Hmong Funeral in Australia in 1992

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On Saturday the 5th of September 1992 six Hmong youths went to the Royal National Park south of Sydney to celebrate the birthday of their friend, Phillip Lee. They hired three canoes from the Audley boatshed but neglected to hire life jackets. Thirty minutes later three of the youths - Jason Lee, aged 15, Phillip Lee, aged 14 and Tong Vang, aged 19, had drowned. Two of the boys belonged to different subclans of the Lee clan and one to the Vang clan. Tong Vang had commenced tertiary study this year and is survived by a twin sister.

This event threw the Hmong community in Australia into turmoil, not only because of its tragic and traumatic unexpectedness, but also because of the ritual requirements that accompany death in Hmong society.

This paper will describe how the Australian Hmong fulfilled those ritual requirements in an Australian context.

But firstly: who are the Hmong and how does the "here and now" reality of their life in Australia compare to their traditional "then and there" life in Laos? The following quotation, although taken from an American newspaper, is applicable to the Australian experience of most Hmong people:

> The Hmong made one airplane flight from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century. Within the space of seventy-two hours these mountain people were taken from bamboo-thatched huts in refugee camps along the Mekong river and put into two and three bedroom apartments in Philadelphia, Minneapolis and other major American cities. They are unaware of how to deal with the simplest of tasks for Americans: turning on and off lights, using the refrigerator, stove or oven, paying bills. (Sherman 1985:13)

The Hmong people are an ethnic minority indigenous to south western China and parts of Indochina. Their traditional way of life centred around shifting agriculture in mountainous regions; a belief system based on ancestor worship; and a social structure based on kinship ties through the patrilineage and clan systems. To some extent, Hmong myths and legends define Hmong ethnicity in terms of an absence of material and conceptual properties which they have observed in the dominant majority cultures by which they have always been surrounded. These include the absence of writing or literacy and a long history of being without both a state or territory and a ruler or head of state. The obverse side of these perceived lacunae include a strong sense of political, economic, social and cultural self-sufficiency and a rich oral tradition of legends, stories, mythology, ritual texts and extemporised sung poetry.

The Hmong have always been a migratory people. Traditionally, voluntary resettlement occurs as a result of the use of slash and burn agricultural techniques: new land was sought on average every ten years and villages were constantly regrouping or reassembling (see for example Geddes 1976). Forced resettlement has been occurring since at least 800AD, when aggression from the dominant Han culture forced the Hmong ever southward, to the remote mountainous regions of the south western Chinese provinces (Yunnan, Guizhou

and Sichuan) and, in the early nineteenth century to Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. After 1975 some 100,000 Hmong fled from the Pathet Lao regime in Laos to Thailand where they were placed in refugee camps under the authority of the Thai government. Hmong in the refugee camps found themselves facing a protracted time of "temporary asylum", grouped haphazardly in arrangements which bore no relationship to traditional village, clan, subclan or patrilineal relationships. Many Hmong have now been resettled in western countries, including France, the United States, Canada, French Guyana and Australia. Some 50,000 remain in the camps of northern Thailand, awaiting possible repatriation to Laos as a result of UNHCR policy which has turned away from the Hmong people in order to assist Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees. There are now (1992) about 1000 Hmong in Australia of whom approximately 400 live in Victoria. Demographic data about the Australian Hmong is destined to remain vague from 1986 on: the ancestry question was abolished in the 1990 census and the Hmong language does not appear in the language question, to which most Hmong reply "Laotian".

The Hmong in the camps continued to use their tradition of secular improvised sung poetry (kwv txhiaj) for the expression of strong personal emotions concerning love, war and separation. After resettlement in western countries, two aspects of western technology were immediately seized upon by this group of non-literate but self-sufficient people: the cassette tape and the telephone:

> a people with still a predominantly oral tradition communicate with relatives in other parts of the globe by cassette recorder and urgently desire telephones, so that lineage names can be entered in telephone directories and traditional lineage hospitality practiced on a global scale. (Tapp 1982: 125; see also Hassoun 1985)

The Hmong have retained a remarkable sense of cultural identity. In spite of their long and more recently radically scattered settlement, forced and voluntary migrations and prolonged periods in temporary asylum, they have managed to keep intact their mutually intelligible dialects, their shamanic diagnostic and healing practices and their elaborate funeral ritual. As Geddes commented:

