impact students in the Western schools, the majority of discussion on this research is focused on Hmong funeral practices in the United States. A brief explanation between traditional rituals and contemporary practices is needed to point out subtle differences between the two practices as well as the two dialects of the White and Green Hmong. These differences between the traditional and contemporary practices are that the former continues to value the ritual as their elders' had done in Thailand or Laos, while the latter is slightly modified. Today, traditional funeral rituals have been modified due largely to local ordinances and availability of facilities. Another difference is that today's contemporary funerals have adapted to Western rituals where some Hmong have converted to Christianity.

There are slight variations between the Green and White Hmong funeral rituals. However, the difference is insignificant as the ritual itself is always done with respect and honor to the deceased and descendants in both groups. The most significant difference between the Green and White Hmong is the dialect.

The goal of this project is to explain the traditional rituals and potential effects on students in public schools. Given the wide cultural variations and differing household practices, I must admit that this finding and observation only reflects one interpretation—the author of this thesis. Therefore, any omission of descriptive or inclusive details should not be accepted as a comprehensive account of all Hmong funeral rituals.

## Terms and Definition

### Descendant Counselor (1) (Sawv Qabntees)

The Descendant Counselor is an important figure in the Hmong funeral ritual and is well versed in the songs that are sung to the deceased and surviving descendants the night before the burial. This person may be selected from the funeral directors but sometimes is picked separately. He is compensated for his singing, which gives blessing to surviving family members. His service is usually not needed when the deceased is young and the funeral is not as elaborate (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87).

### Elder Funeral Director (1) (Thawj Xyomcuab)

This person is selected from the same clan or sub-clan, and his primary responsibilities includes coordinating all funeral functions, such as organizing daily operations of the funeral and dealing with internal issues. He also coordinates various financial related roles (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87). The Elder Funeral Director must work alongside the Funeral Director to resolve any disputes during the ritual.

### Food Offerer (1) (Cuabtsav)

This person is selected from the same clan or sub-clan (but from a different lineage) and holds the same rank as the deceased. At each offering, whether it is an animal that had been sacrificed or a meal, he uses split bamboo sticks to communicate with the deceased. While accepting the offer and departing from this life, the deceased is asked to give blessings to the descendants. For his service, the Food Offerer is offered a cow to slaughter as gesture (Her, 2005, p. 4).

Funeral Directors/Chairperson (2-4)  
(Kavxwm)

Individuals who have studied the songs, learned the functions of the funeral rituals, and help settle internal disputes amongst the surviving sons, daughters-in-laws, clan members, and external clans. External issues involving in-laws who have had disagreements with the deceased are resolved by the directors. The directors oversee the monetary contributions, slaughter of cows, distribution of meat, and assignment of tasks to ensure the success of the funeral ritual (Her, 2005, p. 4; Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87).

God (Yawm Saub)

God exists in the Hmong tradition, but only as a creator of human life on earth. His existence is obsolete in the Hmong tradition as they worship the spirits of their ancestors.

House Cleaner (1) (Tu Vajtse)

This role is needed in the contemporary funeral rituals as today's funerals are held in churches and the house cleaner is needed to pick up trash around the premise and empty trash bins.

House spirits (dab vajtsev)

Hmong tradition holds that houses are filled with spirits that protect the family and its members (Her, 2005, p. 11).

Life Realm (Saum Yaj)

This realm is where humans reside. This belief exists only in the imagination as no one has actually experienced it.

Meat Preparers (4) (Tshwjkab)

These individuals are selected from the community by the funeral directors who feel they are best able to prepare the meat, cook, and serve the food at the funeral home or at the deceased person's home (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 88). They are the hardest workers, always keeping meat in order, and cooking for the next meal.

Money Handler (1-2) (Tub tuavnyiaj)

This person is appointed by the immediate family to keep track of donations from community members and guests during the funeral. He monitors the flow of donations by keeping an accurate record of the monies.

Presider (Xeevtxwj)

This person is selected by the funeral directors during the table proceedings to preside over financial matters. Any debts owed by the deceased must be paid by the surviving descendants, and debts owed to the deceased must be paid (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 88).

Qheng and Drum Players (2-4) (Txivqeej/  
Txivnruas)

The numbers of selected individuals may vary depending on the age of the deceased. The older the deceased, the more qheng players are needed since this demands that more songs be played throughout the funeral. These selected qheng players may ask their protégés or qheng players-in-training to help play the songs. Drum players are not selected; only qheng players are, since qheng players are also experts in playing the drum. The qheng player and drummer alternate on playing the qheng and beating on the drum (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 86).

Rice Preparers (4) (Niam Ua Mov)

These are normally women who are selected by the funeral directors to cook the rice, which is usually served three times a day to guests and family members.

Satan (Ntxwg nyug)

He is believed to cause discontent and death in the Hmong tradition. His existence is only present in thoughts.

Shaman (txivneeb/Sivyis)

Spiritual healer whose role is held in high regard and performs trances (Fadiman, 1997, pp. 283-287; Her, 2005, p. 9). The Hmong community also believes a spiritual healer is able to communicate with the spirit world for healing purposes (Vangseng, 1995, p. 5).

Song Chanter (1) (Txivnkauj)

This person is someone who knows the songs, or *nkauj*, and sings during significant songs offering animal sacrifices or offering meal to the soul of the deceased. A deceased person who is older typically requires one on standby at all times.

Soul Guide (1) (Tawkev/Qhuabke)

This person must initiate the funeral on the first day, chanting the song, leading the soul of the deceased to his/her place of birth and to join the ancestor's spirits. This person uses a split bamboo stick to communicate with the soul of the deceased and lead the soul in a safe journey (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 86).

### Soul/Spirit Calling (hu plig)

This ceremony is to call a person's soul back. There are several levels or types of soul calling; it is done when a person is startled or frightened and the shaman is needed to call the soul for its return (Fadiman, 1997, pp. 9, 287; Her, 2005, p. 6).

### Spirit Realm (dabteb)

Hmong people believe there is another dimension full of evil spirits (Her, 2005, p. 5). This realm equates to Hell in Christianity.

### Stretcher (1) (Txivtxiag)

This person is responsible for making the casket in the traditional funerals but is not needed in the contemporary funeral rituals since the casket is made commercially. A small stretcher is made to symbolize a horse (Falk, 1992; Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87).

### Warrior (1) (Txiv ntausrog)

This person is appointed by the family members. This person is only needed in the White Hmong funeral rituals. His role symbolizes a Hmong army battling Chinese soldiers. The Green Hmong do not need this person because it is believed that they left China before these battles took place. It is believed that the White Hmong left China later (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87).

### Water Gatherer (1) (Ris Dej)

This role is not needed in today's funerals because water is readily available. In the traditional funeral rituals, this person was needed to get water from streams or wells for cooking and cleaning (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 88).

### Wood Gatherer (1) (Ris Taws)

This role is also not needed as wood is readily available. In the traditional funeral, he was needed to gather wood from the forest for heating and cooking (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 88).

### Organization of the Rest of the Project

This project is organized in chapters, starting with a brief historical description and background of the Hmong people, the purpose of this study, limitations of this research, and relevant terms and definition. Chapter II looked at the literature used to make this project a reality. These sources provide a clear understanding of the Hmong culture, clan structure, and views of the cosmology, type of spirits in the home, grieving process, and important topics discussed. In addition, reincarnation is an important topic in the Hmong culture and is discussed here. Chapter III takes us to a funeral from the view of a person who participated in the ritual and provides an in-depth understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the directors and family members.

Chapter IV contains the central theme of this project: children's participation in the funeral custom, their roles, what is expected of them, and what they hope to receive from this participation. Another important aspect of this project is discussed in Chapter V, which answers questions central to teachers' and school staff's concerns. This section provides suggestions and offers implications for concerned administrators. Chapter VI offers some recommendations for practitioners and researchers.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The funeral practice is one of the most important rituals in the Hmong culture (Falk, 1992). The Hmong people believe that death is the end of a life cycle for one and the beginning for another. It is believed that when one person dies, either a young or an elderly person, another life is reborn or reincarnated (Lee, 1985). As in most cultures, the Hmong funeral ritual strives to fulfill the family's desire for the deceased to receive a proper burial. As Fadiman quoted, "...anyone who is not accorded the proper funerary rites...is doomed to an eternity of restless wandering" (1997, p. 163). It is the belief that any Hmong who dies without getting the proper funeral will be a wanderer without finding the ancestors. The immediate family members and relatives must perform the ritual in a way that will not offend the surviving family members or the deceased. These responsibilities rest on the family and the roles each member plays are essential throughout the funeral process. These practices date back hundreds of years, having survived through many generations, and have recently been brought to the United States by refugees since the late 1970s. Today, the intensity and demands for close adherence to custom are still strongly ingrained even in the new generations living in America.

