

Hmong Families

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Family Roles

The Hmong have an old saying, "To be with a family is to be happy. To be without a family is to be lost."

Being part of a family has always been important to the Hmong people. The larger the family, the better. A large family testifies to success and prosperity. Traditionally, many people lived together as a family. One house people or *ib tsev neeg* refers to the extended family which lives under one roof. This group includes multi-generational members of the father's clan as well as those who have joined the clan through marriage. Most often, a husband would bring his wife home to live with his parents, at least at first. As a result, a household may include a man's sons, wives, and children as well as his own parents, brothers, and sisters-in-law. Traditionally a Hmong man could marry as many wives as he could support.

Each family was also part of a clan; everyone with the same family name was a member of that clan. At birth a child automatically became a member of his or her father's clan.

Everyone in the family worked. Each person was assigned to special tasks. The men planted and harvested the crops. They also used crossbows to hunt for food in the mountains and protect their families from wild animals. Older boys were expected to help the men with these jobs.

The women and girls took care of the crops after they had been planted. They also took care of the animals. One of the most important jobs was caring for the pigs. Corn was specially prepared for the pigs to make sure they grew fat and stayed healthy.

The women made and repaired clothing for the family. Girls were taught to sew at a very early age. Once they mastered the details of Hmong needle work, they were considered mature enough to marry. Special occasions required special clothes. Many hours were spent embroidering colorful clothing for celebrations and marriages.

Traditionally, women bow to the wishes of their husbands, their in-laws and their own parents. Transition to western culture, where many women work outside the home, has placed a tremendous burden on young mothers who are attempting to fill several roles, that of obedient wife, daughter, daughter in-law, mother and wage earner.

Older people in the Hmong village were respected because they had lived a long time and had many life experiences. Their advice on crops, marriage and other matters was followed. The older people also cared for the babies so that the parents and children could work in the fields.

The family is the primary institution of Hmong society. Order and authority in the household are maintained by respect for age. Younger brothers respect their older brothers; sons respect their fathers. The youngest child in each family is especially revered and attended to, regardless of how many older siblings are in the family. Often each child is responsible for the care and safety of the next youngest. New arrivals to the U.S. are unfamiliar with the urban dangers that require close adult supervision of young children. Many are unaware of the concept of respecting private property, both outdoors and indoors. The mountainsides of Laos had no property boundaries.

Clans

The Hmong hold closely to their clans and put a great deal of trust in their leaders. Clans consist of those persons who share the same paternal ancestry. There are 18 different clans in the Hmong society, but 12 of them – Vang, Chang, Lee, Yang, Xiong, Vue, Her, Thao, Kong, Hang, Moua, and Lor – are larger in number than the other six. Other accounts consider 21 clans, though the extras are most likely spelling variations of the original twelve.

All clan members are considered to be brothers and sisters. A boy cannot marry a girl from the same clan. Men remain members of the same clan all their lives, but women normally change from one clan to another by marriage. Admission to a clan is by birth, marriage or adoption.

Each clan is directed by a leader or group of leaders that oversee all relations with other clans. These leaders often mediate in disputes, assist families in determining punishment, and handle difficult situations for family members. The head of the clan has particular powers that permit him to communicate with deceased ancestors of clan members in specific rituals.

The Hmong living in America continue to value their families and clans. Anyone with the same clan name is related, wherever they may live. Many Hmong have moved from their first home in America to re-join a cousin, uncle, or brother in another state, and maintain a strong family.

Clan Names

Vang	Her
Cheng	Chang(Cha)
Thao	Chue
Kong	Fang
Yang	Hang
Kue	Lee
Xiong	Moua
Kang	Vue
Lor	Pha

Marriage

Marriages are the concern of whole families and, to a lesser degree, the clan. The arrangement of a marriage follows the patterns of authority and respect within the family based upon age and sex, but also takes into account individual rights and the desirability of achieving general agreement. A father usually proposes marriage for his sons and judges the chosen husband for his daughters. Young men and women are allowed to actively participate in the spouse selection process, but they undoubtedly receive substantial input. Once a selection is made, family negotiations soon take place. Each family selects one or two neutral individuals who negotiate, or in a sense "broker," the details of the agreement. These brokers prevent direct family-to-family confrontation.

The average age of marriage in Hmong society varies, but traditionally boys and girls married between the ages of 14 and 18 years. One of the factors contributing to early marriage was the need for additional family members to work in the fields and in the house.

The bride-price is usually arranged by both sides. "Buying a wife" does not indicate that a wife is considered property to be bought and sold. The bride-price can be seen as an insurance policy to assure that the wife will be highly valued and well-treated by her husband's family.

The best courtship opportunity, now as in the past, often happens during the New Year Festival when people get together for games, singing and dancing contests, visiting with old friends and relatives, and sharing in big meals.

