

Hmong Religious Practice in Australia.

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1. Settlement History:

The Hmong are a people whose ancestors are believed to have lived in China more than 4,500 years ago. Many of those who are found in Burma, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand migrated from southern China in the 19th century in search for farming lands and after suppression of their many uprisings from the Chinese. More 4 million Hmong still live in China today. Laos has 460,000 in 2005.



Hmong in traditional costumes, 2008.

The earliest Hmong to settle in Australia arrived in March 1976 as refugees from Laos that were accepted by the Australian government from refugee camps in Thailand. Like other Indochinese refugees, the Hmong came here after the communist take-over of Indochina. Small numbers followed in subsequent years, mostly to Melbourne, Hobart and Sydney. Those in New South Wales were first housed in the migrant hostels in East Hills, Villawood and Cabramatta. Some who had relatives and friends living in these suburbs eventually chose to establish themselves there. New housing estates were also opened in the Fairfield area in the early 1980's, so that many refugee families profited from these developments to buy houses in St Johns Park and Bonnyrigg. This resulted in many Hmong families settling in the new area.

There are about 2000 Hmong living in Australia today, with half of them in Queensland. The Hmong population in Sydney is estimated at 180, most of whom are in the Fairfield local government area.

In 1978, the Hmong in various states set up the Hmong-Australia Society, a mutual assistance association. They have benefited from much help from Fairfield City Council which has generously allowed them to use local parks and community halls in Carramar and Bonnyrigg to hold meetings or to celebrate the Hmong New Year. The Council and other local organizations such as the Cabramatta Community Centre and the Lao Community Advancement Cooperative have given much support to the Hmong during the early period of their settlement in the area.

2. The Hmong Religion

The Hmong religion is very similar to folk beliefs (*khuam xuathue phuenbanh*) found among neighboring groups in China and Laos such as the Chinese, Khamu and Lao. It is an assemblage of many beliefs, based on ancestor worship and the practice of animism. Paying respect to ancestors and honoring them on important occasions of the year are practices that are likely to be borrowed from the Chinese, while beliefs in the existence of spirits are local influences that exist among rural inhabitants of Laos and other parts of Southeast Asia.

Traditionally, Hmong animism consists of beliefs in:

- the existence of the soul (some say 3, others say 32 souls) and its importance in maintaining good health or in causing sickness,
- the existence of household spirits: door spirit, central post spirit (“*xwm kab*”) and other household spiritual protectors - all important in safeguarding the well-being of household members. These house spirits are called “tamed spirits” (“*dab nyeg*”).
- the existence of natural spirits that can harm as well as protect one’s health, such as spirits of the woods and trees, rocks and streams, animals and birds, etc.. These are known as “wild spirits” (“*dab qus*” or spirits of nature).
- maintaining balance between spiritual and physical well-being through:
 - a. Respect for and seeking protection from both sets of “tamed” and “wild” spirits, by making offerings of food, animals, incense and paper money to them and to dead ancestors. This is sometimes called “ancestor-worship”, although this term does not accurately describe what the Hmong practice. They make offerings to ancestors and spirits, but do not “worship” them.
 - b. Not offending both tamed and wild spirits by not going into domains reserved for them or believed to be inhabited by them.

3. Place of Worship

The Hmong religion does not use a single community facility to gather worshippers in one place such as a church or a temple. It is a very personal and family-focused practice which requires the head of each family to know all the rituals and to be able to perform them, when needed. All the religious ceremonies are done in the private house of the person concerned. It does not have a set time for when people should get together for a ceremony. There are no regular preaching, no bible and no written rules or precepts.

A Hmong's house is his temple. The house is designed specifically for this purpose with a door facing the East (*qhov rooj tag*) and one facing the South (*qhov rooj txuas*). Most of the rituals are done at the eastern door. The southern door is for everyday use. The house altar for the *Xwm Kab* (God of Good Fortune) is set up on the main wall on the West which faces directly the eastern door. In traditional villages, the body of a dead person is hung on a stretcher on this western wall during funeral. Near the fire place, the central post (*ncej tag*) holding up the house structure is vital as the central place for the house spirits although there is no altar here for them. For some Hmong, the door spirit (*dab rooj*) that protects harvests, money and domestic animals is kept in a bamboo basket in the bedroom of the household head. For others, it is kept on the side of the eastern door.