## Hmong Culture

To know the Hmong people, it is important to know their culture, particularly their religion, family structure, and individual responsibilities during ceremonial events, especially the funeral ritual. As the Hmong assimilated into the mainstream, the culture also adapted. Today, there are two different religious practices in the Hmong community: the traditional practices and contemporary rituals. The earlier waves of refugees started arriving in the United States in 1975, with the majority of them practicing the traditional funeral ritual. Today, some contemporary practices have been converted to Christianity or other religions (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 97). There are fundamental differences between the two. Funeral rituals for the non-converted Hmong are more elaborate and require animal sacrifices. Funerals for those who are Christianized do not make sacrifice offerings to the deceased. The ultimate goal of souls in traditional funerals is to be reincarnated, while the spirits of those who are Christianized is to be with God rather than being reborn (Irish et al., 1993, p. 97).

The Hmong typically do not have an identifiable religious belief; however, the majority has continued to practice Animism (known by Westerners as “pantheism”) a belief that every living thing has a spirit or soul (Her, 2005, p. 2). Vangseng stated that Animism “is the belief that all things, as well as living creatures, have souls or spirits in them” (1995, p. 4). While animism is the belief, the Hmong have worshipped their ancestral spirits and honor the souls of the deceased for generations (Falk, 1992; Lee, 1985). Each year, when Hmong families celebrate the New Year, they invite their ancestral spirits to join in the feast. This belief assures them of protection, prosperity, good health, and “brings fortune to families” (Fadiman, 1997, p. 174; Lee, 1985).

According to Her, the Hmong do not have a religion; it is their “household rituals” that were taken into context by Westerners as a belief (2005, p. 2). The Hmong believe believe that their “ancestors’ spirits reside in the home” with the family (Her, 2005, p. 4; Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 82). Lee (1986) stated that, “ancestral spirits are no more than ‘a projection of the authority system of the living – the lineage elders elevated to a supernatural plane.’” This is a belief that maintains family balance and functions that assure harmony with oneself and the natural surroundings. For example, for practical purposes, whenever my father hunts, he offers food to the spirits to join in at lunch. This is done to assure his hunting success and provide guidance in a time of distress (Pachor Lee, personal communication, April 12, 2008).

As important as the funeral ritual is to the Hmong, talking about death is not discussed in the home (Fadiman, 1997, p. 177; Falk, 1992). By openly discussing the subject, “foretelling death” or “preplan funeral precipitates death in the family,” and it is believed to bring bad luck or disharmony among the household spirits and upset household guardians (Fadiman, 1997, p. 177; Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 84). These house spirits (*dab vajtse*) protect the home and ward off evil spirits. If the house spirits leave the home, family members’ souls are vulnerable to evil spirits and causes illness and discontent in the home. This period may be viewed as evil souls (*ntxwg nyug*) had entered and influenced the house spirits.

According to Her, “a person has three souls”, which can “live inside or outside of a person’s body” (2005, p. 6). When a person become sick, it is believed that the soul is no longer attached to the person’s body and has been “forcibly separated” from a person’s body (Her, 2005, p. 6). When this happens, illness occurs, and if remains

untreated death may occur. When a person becomes ill, a family may summon a shaman (*txivneeb*) to perform a soul calling (*hu plig*) to restore the soul to a person's body (Fadiman, 1997, p. 9). There are several kinds of soul calling (Pachor Lee, personal communication, April 12, 2008):

1. New born (*hu plig menyuam tshiab*)
2. New Year (*hu plig xyoo tshiab*)
3. Lost soul (*poob plig*)
  - a) Soul startled and wandered off (*ceeb*)
  - b) Soul lost from lengthy illness/paleness (*plig tsa thwv*)
  - c) Person's annual soul calling (*plig cawv xeeb*)

Of these soul calling ceremonies, a newborn's birth is done to welcome the new baby's spirit to the home and join in the family lineage. Each year, during the New Year, a celebration is done to call the ancestral spirits to join in the feast and asked to protect the family and bring prosperity in the upcoming year (Xiong, 2004, p. 4). The most common soul calling ceremony is done when someone is suffering from an illness and the ceremony is done to restore the health of the person. The last two soul callings are reserved mostly for special occasions, such as an elder or the oldest son; this soul calling is needed for him<sup>1</sup> in alternating years (Pachor Lee, personal communication, April 12, 2008).

If soul calling is unsuccessful in making a person well, a shaman is called upon to perform a trance. The trance is a detailed ceremony where the family agrees to

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<sup>1</sup> This is reserved for the oldest son, usually to ensure his well-being. It is commonly done in alternating year.

summon a shaman to use a pig as sacrifice and allowing him/her to journey to the spirit realm using the pig's soul as gift in exchange for the release of a person's soul. Anne Fadiman described the trance as "while riding his wooden shaman's bench, an embodiment of the winged horse that carried him in search of wandering souls" (1997, p. 96) and barter with the evil spirit to restore the soul's safe return to the body. The common misconception about shaman's performance is that opium must be consumed before initiating the trance (Fadiman, 1997, p. 122). As someone who has known a shaman for over forty years, I have never seen my father smoke opium before initiating a trance. It is customary that the shaman only performs the trance when called upon, and it is only done at the request of the family. The same or another shaman may be summoned to perform other kinds of trance.

According to Pachor Lee, who has been a shaman since his late teens, there are at least eight kinds or levels of trances, each requiring different animal(s) sacrificed (Pachor Lee, personal communication, April 12, 2008). Table 1 indicates the levels of trances and types of animals used. Each kind of trance does not necessarily mean its difficulty but its frequency. The second level is the most common of these trances, which may be done weekly in the community. The third level is done at the request of young couples who are unable to conceive children. The Hmong believe that after this trance, where the shaman extends a symbolic bridge to the other realm, the couple could potentially conceive and have children. (Of all these trances, Pachor Lee has done all except the last type, which he has seen, but not mastered nor performed.) Among these trances, the second level is most commonly performed. It requires the shaman to bargain

Table 1

*Levels of Trance and Animals Used*

Type/Level	Animals sacrifice
Level 1: Prognostic trance (neeb saib)	none
Level 2: Trance healing	
a. Simple healing (kho ntsuj)	pig (up to 2)
b. Extension of life (fab laj)	2 pigs
Level 3: Trance giving offspring (tuam choj)	1 pig
Level 4: Trance to exile evil spirit (xa vij xa swv)	2 pigs
Level 5: Trance banning taboos (nphau ntees)	2 pigs
Level 6: Trance to invite spirit for ancestral offering (tos plig)	none
Level 7: Trance releasing souls of animals at New Year (tso qhua/tos qhua)	1 pig/3 chickens
Level 8: Trance using dog's soul (neeb hu dev plig)	pig/1 dog

with the Spirit Realm (*dab teb*) and return the lost souls to Life Realm (*saum yaj*). From the third to sixth level, these are the least common trances performed).

In return for the shaman's service, it is common tradition to give the shaman the head of the pig along with one front leg as appreciation. Sometimes a small monetary fee is requested. If it is a spirit that has caused the person illness, the person will be cured after the trance and can expect improvement. It is commonly believe that if the shaman is unsuccessful, the person's condition may deteriorate and die. During the illness, the

family may seek traditional healing methods, such as “cupping, coining,” traditional herbs or Western treatment (Vang, 2002, p. 23). Since there might be several treatments occurring simultaneously, it is difficult to determine and evaluate which method actually cures the illness.

These traditional practices often conflicts between the elders and youth. For the elders, it is considered normal for a person to become well shortly after a trance or ceremony. However, younger generations view the outcome as a coincidence, and some are beginning to reject the traditional beliefs and practices. Although more studies are needed to conclude whether it is a valid debate, it may be an important area of interest to determine whether generational gap are contributing to the many family conflicts.

### Clan

Today, there are officially 18 clans in the Hmong community. “A clan is a group of people bond together through birth or adoption by a shared surname, but with few or no other identifications.... members of a clan who can trace descendants to a known ancestor are said to belong to a lineage” (Lee, 1985; Saykao, 1997a). Each clan has sub clans. For example, throughout the United States, there are many Lee clans; however, a person having the same last name might be from different ancestral lineage. The closer the lineage, the more related the members, and the ability to identify their ancestral parents or grandparents, whether it be from three or four generations. The closer two or three persons are, the more similar their funeral ritual practices. When a person dies, only those who are related can die in one another’s home (Lee, 1985; Saykao, 1997a). If one unrelated member were to die in another clan’s home, it is required that the

deceased's surviving family members offer an animal to the other family to cleanse themselves from sickness or death. Each clan or sub clan having the same last name cannot marry each other (Saykao, 1997b). To determine if two persons are related, it is common to engage in a conversation with another person at ceremonial gatherings to discover if people are related, whether by blood or by marriage, or from an extended family member. For example, since my mother is from the Cha clan, it is possible to link another Cha to my mother's brothers.