In Laos, a young man might continue the courtship by serenading with his flute, jew's-harp, or recorder in an attempt to win a girl's heart. Poems, songs, and music could last late into the night. This was normally carried out through the house wall which kept the young couple apart, the girl inside and her boyfriend outside.

Traditional Hmong marriage involves elaborate preparation, a symbolic ceremony, and huge banquets. Depending upon the affluence of the families involved, the wedding can last anywhere from one to three days. Gift exchange between the two families, as well as elegant food preparation, always precedes the ceremony.

A Hmong wedding ritual involves tying a length of white ribbon or string from around the wrist of the bride to around the wrist of the groom. This tying is performed by a respected elder or pair of elders who accompany themselves with chants. A young hen, rooster, and a hard-boiled egg are also a part of the ceremony as symbols for the

coming together of all parts. Candles and burning incense alert the spirit world to the fact that a marriage is taking place. After the hard-boiled egg has been halved, each marriage partner eats one of the halves.

Extensive toasting then takes place with the groom acknowledging each toast while trying to remain sober. When the feasting finally takes place, the bride and groom sit separately. Pork is always served to symbolize future prosperity. Vegetables are not offered as they represent poor people's food. There is no rush to finish eating; the meal can go for hours.

After marriage, a bride must prove that she is able to carry out her household responsibilities, and prove her modesty and loyalty. According to tradition she is not supposed to make eye contact, have a conversation with or smile at other men during the first year of marriage.

A man can have more than one wife. There is no moral sanction either for or against it, and its major purpose is generally economic. The actual situation of the wives is often not so fortunate; the second wife usually has less prestige than the first, and the senior wife often feels hurt by the competition of the younger woman for her husband's affection and attention.

Many Hmong men in the U.S. continue to support more than one wife and family. They usually have only one legal marriage and consider the others to be "Hmong marriage." Divorce is permitted within the Hmong culture, but not before extensive efforts have been made within the community to sort out marital problems.

Childbirth

Traditionally, Hmong women gave birth while in a standing or squatting position. Usually only the husband and midwife were allowed to be present for the birth.

Part of the placenta and umbilical cord of the first-born babies were kept. It could later be used to cure ailments. In Laos the first-born son's placenta would be buried near the post in the middle of the house. It is believed that when the oldest boy grows up, he will be responsible for the house spirits.

For about 30 days after the delivery, it is believed that the mother should eat only hot chicken with well-cooked rice. The chicken is eaten so that she can regain her strength quickly. It is believed that other food would poison her. Also during the first 30 days after delivery, the new mother is not permitted to visit other homes and is not allowed to receive a pregnant woman in her home.

It is believed that a new mother is at her weakest, both physically and spiritually. Her health and the health of the baby can be jeopardized by jealous spirits. Most of the assistance to the new mother and baby comes from the mother-in-law with whom they live.

Names

Three days after the delivery of a child, a name is chosen. The child will be addressed by the given name until old enough to socialize. After that time, either the surname or given name may be used in the first position, depending on the individual's preference. Many Hmong children today are given two names: one Hmong and one American.

When a Hmong man becomes a father, a name ceremony will be held to give him a new name such as Nhia or Pao to indicate that he has passed from one stage of life to another entailing more responsibility. This ceremony can be held anytime after he has a child, depending on his wealth and on the arrangement with his in-laws.

When a Hmong woman becomes a mother, she may be addressed as Niam (mother), adding either her first child's name before or her husband's name after.

A Hmong woman traditionally continues to use her father's clan name even after marriage. However, many women in the U.S. are now adopting their husband's clan name as their own last name.

Death

A person is believed to have three souls which separate upon death. One goes to heaven, or the "place of the dead"; one remains in the grave; and one becomes re-embodied. The departing souls must be shown the right "roads" to reach heaven. The funeral ceremonies vary according to tribe or clan, but exorcising the evil spirits from the dead before burial is common.

When an old person dies, the body is kept inside the house for three to ten days and, in certain circumstances, even longer. The body must be kept in the house until the deceased's children and relatives arrive and until the auspicious day for burial.

Relatives and neighbors of the deceased come to visit and to comfort the inhabitants of the house, fulfilling a social function for relatives. They exchange news and discuss the prosperity of various villages. Today this is done at the funeral home where the rooster, the children's blessing, and the big drum all play a role.

The corpse is usually buried in the afternoon. The spirit of the dead person should depart as the sun sets, so that the soul will not come back often to make a nuisance of itself.

Within a year after the death, a ceremony must be held to release the departed's soul. If this ceremony is not performed within this period, the spirit may cause harm because it cannot be reborn.

Distributist Society

In many parts of Southeast Asia, culture is more important than money. There is reward and a great sense of pride in being self-sufficient, in providing for one's family as tradition dictates. All is shared within the family, often the extended family. Children are loved and accepted everywhere. Everyone in the village is expected to keep an eye on children and discipline them if they get out of line. There is no sense of competition or keeping up with the neighbors. Success is measured in numbers of family members and the satisfaction of living freely and working