The Hmong have been heavily influenced by the Chinese who have dominated them politically in China for many centuries. For this reason, they strongly believe in the power of *feng-shui*. The positioning of a house or a grave is thus very important. No two houses should be in the line of each other in any direction as it is believed that such positioning will make one house take away the good fortune of the other. Thus, few Hmong houses or graves will be found to be aligned in a village.

In Australia and other Western countries, it is difficult to have a house designed or positioned according to these traditional beliefs. All houses are aligned along a street, and so are graves in cemeteries. The Hmong have to compromise and make do with what they can when they have to buy ready-made houses from other people. Such houses may not have an eastern or southern door, so the Hmong use any door for ceremonies.

4. Ceremonies and Rituals

Depending on the need, ceremonies can be performed by the male household head or the spiritual head of a clan or cluster of male relatives. More difficult ceremonies are done by ritual experts, or people who have especially learned to perform these ceremonies such as soul-calling or *hu plig* (*su khuan* in Lao), the shaman for spiritual healing (*txiv neeb*), and various experts skilled in funeral rites like the reed pipe player (*txiv qeej*), the soul chanter (*nkauj plig*) and the blessing singers (*txiv xaiv*).

The most common rituals are performed when a person is sick and no physical causes can be found. In such a situation, the Hmong will resort to spiritual healing through shamanism. They believe that when a person experiences severe fright or when evil spirit

captures the soul of the sick person either to exchange for food offerings, or to punish for trespassing into the forbidden abode of the spirits.

To find a cure for a sickness without a physical cause, the Hmong may:

- consult a shaman, or spiritual healer who is called upon to become a healer by shamanic spirits. He can exorcise evil spirits, or spells cast by ill-intentioned persons using magic formula (*tso dab*) on the sick person. The shaman will try to recover the lost or separated soul believed to have been taken by evil spirits and put it back to the body of the sick person through shaman trances. This is usually done in two sessions: one to diagnose the sickness, and the last one to cure, using a piglet but it may be dog or a goat.
- perform a soul-calling ceremony or *hu plig* (*su khuan* in Lao) to urge a soul who may have wandered away to come back and reunite with the body of the sick person. In cases where the soul has been captured by evil spirits, food and the soul of a chicken or piglet may be used to exchange for the human soul. This is a more complex ceremony and only a shaman has the skills to do it.
- resort to “magic formulas” or “*khawv koob*” (“*khatha*” in Lao) by reciting the formula and blowing into a bowl of blessing water, then using the water to apply to a wound, or burnt area which is located on a specific part of the body.
- use medicinal herbs (*tshuaj*), roots or plants either by drinking a boiled herbal concoction, or by applying mashed leaves of a plant on the affected area.

In Australia, the Hmong usually resort to modern medical care as a first option by consulting their local doctors or going to the nearest hospital. Many have also converted to Christianity, Buddhism and other religions, especially in the USA, and will not use traditional healing methods based on beliefs in the power of spirits. However, language problems, medical insurance costs, negative experiences with the Australian health care system or a firm belief in Hmong traditions may lead some Hmong (especially the elderly) to continue believing in their old religion and using the methods of curing illnesses based on these beliefs. This is shown mostly clearly by their continuing resort to shamanism as a healing practice in the Hmong system of beliefs about the existence of the soul and spirits.

Life cycle milestones

The Hmong have a number of important occasions in life where religious ceremonies are used to mark them off as milestones.

Birth:

The first major of such events is the birth of a new baby. Three days after birth, a *naming ceremony* is performed by an elderly member of the family or community who knows how to do the soul-calling ritual. The goal is to welcome the baby into the family and to give it a name. Two chickens are killed for food and a small meal prepared. For some Hmong, another ceremony known as *xi poj dab pog* or “sending back to Goddess of babies” is carried out a month after the birth. In this ceremony, a soul calling ritual is done, but it may involve the killing of a small pig or even a cow to thank the Goddess of babies for sending the child to the parents. Members of the community will be invited to take part in the feast, and to do a *khi tes* or *baci* (in Lao) by tying a cotton thread around the wrist of the baby to give it blessing and to wish it good health.