It is a taboo (Fadiman, 1997, p. 8) to marry within your clan or sub clan, although some inter-clan marriages have occurred. Only intra-clan marriage is acceptable. For someone who has breached this tradition, the couple is shunned. For example, a Lee person marrying a Yang, or vice versa, is okay, but not a Yang marrying another Yang, regardless of how distant the lineage is. Laos is a small country, traveling is limited on foot, but a person may start a conversation with another person and find out that they have some relatives marrying one another or their parents and uncles' in-laws are related. Conversing with distant relatives may provide enough information about the person to determine the person's generation or rank (*phaj*). If you are from a higher rank, you have more authority or command more respect. If a person is separated from his immediate family lineage for a long time, he may lose contact with them. Again, there are officially 18 clan names, but other clans have split from larger groups:

1. Cha/Chang (Tsab)
2. Cheng (Tsheej)
3. Chue (Tswb) (from Cha)
4. Fang (Faj) (from Vang)

5. Hang (Ham)
6. Her/Herr/Heu (Hawj)
7. Khang (Khab) (from Kue)
8. Kong/Soung (Koo)
9. Kue (Kwm)
10. Lee/Ly (Lis)
11. Lo/Lor/Lao (Lauj)
12. Moua/Mua (Muas)
13. Phang (Phab) (from Lo/Lor)
14. Thao (Thoj)
15. Vang (Vaj)
16. Vue (Vwj)
17. Xiong/Song (Xyooj)
18. Yang (Yaj)

### Hmong Cosmology

There are many views on cosmology throughout the world. In the Hmong view, Vincent Her described his model of the cosmology as similar to that of a home structure (2005, p. 5). The home consists of many spiritual guardians residing with their inhabitants, protecting them against evil spirits. In Her's view, cosmology is divided into three realms: Upper, Earth, and Spirit (2005, p. 7). In the Upper realm resides an almighty figure, similar to that of God (*Yawm Saub*) in the Western view (2005, p. 7). However, the Hmong do not worship this figure, only acknowledging its existence, while

worshipping their ancestral spirits (2005, p. 7). The Earth realm is the existence of human beings. Rebirth or reincarnation takes place between these two realms (2005, p. 7). The Spirit realm is an equivalent to Hell in the Western belief, where it is described as “desolate mountains” and all suffering take place (Her, 2005, p. 7). The Hmong believe that Human death occur between the Earth and Spirit Realm. The Upper Realm is where all human souls strive to reach, and where all human souls are believed to wait for their “reassignment” for a new life on earth (Her, 2005, p. 7). The dominant Hmong view is that life is desirable and they must strive to reach the Upper realm and wait for permission to be granted for life on earth again (2005, p. 7). Before being granted permission, a soul must choose a provisional mandate to be reincarnated. This provisional mandate includes options on how a person will live in the Life Realm. A soul waiting to be reincarnated must choose his/her life, and this choice determines how a person will be rich, poor, noble, or layman. Upon receiving this provision, a soul can return to earth and resume a life in the form of another human being, an animal, or an object. This reassignment will only occur after the descendants perform the ritual to release the spirit (Falk, 1992; Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, pp. 93-94; Her, 2005, p. 7). According to Her, the provision is similar to a book: when the last page of this provision is read, the person dies; however, this mandate can be extended through shamanic trances (2005, p. 7).

### Types of Spirit or Soul

It is believed that ancestor spirits or souls reside in a Hmong’s family home, waiting to be called upon for safety, assure good health, and bring prosperity (Her, 2005,

p. 6). In Her's Hmong Cosmology model, he indicated the cosmos has three realms: the Upper, Earth, and Spirit. A soul must travel through these realms before it is reincarnated. According to Her, a person has three major souls (2005, p. 6). When a person dies, of these souls, "one is expected to journey to the ancestors; one remain on the family altar as an ancestral guardian; and one remains at the gravesite" (Her, 2005, p. 6). Also, Her said a Hmong home exist as a "microcosmos," where all household spirits must always stand on guard and prevent any family members' souls from leaving (2005, p. 11). However, once a family's soul is forcibly separated, its soul is considered lost and require a shaman to perform a soul calling or trance. Upon death and during the funeral process, the deceased's soul travels through these structured realms by seeking permission from the household guardians (2005, p. 6). When permission is granted, the soul must journey to retrieve its placenta then enter into the Spirit Realm where the soul must again travel to the Upper Realm and await for rebirth (Her, 2005, p. 6). How does a soul travel through these cycles? According to Her, the soul travels through these realms by communicating with the divining bamboo stick, used by the Soul Guidance (*tawkev*) chanting the song (*qhuabke*), considered to be the Bible of Hmong religion (Her, 2005, p. 9). Upon reaching the Upper Realm, the soul must wait until after the surviving descendants perform the ritual to release the spirit, then it can be reincarnated (Her, 2005, p. 7; Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, pp. 93-94).

According to Irish, Lundquist, and Nelsen (1993), the home has at least 12 spirits; however, others have suggested there are as many as 30 souls (p. 83). Each of these spirits helps protect the soul of their inhabitant's spirits. When a person dies, the soul must seek permission from each household guardian and be granted to leave before

it travels to the next guardian. The following shows the types of spirits or household guardians Hmong families believe reside in their home, and the order in which a soul travels when seeking permission to leave the home upon death (Fadiman, 1997, p. 282; Saykao, 1997a; Her, 2005, p. 11; Irish et al., 1993, p. 83):

1. Bedroom (dab rooj txag)
2. Altar (dab xwmkab)
3. Oven/Stove (dab qhovcub)
4. Central Pillar (dab ncejtas)
5. Hearth (dab plag tse)
6. Main door (dab roojtag)
7. Proximity (dab plag xua)

It is important to note that this is the same order the qheng player must ask the guardians for permission on behalf of the soul through the Song of Expiring Life (*Chaya Chasengnou*, personal tape of the song, 2003; *Juacai Thao*, personal tape of song, 2007; Falk, 1992; Kue, 1997). When each house guardians grants permission, the soul can proceed to the next guardian, until it exits the door and waits for the day of the burial when it is called upon to leave for the gravesite.

### Death and Grieving in the Hmong Culture

Catherine Falk stated that, “death and funeral are the most important ritual” in the Hmong culture (1992). As much as talking about death as a taboo, it is a time for consolation, grieving and mourning, and accepting the inevitable. After about 15-30 minutes of crying and wailing (Falk, 1992), an elder of the family gathers the immediate

and extended family around to make preparations for the funeral ritual. Although the initial shock has yet to sink in and grieving is taking place, it is hard to determine when the mourning ends. In the Hmong culture, like any others, is also difficult to predict when the family or members actually overcome the attachment and accept the loss.

The immediate family members are not as active in the pre-funeral arrangements because they have already suffered a great loss. If the deceased is young, the family must join in the welcoming of guests or bow (*pe*) to those who come to pay their respect and offer monetary contribution for the funeral. The extended family members, however, have many roles and they must play in preparation of the funeral (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 82). The elder may be assigned or assume the role of a elder funeral director (*thawj xyom cuab*) to assemble other funeral directors and carry out the task of sending the deceased's soul to join the ancestors.

When a person dies, and prior to the funeral ritual, the family is expected to cease all activities, to thank the guests for their support and condolences. Working adult men and women are encouraged to take time off. Children of the deceased are expected to remain in the home to help with household chores and responsibilities. All surviving descendants are advised to dress down to show pity so that it would not appear overly arrogant. The most compelling explanation given is that when the first soul leaves the body and symbolically travels to the Upper realm, it turns to look at the descendants. If the soul sees that the descendants are well dressed, then they are less likely to deserve his/her blessings. Therefore, the surviving members are encouraged to dress down to be blessed.

After the autopsy is complete and the body is transported to a mortuary for the funeral ritual to take place, all immediate, extended family members, or sons-in-law are expected to participate in the funeral throughout the three days. Their primary responsibilities are to welcome the guests, thank the guests for their offerings, and pray during the offering songs. The boys and girls may help with passing out drinks to guest, cleaning, and watch over the body.

During the second day of the funeral, the day of offerings (*qhua txws*) those who are related and asked to slaughter a cow must bring in a basket containing a sash of clothe, cooked pig (small), a bottle of wine or soft drink, a piece of pig liver, rice, and large batch of elaborated joss paper (*ib ntshuas ntawv*). Those who are secondary guests of honor are not required to slaughter a cow, but bring a basket with two whole-cooked chickens, a piece of chicken liver, and a batch of joss paper to honor the deceased. The pigs and chicken livers, drink, piece of clothe, joss paper, and rice is renounced to the Food Offerer for the offering to the deceased's soul. The pigs and chickens are later prepared and served. During this day of offering, grieving, and thanks, guests literally storm the funeral home to join the relatives and descendants in mourning. As all of this is going on, the qheng player and drummer play and beat on through deafening wailings.

After the guests have arrived, the Funeral Director will have two or three members of his crew go through the baskets individually. This process is literally called "divide guests' lunch" or *faib qhua su*. Each representative of the basket's owners is called out, take out the cooked pigs and chickens, and cut them up. Half of the pig and chicken is returned with a piece of meat in a symbolic gesture known as meat to end the

relationship or *nqaij tu moo*. The hosts or descendants will go through a “thanking procedure.”