> The preservation by the Miao (Hmong) of their ethnic identity for such a long time despite their being split into many small groups surrounded by different alien peoples and scattered over a vast geographical area is an outstanding record paralleling in some ways that of the Jews but more remarkable because they lacked the unifying forces of literacy and a doctrinal religion and because the cultural features they preserved seemed to be more numerous. (Geddes 1976:10)

(Debate about what constitutes "Hmongness" is discussed at length by Tapp 1989 and McNamer 1986. Tapp discusses at length the "theory of deteriorating knowledge” held by the Hmong. See also Gary Lee on the Hmong adaptation in Australia.)

Although the Hmong do not have a word meaning "music"' Hmong refugees from Laos acknowledge a shared musical tradition which can be characterised either as never changing or as constantly changing, a perception which may be indicative of individual Hmong identities within the context of a constantly changing personal and collective history. As Feld writes:

> the notion that the most general relationship between sound structures and social structure concerns identity has strong support from qualitative research... musical structures frame the message: this was... where we are, who we are (Feld 1984:405)

or, as Graham, writing about the ceremonies of the Ch'uan Miao in China in 1937 put it:

> Among primitive peoples ceremonies are exceedingly important. They enable the tribes or ethnic groups to face in unity the crises of life, and to solve their difficulties. They bind the individuals into one psyche and emotional unity, causing them to unconsciously absorb the emotions and ideas of the group. Ceremonials generally come down from a remote past, and are uncritically received and passed

> on to future generations. Through them one can learn the sentiments, beliefs, and practices of the people among whom they are found (Graham 1937:71).

A story of the origins of music tells of how Suab, a creator spirit, gave special words to the Hmong in separate boxes. The words for funeral and marriage ceremonies are said to have remained in their particular boxes to this day - brought out only on certain occasions when they are needed and then returned. The words, therefore, might be considered preserved. Another box - that containing words of love and other sentiment - was opened immediately, upon receipt, by curious people. The words spilled out and were scattered everywhere. They became part of the changing world.

The practice of Hmong music shows this duality. The ideals of correctness and conformance to a proper procedure seem to dominate the performance of the songs that form the marriage and the funeral ritual which, although transmitted orally from generation to generation, emphasise exact unvarying repetition of specified texts in order to fulfil the requirements of important life and death transitions. These texts have been obtained from a superhuman source but they are expected to continue unaltered through time and space serving, perhaps, to secure transitory and diverse human life in an unchanging and unifying tradition.

On the other hand, love songs and songs of strong feeling are improvisatory and emphasise personal creativity. The boundaries within which improvisation can occur are specified (see Catlin 1982, Mareschal 1976 and Johns 1986) but clever and subtle manipulation within these constraints is highly valued. Through textual variation and optional melodies, while using conventional phrases and special "flowery" poetic language common to all Hmong, an individual can adapt this song form to reflect upon his changing circumstances.

The musical structure of all Hmong music, whether instrumental or vocal, precomposed or improvised, ritual or secular, is governed by the nature of the language. Hmong is classified as a variant of the Miao-Yao languages of the Sino-Tibetan family. It is a monosyllabic tonal language with seven basic tones and two alternate tones. Its complexity is summarised as follows:

> ...it is Miao-Yao which is the tonal champion among the tone-prone languages of East Asia... [they have] extremely complex phonologies, with elaborate tone systems, pre-nasalised consonants, pre-glottalized sonorants, post-velar stops, dentally, plurally and laterally released affricatives, voiceless nasals, central and back unrounded vowels... Such features are also to be found in the other language families of the area, but it is as if Miao-Yao had developed them all to the nth degree. (Matisoff 1983)

In the sung repertoire, vocal tones are converted into musical pitches in a complicated yet systematic manner (Catlin 1982). In the case of the ritual instrumental repertoire performed on the bamboo mouth organ (*qeej*), the vocal tones are embedded in a rich melodic, rhythmic, drone and chordal texture which the instrument produces simultaneously. The instrument literally "speaks". Extracting the vocal pitch-musical tone relationship from the music of the *qeej* is one of the main tasks of this research in progress.