A baci ceremony, 2008.

Marriage:

The next milestone for the Hmong is marriage. Hmong weddings are very elaborate and may last 2-3 days, but most of it does not involve religion. Much time is spent on negotiating the terms of the marriage and on wedding chanting by the *mej koob* or negotiators who represent each side of the marriage: two on the groom side, and two on the bride's side. After the negotiations are completed, a feast is prepared. Before the family members and their guests can eat, a religious ceremony to offer food (*laig dab*) to the ancestors of the bride has to be performed. A bowl of rice and a bowl of meat with spoons around the brim are laid on a small table, and the head of the house will call on each generation of dead members in the family to come and join in the food offering as a mark of respect and reverence.

Renaming after marriage, trauma or sickness:

The Hmong usually give a new name to a man after he has 2 or 3 children as mark of recognition for reaching his adult married status. This ceremony is called “*tis npe laus*” or giving an adult name. It is very similar to other ceremonies where a feast is prepared and a wrist-tying or *baci* is given to the man concerned by his family and the community. Everybody eats and is asked to remember to call him by the new name from that day on. Sometimes, the old name was changed by adding a second name to it, but often a completely different name may be adopted. Before the renaming ceremony, a man’s name often has only one syllable, but the “old status” name has two or more syllables in it.

Renaming is also done when a person has been very sick in an attempt to find a cure, to disguise the person so that evil spirits cannot find him or her after a new name has been adopted. Sometimes, this may involve a baby who cries constantly and the shaman may diagnose that the baby does not like its name, so that it is renamed with a different one. Sometimes, a traumatic event may lead to the need to change names such as when a twin dies in tragic circumstances, the other twin will be given a new name to avoid the dead twin being able to find the living twin and harm him or her. These renaming ceremonies are always done by shamans.

Extending mandate for sick elderly:

If an elderly Hmong has been unwell for a long time, a shaman session may be carried out to extend the life of the person on earth. This ceremony is called “*ntxiv siav*” or extending mandate. It involves the shaman performing a trance and the killing of a pig to use its soul to exchange for the soul of the sick elder, so that its life on earth can be extended by many more years.

Death and Funeral:

The Hmong have very elaborate funerals that last from 3 to 10 days in their traditional settings in Southeast Asia. In Australia where most people cannot take time off work, funerals usually take place over a weekend, starting on Friday night and finishing on Monday because most cemeteries are closed on Sunday. During funerals, only diced beef boiled with salt is allowed to be eaten with rice, as other dishes are considered too rich and do not fit in such a sad occasion. Funerals are not seen as a time for feasting and drinking.

There are many rituals involved in a Hmong funeral, starting with the chanting of the “Showing the Way” (*qhuab ke*) to send the soul of the dead person to join the ancestors in the Afterworld. After this ritual, the reed pipe or *qeej/khene* music will be offered by players who have specially learned this funeral music. They will play on and off for the duration of the funeral, starting with the *qeej tu siav* or expiring song, then the *qeej tsa*

nees or the raising of the body onto the funeral horse (stretcher). The funeral songs are all in poetry, and are conveyed through the reed pipe music, not verbally. Other songs are also played such as the offering of breakfast, lunch and dinner to the soul of the dead person for each day of the funeral.



A funeral in Sydney, January 2009.

The final major ritual is called the “blessing of the living descendants” or “*hais txiv xaiiv*”. This is done by at least two experts in this chanting. It usually last all night on the last night of the funeral. All living relatives of the dead person will kneel on the floor before the coffin and listen with a stick of incense in their hands. They will bow occasionally to the dead person as indicated by the chanters. The chanters will sing to them in poetry about the purpose of life on earth and why people die, and will give advice to those present on how to do be good in life as a last farewell act from their dead relative. This is the saddest and most touching part of a Hmong funeral, but the ceremony is only done for elderly people.

Re-incarnation:

Like other Asian societies, the Hmong believe in reincarnation. They always bury their dead, they do not cremate, except when the person involved has become Buddhist. Burial is preferred because the body is not destroyed and can be preserved whole for the re-incarnation of the soul. If any part of the body is missing at death, they believe that the person will be born again without that body part. For this reason, they do not like autopsy to be performed on a dead person, nor do they like surgery that will remove a body part. The coffin must not have any nails or metal components, as these may fall on the body after the coffin become decayed, and that part of the body with the metal object will become the seat of sickness in the next life since metal does not decay.