The last day of the funeral ritual is for burial. Oftentimes, after the blessing songs are sung, the Funeral Director, along with all the descendants, must thank the significant guests of honors and general public for their generosity. This thanking procedure is called *xom mej xyom* (unfortunately, there is no equivalent English word). The qheng players and drummers will start their song again. The songs for this day consist of offering breakfast, offering the joss papers, and departure song or *qeej sawv kev/qeej tawm nras*. Midway through the last song, the drum is taken down. The qheng player plays the departure song and leads the way, followed by a lady holding a torch or *taw tsau*, and the casket with the corpse exiting the door enroute to the cemetery.

#### Ritual to Release the Soul

After the deceased is buried, it is believed that the gravesite soul is to remain with the body for 13 days before it can travel to join the ancestors (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 93). During the first three days, a ritual is observed to offer food to the soul. After the first day of the burial, a male person may take some food, walk to the gravesite, and offer the food to the soul. On the second day, the same person may walk half the distance and place the offering on the side of the road or path, making a similar food offering. On the third day, the person may place the food offering near the home and offer the food to the soul.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> day, a ritual called *xi* is performed. This is where the family invites the spirit to visit the home in preparation for the release of the soul ritual or *tsɔ*

*plig*. If the family wishes to postpone the ritual, it has up to a year to perform it. If the ritual is delayed longer, the soul may show signs of discontent. This lost soul, without the release ritual, has not been formally accepted by the ancestors, and cannot be reincarnated. If the delay persists, the soul cannot be reincarnated and family members may show signs of illness or other forms of misfortune.

The ritual is similar to that of a funeral, but less formal, and not as elaborate. If the family is prepared, the directors and group are reassembled to perform the release of the soul ritual to enable the soul to be reincarnated. The ritual lasts one day. The intent here is to raise an awareness of the need for the ritual and further research is needed.

### Reincarnation

According to Her (2005, p. 7), the general Hmong belief is that each person has three souls. Upon death, one soul travels to the Upper Realm, one remains at the family altar, and one remains at the gravesite, waiting to be reincarnated into a person or other beings (Her, 2005, p. 11). Lee (1985) stated that reincarnation is not universal; however, for those who believed in the process, it is as if a “soul arises anew in the next child.” Again, this is in reference to the belief that when one dies another is born.

The Hmong believe that life on earth is most desirable, where each person must live morally; however, not all can achieve this state. There are incentives of living a moral life. If a person lives ethically, upon death, the soul will be reincarnated into a desirable form of being. However, if a person’s life has been miserable, he or she has committed adultery, wronged other people, or owed debts, then the soul is cursed and

must return into other forms of being, such as a cow, horse, dog, rock, or a deformed human life.

The soul's quest for rebirth must be initiated by the descendants in a ritual to release his/her spirit after the 13<sup>th</sup> day, or the family has up to twelve lunar months to do so. If this ritual is done quickly, the soul may reincarnate sooner. In the traditional view, all Hmong souls after death must seek rebirth and do not reside with an almighty figure in the Upper Realm, as the Western's belief of being with God.

#### Summary

This chapter has described the Hmong culture, clan structure, cosmology, and types of spirits – both in the body and in the home – death and grieving, soul release ritual, and reincarnation. As an outsider, I believe the section is helpful to understand the Hmong culture from a Hmong person's point of view. Other groups of people may question the need for the clan. For the Hmong, one who does “not belong to a clan is a bat” or *puav* (Fadiman, 1997, p. 196). Fadiman stated that, “the Hmong is never everyone for himself” (1997, p. 247); whether one belongs to a clan or not, they all belong to one big clan.

## CHAPTER III

### FUNERAL RITUAL

#### Introduction

Since arriving in the United States in the late 1970s, the majority of Hmong families still practice their traditional rituals, especially their funeral ritual. Nowadays, the number of traditional funerals performed has dwindled due to a large number of Hmong, particularly the younger generations, converting to Christianity and other reasons. One of the most prevalent reasons was financial. Although the elders prefer to preserve many aspect of the Hmong culture and funeral practice, it has become economically unsound to have three to four days of traditional funeral observances. The younger generations see the traditional funeral rituals as a hindrance to their education and financial mobility. When a student has to take a week off to attend a funeral, it may put a young person's education at risk. A person working at a minimum wage job cannot financially sustain his/her family's well-being. Their roles are reduced because they do not know the elders' way or *tej laus kev txujci*.

Government agencies in many countries have been vigorous in their efforts to spread Hmong families and clans throughout their country, and assimilate and integrate them into the mainstream culture and society (Xiong, 2004). As Xiong pointed out, the French government and citizens welcomed the Hmong with open arms with the goal of assimilating large families in high-rise and crowded apartments, where many cultural

practices are limited, if not eliminated. Even today, the Hmong families' second-migration efforts are limited due to lack of education and inaccessible job markets. Whereas some countries have limited the Hmong's transition and cultural practices, others encourage the Hmong to retain many aspects of their culture (Falk, 1992). For example, in Australia, Dr. Gary Yia Lee has advocated on behalf of the Hmong to sponsor, fund, and preserve the Hmong funeral ritual (Falk, 1992). As Falk pointed out, as the Hmong assimilated, they became educated and able to establish organizations advocating on families' behalf and continue to hold modified funerals rituals (1992).

### Hmong Funeral

Traditional funeral rituals in Laos and Thailand are done immediately in the home after a person dies because local authorities and health officials do not conduct autopsies (Falk, 1992). The body is immediately dressed and the funeral is held within hours. However, in the United States, upon death, a body must be transported to a mortuary for autopsy, embalmed, and issued proper documentations before a body is released for the ritual (Fadiman, 1997, p. 33). Before the funeral, the family must locate a church for its availability and affordability.

In the Hmong funeral ritual today, once a person dies, the family must assemble the funeral directors crew and carefully plan the funeral ritual. The Hmong believe that a deceased person's journey to the spirit world depends on the successful rite, which has both positive and negative implications for the surviving descendants. The age and stature of the deceased is important. The older the deceased, the more elaborate the funeral that is conducted. If the deceased is a young person who has no surviving

children, the ritual is done in its simplest form, while the funeral for an elder who has many grown children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, is filled with elaborate decorations and lasts up to three or more days (Falk, 1992).

In the case of an elder who is highly regarded in his/her community, an elaborate funeral requiring animal sacrifices from his/her children is the norm. If a married son does not have the money to sacrifice a cow for his in-laws, he is shunned and brings shame to the person's family and children. This person, along with the wife, assumed the role when they were married to provide an animal sacrifice for his in-laws. If this couple cannot provide one, the wife is considered a disgrace to her biological family. In Laos, in some extreme cases, if the couple cannot afford the cow on their in-laws' behalf to offer it to the deceased, they must give up one of their children to someone who will in return make the sacrifice in his place. Nowadays, this practice is no longer prevalent as family members pitch in to buy a cow for the sacrifice. Cows, mostly steers, are preferred. Falk (1992) stated that traditionally, only oxen were used, but in my experience, oxen were mostly reserved for highly regarded elders from upper class families. In addition, oxen are not readily available in Western countries, thus in my years as a qheng player in the United States, I had only witnessed cows being sacrificed. If the deceased is a child, someone who has not had any married sons, daughters-in-law, or sons-in-law, then the funeral is less elaborate and shorter.

When a person passes away, the family calls on the immediate family to the home. Once they have gathered, the family appoints an elder funeral director or *thawj xyomcuab*. This person may be from the same clan, but cannot be an immediate family member. The general belief is that this person will grieve with the family. For instance, if

a person passes away, this person will discuss with the family and plan how best to manage the funeral. They discuss monies that are involved, when the funeral will be held, length of funeral, and animals to be slaughtered.

In the traditional funeral, the ideal ritual is three to seven days. If the deceased is younger, the funeral is shorter, possibly with the burial on the second day. However, if the deceased is older, has more sons or descendants, more animals to be sacrificed, the funeral is longer (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 84). The Hmong set the burial day based on the lunar calendar. Selecting a burial date and burial site is important. The day of the burial and site determines a person next life and “brings wealth, prosperity, stability, and nobility” for his/her descendants (Falk, 1992; Irish et al., 1993, p. 84). The Hmong believe in predestination, and having a proper burial date with a desirable site determines a person’s success.

However, due to time constraints of the immediate and extended family members and the monetary cost of the mortuary, most funerals are abbreviated to the normal three days, with the initial day beginning on Friday and lasting until Monday, as the burial day. With these constraints, the burial day does not always coincide on an auspicious day and the burial sites are limited and not always preferred due to its availability and cost.

#### Roles of Funeral Directors and Others

During a Hmong funeral ritual, there is continuous activity day and night – the funeral directors are constantly on the move; the qheng players are playing their songs with the drum beating; meat preparers exhaustively chop and slice meat; rice cookers

always preparing for the next meal; visitors or guests chattering in another room; and poker card players always keeping the place warm – all happening at the wish of the family for a well elaborate funeral. These roles and responsibilities are carried out automatically. Below are the descriptions of each person's roles and responsibilities, and Table 2 compares the need for each role between the traditional and modified funeral practices.

#### Funeral Directors (2-4) (Kavxwm)

Funeral directors are the individuals who have studied the songs and learned the functions of the funeral rituals. Funeral directors roles are to help settle internal disputes amongst the surviving sons or daughters-in-laws. Some external issues involving in-laws who have had disagreements with the deceased are resolved by the directors. They also oversee the slaughter of the cows, distribution of meat, and assigning tasks that pertains to the success of the funeral ritual (Her, 2005, p. 4; Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87).

#### Descendant Counselor (1) (Sawv Qabntees)

The descendant counselor is an important figure in the Hmong funeral ritual. He is also well versed in the songs that are sung to the surviving descendants the night before the burial. This person may be selected from the funeral directors, but sometimes picked separately. He is compensated for his chanting which offers blessing to surviving family members. His service is usually not needed when the deceased is young and the funeral is not as elaborate (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87).

Table 2

*Funeral Director Members*

Name & Individuals needed	Traditional	Modified
Funeral Directors (2-4) (Kavxwm)	yes	yes
Soul Guide (1) (Tawkev/Qhuabke)	yes	yes
Qheng and Drum Players (2-4) (Txivqeej/Txivnruas)	yes	yes
Song Chanter (1) (Txivnkauj)	occasionally	occasionally
Elder Funeral Director (1) (Thawj Xyomcuab)	occasionally	yes
Food Server (1) (Cuabtsav)	yes	yes
Stretcher (1) (Txivtxiag)	yesno	
Warrior (1) (Txiv Ntausrog)*	yes	yes
Wood Gatherer (1) (Ris Taws)	yes	no
Water Gathering (1) (Ris Dej)	yes	no
Meat Preparers (4) (Tshwjkab)	yes	yes
Rice Preparers (4) (Niam Ua Mov)	yes	yes
House Cleaner (1) (Tu Vajtse)	no	yes
Money Handler (1-2) (Tubtuavnyiaj)	no	yes
Descendant Counselor (1) (Sawv Qabntees)	yes	yes

*Note.* \*This person is only needed in the White Hmong funeral. The Green Hmong do not have the warrior.

#### Elder Funeral Director (1) (Thawj Xyomcuab)

This person may be selected from the same clan. His primary responsibilities include coordinating all funeral functions, organizing daily operations of the funeral, and dealing with internal issues. He oversees many financial decisions and assigning tasks that relates to the funeral ritual needs (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87).

#### Food Offerer (1) (Cuabtsav)

This person is selected from the same clan, but from a different lineage and is from the same generation as the deceased. At each meal or animal sacrifice, he uses the split bamboo sticks to communicate with the soul on offering. While accepting the offer and departing from this life, the deceased is asked to return blessings to the descendants. For his service, a cow is slaughtered as common practice (Her, 2005, p. 4).

#### Qheng Players/Drummers (2-4) (Txivqeej/ Txivnruas)

The qheng players are important members of the funeral crew. Without this group, the funeral cannot be held. The number of individuals selected may vary depending on the age of the deceased. The older the deceased, the more instrument players are needed, which demands more songs be played at the funeral. These qheng players often ask their protégés to help play some selected songs. The drummers are not selected as the qheng players are experts in the drum as well, and they alternate on playing the qheng and beating on the drum (Figure 1) (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 86).



Figure.1. Batches of joss paper hanging; a qheng player playing a song, a drummer playing the drum; family members sitting next to the casket. Picture taken by Kirk Lee, 7/08.

The following are items the qheng player may use:

1. Qheng instrument (Figure 2); each person may bring 2-3 instruments.
2. Drum and 2 drumsticks.
3. Three pieces of wood to hang the drum.
4. Durable tapes, strings, and nail to hang the drum.
5. A table as station for guest players to assist the main players.

Songs played by the qheng player during the course of the funeral:

1. Song of expiring life – played only on the first day after the qhuabke (zajqeej tusiav).

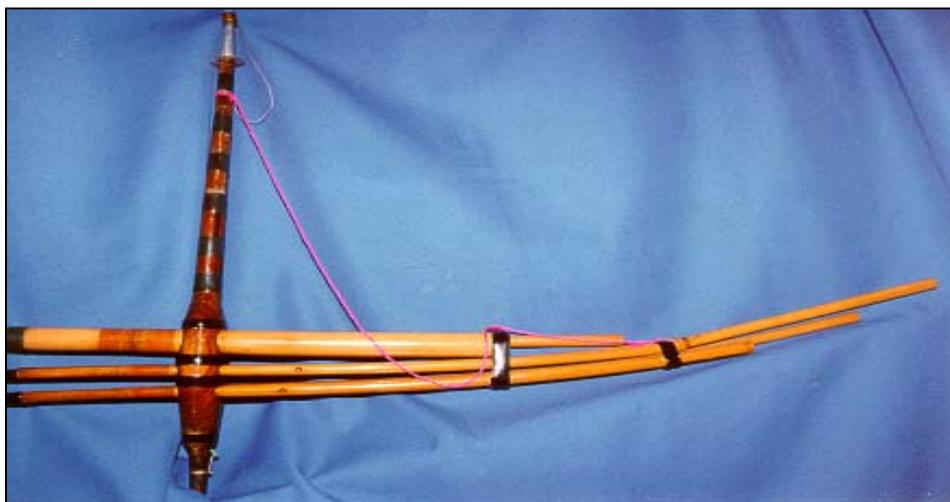


Figure 2. The qheng: a universal Hmong instrument.

2. Song raising the stretcher or symbolizes a horse – first day only (zajqeej tsa nees).
3. Song offering a pig for the stretcher or horse<sup>1</sup> – first day only (zajqeej cobtsiaj tsa nees).
4. Songs offering breakfast, lunch, and dinner – cov zajqeej cob tshais, su, thiab hmo.
5. Songs offering paper money – cov zajqeej cob ntawv.
6. Songs offering spirits of the cows or pigs sacrificed – cov zajqeej cob tsiaj.
7. Song leading the soul for burial on the last day – zajqeej tawm nras/sawvkev.
8. Songs leading the warrior – zajqeej ntaus rog.
9. Songs welcoming guests – qeej tosqhua.
10. Songs of passing time or during idle times – qeej nujnraws/qeej laug hnuv laug hmo.

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<sup>1</sup> This song is only played on the first day. The pig is offered to the deceased's soul.

Below is an example of how a song offering the spirits is played to the deceased. I have simplified the format so that it can be easily understood. This is the process of playing a death song, one that offers some form of sacrificial animals, or *cobtsiaj*:

1. Start with the first set of complex beginning or *ntiv*.
2. Join the part that requires the qheng player going under the drum *lwm qab nruas*.
  - a. The first set requires going under the drum, starting opposite from the drummer.
  - b. Start the second set, change direction going under the drum.
  - c. Start the third set, changed direction, after finishing the last set, end it.
3. Begin this set by kneeling three times, once on each knee. *ntaus caug* or *ntaus xub*.
4. End it on the third note.
5. Begin the song.
  - a. The song has three levels; each level is played six times, twice on each reed and ends on the larger reed, then kneel again three times, alternating knees.
  - b. Second is also played six times, again at the end of the sixth time, kneel again three times, alternating knees.
  - c. The third level is play and ends on the sixth reed again.
    - i. After this, the song connects to the level to return or *rais rov*; this is played three single times, once on each reed by turning around, gesturing the deceased. After the third time, the qheng player proceeds to the last step.

- ii. This level mirrors Step #2, but playing the note to cover your tracks or *zais roj zais hneev*, and finally ends.

#### Meat Preparers (4) (Tshwjkab)

These individuals are selected from the community by the funeral directors. These are skilled in meat cutting and preparing meat for cooking. After a cow is slaughtered, they prepare the meat for cooking and serve the food at the funeral home or next of kin's home (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 88). Meat Preparers' essential tools:

1. 5-10 large and sturdy knives.
2. 4-8 cutting board.
3. Tarps or plastic rolls for storage.
4. 2-4 big cooking pots.
5. 4-6 propane burners for cooking – may share with the rice preparers.
6. Plastic plates and forks may be supplied by the family as needed.
7. 4-6 tables for cutting meat and/or serve food.

#### Money Handler (1-2) (Tubtuavnyiaj)

This person is trustworthy and can manage the donations from guests. He is appointed by the immediate family to keep track of donations from community members and honorary guests. He constantly monitors the flow of monies and keeps an accurate record.

#### Rice Preparers (4) (Niam Ua Mov)

This role is usually reserved for women who are selected by the funeral directors and family to cook the rice, which is usually served three times a day to guests and family members. Rice Preparers' essential items needed to do their task:

1. 5-10 rice steamers to cook rice.
2. Propane burners for cooking – may share these with meat preparers.
3. Bags of rice – family may provide as needed.
4. Soups and sponges for washing dishes and utensils.

#### Song Chanter (1) (Txivnkauj)

This person sings certain type of songs called *nkauj*. He only sings the significant songs and when an animal sacrifice is offered to the soul. A deceased person who is older typically requires a song chanter on standby at all times.

#### Soul Guide (1) (Tawkev/Qhuabke)

This person must initiate the *qhuake* on the first day, chanting the song, leading the soul of the deceased to his/her place of birth and join the ancestral spirits. The soul guide uses a split bamboo stick to communicate with the deceased and lead the soul in a safe journey (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 86).