Major celebrations

There are other major events or celebrations that involve religion, the most common being:

a. New Year:

At New Year, those Hmong who belong to the same clan get together to undergo the *lwm qaib* or New Year blessing ceremony in a designated location in the village or a park for those in Australia. A grass rope is made and tied to a small tree, extending to one end. Everybody walks under this rope, three times backward to thank the old year, and three times forward to welcome the new year. During this walking, an elder will hold a live rooster in his hand at the foot of the small tree where the rope is tied to. He will chant New Year blessing to all the participants, and wish them good health and prosperity for the coming year.



New Year Blessing ceremony, Bonnyrigg, NSW, 2009.

After this communal ceremony, the Hmong go back home and change the paper decoration on the *xwm kab* altar on the western wall of their house to make new offerings of food, paper money and chicken to the God of Fortune. A rooster will be killed to make food to offer to the family ancestors and local spirits (*laig dab peb caug*). A candle and a set of 5 incense sticks are kept burning in front of the *xwm kab* altar for the next three days. Other than these ceremonies, Hmong New Year is mostly a time for fun and festivity, especially for young people who come together and play ball game to do courting with members of the opposite sex. This festivity can last from a few days to two weeks, depending on how many young people there are. It is also a time for resting for the older people, after all the farming work has been done for the year.

b. Other rituals:

Other major religious rituals are observed by the Hmong from time to time, depending on the need for them. These are the *nyuj dab* (ox ceremony), *dab roog* (door ceremony) and *npua tai* (pig ceremony). The ox ceremony is a food offering ritual that involve the killing of an ox to offer to the soul of a dead parent, as this need is made known through a sickness in the family. The door ceremony is offered to the spirit of the eastern door, for it to welcome good health, domestic animals, money and harvests into the family. The pig ceremony is done only by some clans of Hmong people, as a mark of appreciation for a legendary pig who helped the Hmong to cross a big river when they escaped from pursuing Chinese soldiers during their migration from China.

Gender differentiation

The Hmong often separate religious practices along gender line. In general, women do not practice religious rituals and ceremonies. They prepare food and other necessities for the ceremonies, but do not take part or carry them out. While the men do the ceremonies, the women cook and chat among themselves. The only women who have a role in ceremonies are the women shamans or spiritual healers (Mo Yao in Lao). Herbalists can also be mostly women.

5. Issues

Since the beginning of their Australian settlement, the practice of Hmong religion has been met with problems for two major reasons:

- a. the necessity to kill live domestic animals at home to offer to spirits and to make food as part of their religious rituals is against the law in the new country; and
- b. the lack of older people who know how to carry out ritual ceremonies because most of those accepted for resettlement in Australia were young and inexperienced in Hmong religious practices.

There are many issues faced by the Hmong in their practice of animism in Australia, with the main ones being:

- assimilation of Australian values and loss of beliefs in the old practices.
- animal killing for sacrifices to malevolent spirits and offering to ancestors, which is not allowed by Australian law.
- lack of interest among the young generation in learning rituals and acquiring spiritual healing skills.
- the lack of new callers to become shamans and ritual experts.

- Gender attitudes: women are still seen as cook and food preparers, instead of ritual performers. Some are shamans and herbalists, but mostly men have ceremonial roles.
- Difficulty to find funeral homes that allow performance of Hmong ceremonies that are noisy and last for days, not just hours like other people.

6. Future

Although many Hmong have converted to Christianity in other Western countries, the majority of those in Australia still follow their traditional beliefs in animism and ancestor worship. They believe that without these beliefs, there would be no Hmong culture and identity. This cultural assertion will continue so long as there are members in the Hmong community who practice this system of religious beliefs.

However, the issues cited above and the lack of religious knowledge among the younger generation means that this form of religious beliefs will diminish to the point of extinction after the passing of the old generation. It is difficult to see what the Hmong in Australia will adopt as their religion in the distant future. Perhaps, they may convert to other religions but some many will still practice the old traditional beliefs.

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