The soul guide or *tawkev* sings the *qhuabke* or lead the way and guide the soul to the spirit world. The *qhuake* is memorized by the soul guide. There are various versions of the *qhuabke*, depending on the region. Again, this is an area I am not too familiar with and requires further observation. The following are the tools needed by the soul guide to properly send the soul to the ancestors:

1. Split bamboo stick for communicating with the deceased soul.
2. Knife for protection on the arduous journey and safe return.
3. Stool for the performer to sit.
4. Table for striking deals with the soul.
5. Hemp shoes to be put on the deceased when it is appropriate.
6. String for offering.
7. Umbrella to protect the deceased from the sun and rain on the journey.
8. Chicken for sacrifice and lead way.
9. Spoon for serving chicken liver.
10. Wine for serving with each successful deal.

#### Stretcher (1) (Txivtxiag)

In Laos and Thailand, this person is responsible for making the casket, but in today's funeral, his skill is not needed since caskets are made commercially. Today, a small stretcher is made to symbolize a horse or the casket (Falk, 1992; Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87).

#### Warrior (1) (Txiv ntausrog)

This person is appointed by the family members. This person's role is only needed in the White Hmong funeral rituals. His role represents a Hmong army battling Chinese soldiers during the early struggle. The Green Hmong do not need this person because it is believed that they had left China before the battles between the Hmong and Chinese took (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 87).

### Water Gatherer (1) (Ris Dej)

This person's role is not needed in today's rituals because water is readily available. His role was needed in Laos and Thailand to get water from streams or wells for cooking and cleaning (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 88).

### Wood Gatherer (1) (Ris Taws)

This role is also not needed because wood is readily available. He was needed to gather wood from the forest so cooking could be done (Irish, Lundquist, & Nelsen, 1993, p. 88).

### House Cleaner (1) (Tu Vajtse)

This role is relatively new. He/she picks up any trash or empties trash bins.

## Roles and Responsibilities of Family Members

The age of the deceased determines the role and responsibilities of the family members. Typically, when an elder person dies, family members are expected to cease all activities, in part to help the immediate family with the funeral planning, thank the guests for their contributions, and help them cope with the loss. Oftentimes, working family members are encouraged to take time off to help assemble the funeral directors.

The men hold all funeral planning decisions, coordinate and gather essential household items, and bow to thank guests for their contributions. The women must cook the rice and food in anticipation of visitors or guests, tend to the children, and welcoming other women guests. The Hmong have a saying that, when someone in the community dies, one must grieve with them "when they die, one must die with them" or *thaum luag*

*tuag, yus nrog luag tuag*. This means that when a family suffers a loss, one must pay one last well-wish visit.

Children of the deceased are expected to remain in the home to help with household chores and responsibilities. All surviving descendants are advised to dress down and respect the guests. During the three day funeral, adult males, females, and children are expected to attend the ritual, help with miscellaneous chores, and most importantly, pray. During these three days, when a guest brings offerings or monetary donations, the hosts are expected to thank the guests. When a song is played offering a meal or animals sacrifice, every descendant is encouraged to kneel down behind the qheng players or song chanter to receive blessings from the soul of the deceased. There is no requirement to pray, but it is highly encouraged.

A requirement of adult sons during the funeral is animal sacrifice and offering. Table 3 shows the number of cows the family is responsible for on sacrificial day. Traditionally, the daughters and sons-in-law are not obligated to slaughter any cows. However, in today's modified funeral ritual, they may partner with other daughters or brothers-in-law to contribute what they can. It is a goodwill gesture on the part of the daughters and sons-in-laws.

#### Table Proceedings

On the night before the burial date, the four funeral directors and descendant counselor prepare a table to initiate the blessing process. With the qheng playing and drum beating, the directors set up a table in front of the casket to partake in the singing of blessings. The table will be assigned a chair with a representative of the honorary guests

Table 3

*Number of Cows the Family Is Responsible for on Sacrificial Day*

Persons	Animals Sacrifice
Food Offerer (Cuabtsav)	1 cow
Honorary Sister/Brother (Muamphauj/Txivdablaug)	1 cow
Son #1 (Tub 1)	1 cow
Son #2 (Tub 2)	1 cow
Son #3 (Tub 3)	1 cow
Others (sons-daughters-in law; grandsons)	As needed*

*Note.* \* Additional cows may be sacrificed by sons-in-law or grandsons of the deceased if the required cows are not enough during the duration of the funeral. Outsiders may question why the cows are not enough. Traditionally, the cow is split into sections and distributed to the members of the honorary guests, funeral directors, qheng players, and others. Again, this requires further research and documentation.

and funeral crew. After set up is done, two of the directors, each holding a plate with two shots of drinks, sing a song to the qheng player and drummer, in a friendly gesture, to hold off the songs or *tswm qeej tswm nruas*. After singing is completed, both players drink the shots and finally take a rest. This is the night they can rest.

The funeral directors shift their attention to the guests' representatives sitting around the table with a shot of drink in front of them and taking nips of food placed on the table. The funeral directors take turns and sing a series of songs. The orders and names of songs are based on my father's songs; other versions may vary in its length and

order (Pachor Lee, personal communication, April 19, 2008). Names of the songs sang during the Table Proceeding are:

1. Beginning songs or *qhib phiaj* (about 18 songs).
  - a. Calling descendants' attention or *tswm xyomcuab*.
  - b. Calling qheng players and drummers to rest or *tswm txivqeej/nruas*.
2. Songs offering guests or *cwb qhua*, one song for each representative.
  - a. After offering the songs, must assure their satisfaction and rest.
  - b. Offer the ax for slaughter or *cwb ko taus*.
  - c. Accept their offerings or contributions or *txais txiaj ntsig*.
  - d. Accept appreciations for guests' contributions or *txais tshav ntuj*.
3. Songs providing counsel for descendants to be righteous citizens or *qhuab kom* (about 10 songs); this sets of songs may be sang by any funeral directors.
4. Finally, the songs of blessings or *foom kom* (about 10 songs); to be sang by the descendant counselor only.

Figure 3 represents the table proceeding and seating chart for each representative. The order may be in counter clockwise. Not every member or representative is invited. The food offerer's role is reversed here; he in turn questions the funeral directors on the passing of the deceased. This scenario shows that there are five sons, which means each son and his wife must provide a cow for the in-law to sacrifice for the deceased.

The last two sets of songs are especially important, particularly the last sets. The Hmong believe that these songs are direct messages from the deceased. Every descendant is encouraged to sit through this session if they wish to receive blessings from

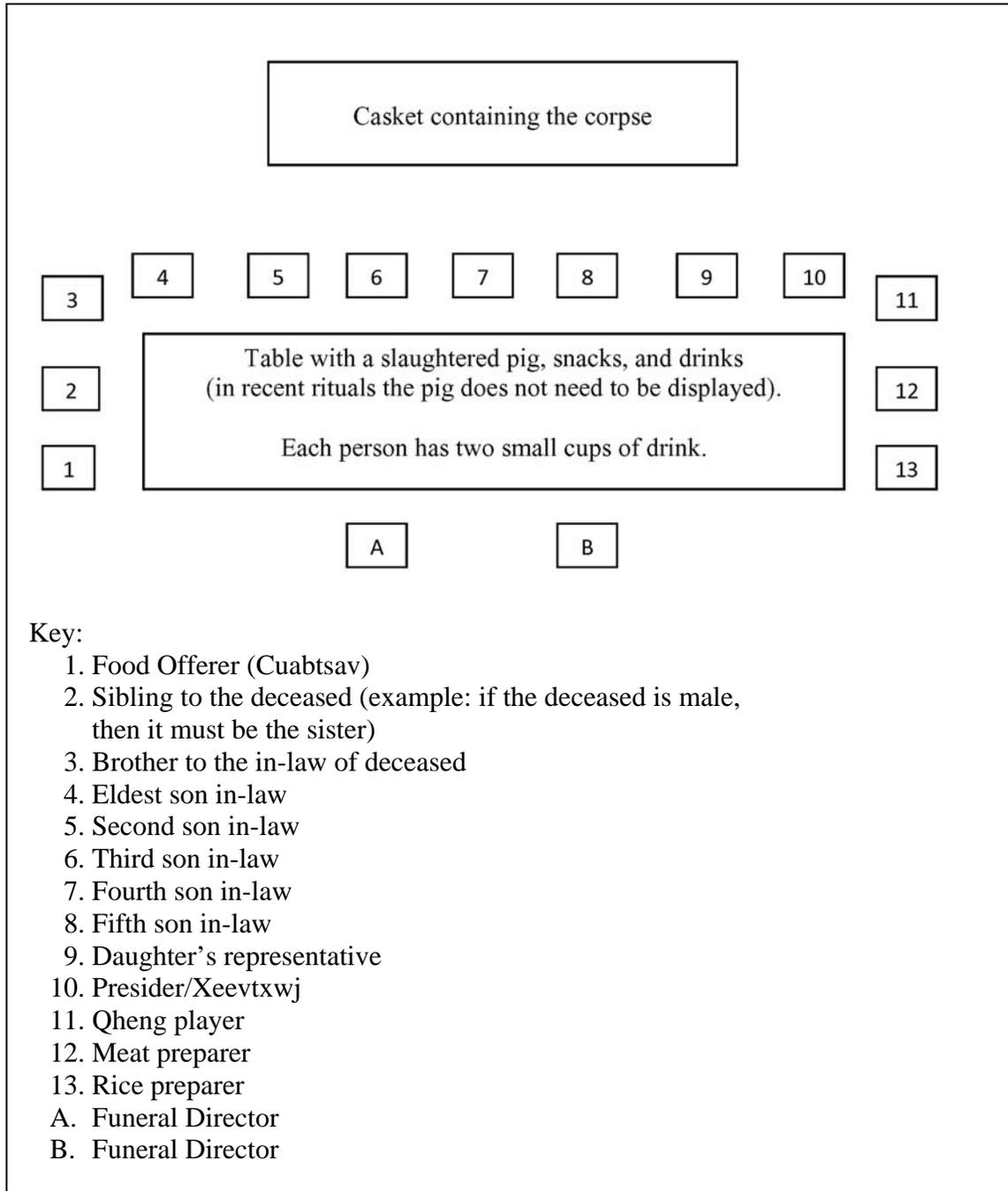


Figure 3. Order of table proceeding seating chart.

the deceased. Usually those who are in the same generation or rank do not participate in this blessings session but they may do so if they wish.

### Summary

The funeral ritual is an important part of the Hmong culture. Knowing the process, from the beginning of a death to the funeral ritual, is an important aspect of the tradition. The practice requires people to know certain roles within the ritual. By knowing what these roles are, a funeral is expected to have a successful ritual where both the soul of the deceased is honored and the surviving family members' wishes are met. The roles of each family member are an important aspect of the ritual.

## CHAPTER IV

### PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN THE HMONG FUNERAL CUSTOM

#### Introduction

In the Hmong culture, children are highly encouraged to participate in the funeral ritual. Participating in the funeral process allow the children to learn the elders' way of practice and knowledge or *tej laus kev txujci*. By learning the elders' way, children will retain a general knowledge of the traditional practices, gain a status in the community, and maintains a person's standing in a male dominant culture.

In the Hmong community, parents consider their children's cultural competency just as important as their academic successes. Those children who have a general knowledge of the ritual and participate, whether playing the qheng instrument, beating the drum, or bowing to honor the guests in the funeral process are all valuable aspect of the culture. Students who have high academic achievement, but less affluence in the culture in the elders' view, are losing the tradition. Children knowledgeable of the traditional practice are praised for their willingness to practice and preserve the culture.

#### Roles, Responsibilities, and Expectations

Children and family members must always be present, whether at home or at the funeral, to receive and repay guests for their offering of gifts or monetary

contributions. Boys' roles are to participate in these activities, repaying guests for their generosity, and pray or kneel during a song. They are also expected to behave accordingly so they may grow up knowing the culture and be responsible members in the community. Boys of the immediate family are expected to conduct themselves appropriately and cannot play cards as it may bring bad luck. Children ages five or older are expected to bow or kneel to receive blessings. In addition, boys are encouraged to attend these funerals so they can help in the process, and when it is a loss in their immediate family, they will know the process of the funeral ritual.

The girls' roles are limited but they must learn to welcome guests and provide assistance in the home and act appropriately so that they do not offend guests. Girls are also encouraged to pray during the songs of offering and table proceedings.

Boys who are ten years or older are expected to kowtow with the adults to show appreciation for guests. Those who know these customs are expected to grow up and be responsible Hmong men who are well mannered or *paub tab paub cai*. Boys or men who have no concept of the Hmong funeral ritual are looked upon as poorly mannered and unfit for the culture.

As guests bring their gifts of respect, a family member of the deceased is responsible to show appreciation by saying:

Ua tsaug mog, yeeb vim peb tsev xyom cuab, tsev mob tsev tuag, tsev puas tsev ntsoog, koj tsis cia li, koj thooj txhij thooj yig, cab yag cab nco nyiaj txiag nto, tuaj pab tsev xyom cuab nta dab thawm xab, nta qhua thawm hmo, koj tus txiaj ntsha ces xyom cuab yuav ua tus nqa, tus txhiaj ntsig ces xyom cuab yuav ua tus ris mus ib txhiab ib txhis lauj," (personal).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are many versions on how to thank a guest; however, this is the version I was taught and continued to use. Other versions may vary in length and content.

Translation:

Thank you, because our family of the deceased, home of the sick and dead, home of the broken, you need not bring, you bring good fortune, bring good deeds and money, come to help our family of the deceased prepare for this rite day and night, your gracious gratitude will be carry by the family members of the deceased, your generosity will be remembered the rest of our life.

At the same time, the person who brought the gifts says:

Txhob ua tsaug mog, yeeb vim nej tsev xyom cuab tsev mob tsev tuag, tsev puas tsev ntsoog, yog txawj ua lub neej ces yuav thooj txhij thooj yig, cab yag cab nco, tuaj nrog tsev xyom cuab nta dab thawm xab nta qhua thawm hmo, tsis txawj ua lub neej ces npaj yam tsis tsheej yam, npaj tsi tsis tsheej tsi tuaj pab tsis tau tsev xyom cuab lub kua muag.

Translation:

You need not thank me, because your family of the deceased, home of the sick and dead, home of the broken, if my life is rich and prosperous, then I bring you good fortune, bring good deeds and money, to help your family of the deceased prepare for this rite, because my life is not rich and prosperous, I bring you things not of great value, cannot help remove your tears of sorrow.

These two verses were taught to me by my father at an early age so that I could memorize them and recite them when contributing money or return the appreciation. Most young children are encouraged to learn and memorize them.

### Blessings

Once an elder is deceased, it is believed that the soul travels to the gate between heaven and earth and turns around to give blessing to the descendants. If the soul sees that the surviving descendants are dressed handsomely, then they are less likely to receive a blessing from the deceased. However, if the soul turns around and sees the grieving descendants wearing ragtag clothes, the soul is more likely to bless them.

Therefore, in the Hmong funeral, especially if the deceased is an elder, it is common to see descendants dress down.

Not all songs played at the funeral are being observed, only the songs of the dead *qeej kabke*. These songs offer sacrifice or feast to the deceased's spirit. When the qheng player plays his song and the song chanter's sings, all children or descendants are asked to hold two unburned incense while kneeling down and praying. While the qheng player and song chanter alternate playing their part, and when arriving at a stopping point, both turn around and play a blessing song directed at the descendants. The Hmong believe that the soul will bestow blessings to the descendants through the words of the qheng player and the chanter. It is also believed that by receiving these blessings, the person will be blessed and live a successful and prosperous life.

During the descendant counselor's singing at the table proceeding, children and adult family members are asked to kneel down, hold two-unburned incenses, and listen to the songs. The Hmong believe that by kneeling and praying or *xyom* in observance of the deceased during the songs they receive blessings and luck or *koob hmoov*, which are transcended directly to those who participated and prayed. Again, the Hmong believe that this song is a direct communication from the deceased's soul, being conveyed to the offspring. For an outsider, this may seem an unusual scene and raise many questions. As a member of the Hmong community, this funeral process is essential for the children to participate in so they can learn the tradition.

### Summary

In the Hmong funeral practices, children are often encouraged to take part in the ritual. As children in the family and students during this time of loss, they are caught in the middle as parents often have expectations and, assign their children roles and responsibilities. These expectations, roles, and responsibilities are necessary for them to participate in their funeral rituals. They are reminded of the importance of their tradition; however, they must also be mindful their roles as children and students. By taking part in the ritual, they are expected to receive blessings, which is something they hope to retain a small part of their tradition.

## CHAPTER V

### IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

#### Introduction

The Hmong funeral ritual has been in existence for generations, but its recent introduction in the United States and other countries is new. Until recently, the history of the Hmong people has been virtually unknown. The Vietnam War resulted in the Hmong emigrating to the U.S. and other countries for political reasons. Today, they continue to practice their traditional funeral practices.

As the Hmong people's background has been unknown, their traditional funeral rituals have yet to be fully understood by the mainstream. Since 1975, and until recently, schools across the country have experienced an increase in Hmong students. As a result, certain issues have recently arisen in the public schools. Noting that the Hmong funeral ritual is the most important cultural tradition in Hmong society, these students are expected to take extended time off from their school activities to attend at their parents' request.

#### Teachers' Roles

In today's classrooms, primary and secondary schools teachers and staff are constantly overwhelmed. Throughout the year, they must attend many school related functions, such as staff development, staff meetings, classroom management, and student

conferences. As daunting as these responsibilities may seem, their roles have not been made any easier. For example, federal and state legislators have made it harder for teachers to do their job by imposing stricter curriculum guidelines and standards.

As pointed out earlier, today's teachers need to understand their students' roles and responsibilities in the family in a time of loss. For primary students, when there is a loss in the family, children often go through a period of shock and grief. As customary in the Hmong community, children are taken out of the classroom to attend family rituals. In these situations, the children need to take time off from schools to help with the family in preparation for the funeral, perform tasks to satisfy their parents' wish to preserve the tradition, and take part in the ritual. However, by granting Hmong students time off to observe the rites in this difficult time of loss, parents of other ethnic groups will request the same for their children. Are teachers obligated to grant this to other students as well? What are the teachers' roles, responsibilities, and expectations? What are students' obligations?

Teachers play an important role in this process. They must be aware that most, if not all, funerals are held during the weekends. During the preparation stages (normally the first few days after the death of a family member) the students are not required to be at home. However, they are encouraged to stay home so they can help with household chores, prepare family meals, and clean up around the house.

During the funeral, which usually starts on a Friday and ends on the following Monday, children are asked to attend. Not participating in this activity is disrespecting the parents, the deceased, and guests. Tradition dictates that they participate in the process so they can receive blessings and bring hopes of prosperity and happiness.

Therefore, teachers should consider allowing these students time off in this important event. It is suggested that by releasing students from school for these funeral preparation activities, students will fulfill their cultural responsibility, family obligations, and parents' wish. Otherwise, students face personal and family dilemmas, and yet must maintain loyalty in the family. Teachers will have to make a personal choice whether to mark their students as absent when their students choose to take the time off from class.

#### Suggestions in Responding to Student's Needs

These are hard choices students have to make while trying not to alienate their parents. Although there are no easy solutions to these problems, teachers must make every effort to accommodate the Hmong students' need for time off. It is essential that teachers be aware of what is happening in the community, especially in Hmong family circles. News of a death in the Hmong community spreads rapidly. When hearing of the loss, teachers must be informed and take the necessary steps to understand the students. By noticing changes in the student's behavior, teachers will be in a better position to respond to the student's needs and respond to these challenges. Hmong students are more likely to avoid making contact with the teachers, therefore, by the time they find out, the student has missed several days of school.

After hearing of a death in a student's family, teachers must provide counsel and understand his/her needs. Teachers should, if possible, pay their respects, but only after consulting with family members, and if accepted, offer their sympathy and condolences. This indicates that the teachers care about the individual student. If the

ritual might seem too foreign, the teacher can obtain a translator or a family member to help clarifying the process

### Open Discussion With Students in the Grieving Process

Oftentimes, the mainstream mentality that “boys don’t cry” is carried over to the Hmong children as well, especially boys. When there is a death in the family, boys often show less emotion. Teachers can discuss the situation with the affected students and help them understand death. Death in Hmong families is not openly discussed, especially with small children where parents would have a difficult time telling them and making them understand what has happened. For older children, it is an easier task.

If teachers make it a priority to talk to their students after learning of a death in the family, it can alleviate many potential issues. However, they should not attempt to talk to the student unless the source is reliable: presenting incorrect information might create additional stress and bring unnecessary grief or bad luck to the family. If possible, teachers can consult with an adult family member or clan leader to see if it is appropriate to approach the child or allow the family to deal with the issue. Again, death is taboo and teachers must learn the appropriate ways to deal with children in these situations.

### Implications

Teachers must consider the potential implications in this culture when the family is in mourning. Teachers might check with their school bilingual staff for reliable sources of information. A lack of awareness about the culture is unacceptable. Keep in mind that the Hmong are very superstitious and any inappropriate behaviors can be

detrimental to the relationship among administrators, staff, teachers, parents, and children.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATION

#### Introduction

This project is based on my experience as a member of the Hmong in the local community who has observed and taken an active role in traditional funeral rituals. I feel that there are many aspects of the Hmong in this community outsiders still do not know. I hope the information in this thesis will provide the historical background, insights about the family structure, funeral rituals, and roles of the individuals involved to increase awareness of the Hmong people.

#### Summary

It is my understanding that to know a group of people we must learn to understand their culture and history. I hope my historical view of the Hmong provides sufficient information and answer many questions on the Hmong people. This project starts with important historical information about how and why the Hmong people arrived in the United States. It provides readers with a reason why this study is needed so that teachers and school administrators can better understand Hmong children in a time of loss. I believe that this project is not a complete account of the funeral ritual, as there are still many issues needed to be researched and this is only my perspective. Finally, there

are certain terms in the text that need clarification, yet, I am hopeful the definitions of these terms are adequate as a first step toward learning more about the Hmong.

The project continues with information about the Hmong culture, history of the people, and current funeral practices. In every society, people have a structured family unit, and the Hmong are no exception; this group has existed for thousands of years based on a clan structure. From there, the presentation provides information about Hmong religion where they believe that everything or place has a soul or spirit and that a house is a constant place for its inhabitants, both physically and spiritually. Another important aspect of the Hmong is their religious belief, how they interpret death, their grieving process, and coping mechanisms. In addition, we must understand the Hmong view of the cosmology, how it operates in the world, and how each spiritual being functions within a smaller context of a home. Finally, this study explains the purpose of reincarnation from the Hmong perspective, where the Hmong believes in a desirable life so that this life determines a person's next life.

The third area of this paper focuses on the funeral process. Again, pointing out every little detail is impossible: there are many rituals that require one to completely immerse in the culture to fully understand it. Until then, you cannot fully understand or appreciate it. The roles of the people participating in the ritual and their responsibilities are very different, and yet their goal is similar. As important as the roles of the funeral directors are, it is also important to understand the roles and responsibilities of each family member.

The focus of this paper is to identify the students' roles and responsibilities in the funeral ritual. Hmong culture dictates that adults assume many responsibilities, but

children's participation in the ritual is also vital for their growth and maturity. One goal for the elders is retaining their culture practices and preserve their way of life. Children are encouraged to participate in the funeral process so their role in the family and community are appreciated.

Finally, this project concludes with a discussion about the need for students' to participate, their roles, and what they can expect to receive from the ritual. Further discussion includes teachers' roles in the classroom, in the community, and ways on how to deal with them. Several recommendations are made for practitioners and researchers for future research.

### Conclusions

I hope this project answers many of questions teachers and school staff may have about the rituals, roles, and responsibilities their Hmong students experience during a time of loss. Some assertions are from personal interviews as well as from professional journals. As a Hmong individual, as well as a parent and student, I feel there are many students who must make some personal choices that will affect their family members. However, I feel that there are many important issues needed to be discussed for the benefit of staff and school personnel as well.

### Recommendations

There are many areas that were discussed in this project in regards to the Hmong funeral rituals in the United States. However, as I mentioned in the limitations section, there remains many aspect of the culture that cannot be answered here, or that

were intentionally omitted. However, I have made the following recommendations for practitioners and researchers.

#### Recommendations for Practitioners #1

As a general rule of thumb, the Hmong is an ethnic minority group from Southeast Asia, more appropriately, Laos. Their educational background is almost nonexistent. The Hmong should not be categorized or lumped together with other ethnic groups from Asia in terms of educational success. For example, many American teachers have assumed the Hmong are Vietnamese, Thai, or Chinese. One of my saddest stories happened at a California State University, Chico, when one of my professors assumed that I was Chinese, and he questioned why I was failing statistics.

#### Recommendations for Practitioners #2

School districts should consider having more bilingual staff. Oftentimes, when teachers have student conferences, they do not have the resources to translate. Sometimes they have to resort to having the student translate what is said to the parent about their progress. This role reversal has a negative impact on the parents. Using paraprofessional staff to translate may alleviate that problem since they are paid staff and their opinions are highly valued.

#### Recommendations for Practitioners #3

If the families have the option, they would have the funeral held in their homes, but since there are local ordinances against that, their only option are churches. In my experience, American churches are very exclusive. Churches need to accept the Hmong funeral and their tradition as they are, not as an unacceptable ritual or practice. A word about autopsy: consult family members before an autopsy is to be done.

### Recommendations for the General Public

Accept the Hmong as Americans because many of them are naturalized citizens and pay their fair share of tax dollars. One of the most ignorant comments I often hear is that the Hmong should go back to China. Hmong are from Laos and Thailand and have no intentions of leaving their home in America.

### Recommendations for Researchers #1

As pointed out at the beginning, researchers may need to discuss the value of the traditional funeral rituals. This celebration, although is a sad event, is the family's only lasting memory of their loved one. Their practice should be valued.

### Recommendations for Researchers #2

I have come across several detours after I started this project. The Hmong culture is unique; the tradition is unfolding right in front of us after many generations. There are many rituals that have yet to be researched. For example, the door (dab roog) and ox (nyuj dab) ceremony is still yet to be researched (Lee, 1985). Also, there are many Hmong taboos that are still believed, but are they still relevant in today's society?

### Recommendations for Researchers #3

Many awful things have been said about the Hmong that are often based on erroneous information. Hmong have been accused of "eating stray animals," they are here to "eat welfare," or shaman smoke "opium" before initiating the trance (Fadiman, 1997, pp. 122, 190, 200). These stereotypes are often made without regard to the people. As much as its inaccuracy, I find there are still many of these topics that need to be researched and put to rest. I highly recommend Fadiman's (1997) book; I have learned so much from reading it, as it helped clarified a lot of questions.

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