Death is the most important ritual time for the Hmong. Traditionally, an elaborate three day ceremony took place, with further ritual conducted 13 days and again one year after death. The *qeej* plays almost continuously, instructing and commanding the various souls of the deceased in their journeys both to the grave site and to the realm of the other world, ruled by Ntxwj Nyoog. The ceremony is called "Showing the Way" (*Kab Ke Pam Tuag*). It must be performed in order to return the soul of the deceased to its ancestors' home, to prepare the soul for its next journey into life, and to make way for those still living and those yet to be born. In Australia there are several practitioners of the ritual who were brought to Australia as a result of successful lobbying of the federal government by the Hmong Australia Society.

Learning the funeral procedure is a long and difficult study, apparently restricted to men. 4 *qeej* players performed the ritual at the ceremony for the three drowned boys in Sydney in September. Two, both of the Thao clan, were bussed from Melbourne. The other two, of the Yang and Lee clans, reside in Sydney. One of the boys of the Yang clan attended as a student. The repertoire for the ritual can really only be learned during the ceremony - its content is regarded as being extremely powerful. If it is performed or learned in a private dwelling not at the time of a funeral, a living soul may be sent inadvertently into the next world. For this reason, the two Hmong who are assisting me with this research, Vangmar Virathone and Seng Thao, always take the tape recorder outside when they are discussing the transliteration and translation of the funeral texts.

Seng Thao, the *qeej* player who has recorded all of the significant sections of the three day ceremony for me, comes from Muangkasy on the border between Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Xieng Khouang in Laos. He is 32 years old. He learned the funeral ritual in his isolated village between the ages of 9 and 15, while walking to the fields and in between working in the fields. He fled to Ban Vinai camp in May 1979 and came to Australia in March 1991 as a member of the "Cultural Program" (see below).

Although Australian Hmong still perform an Australian version of the traditional funeral ceremony, as outlined below, McNamer reports that many American Hmong are foregoing the ceremony, for a variety of reasons:

> Many American Hmong communities simply don't have access to ritual practitioners. The demands of schooling and employment concerns pre-empt musical training. Also *qeej* are hard to come by... The funeral ritual is not used by those who become Christian. The current economic situation of the Hmong in the United States prohibits big ceremonies surrounding wedding or funerals, even if enough time could be taken from jobs and school... Abbreviated versions of these rituals are having to make do (McNamer 1989: 75-76).

The Australian Hmong face similar circumstances but they have managed to adapt the funeral ceremony to Australian conditions and it is still regarded as an essential part of the Hmong way of life in Australia. One problem identified by McNamer - that of conversion to Christianity - has not pertained in Australia. Although Tapps has discussed the conversion of Hmong individuals and even whole villages to Christianity in Thailand by missionaries who have been working to this end for over 100 years, very few Australian Hmong have converted to Christianity which causes particular problems in the kinship system which is so strongly associated with funeral and burial systems ... burials for Christians in some cases cannot be performed by their clan members because the converts have rejected their original mortuary customs (Tapps 1989a:80).

> Hmong resettling in the US were dependent on church and community sponsorship, emphasising assimilation, and came into early contact with people and organisations which caused them to lose confidence in the relevance of their traditional beliefs in the new society. In Australia, the policy of multiculturalism, with its strong government support services, encouraged ethnic groups to maintain their cultures "without prejudice or disadvantage: and to acknowledge common values which give all citizens a sense of being Australian" (The Galbally Report, 1978, p.4).

Access to experienced ritual practitioners was also solved in an efficient and self-sufficient, if painstaking, way by the Australian Hmong. In 1978 the Hmong-Australia Society (HMAS), an agency which transcends clan boundaries, was established. As Gary Yia Lee has pointed out:

> faced with only a residual social structure among its members, the HMAS tries to promote mutual support across clan boundaries by insisting that Hmong refugees assist each other on the basis of their common ethnic background rather than members of a lineage or clan... it is clear that most of [its] concerns reflect a conscious attempt to put Hmong cultural values into practice in a new environment in the virtual absence of kinship networks which traditionally oversee these activities.

> The HMAS, thus, replaces the social structure by being a focal point for members to fall back on in time of celebration or crisis (Lee 1984:18).

In 1983 the HMAS launched a "Cultural Program" lobby with the Australian federal government and succeeded in having four new criteria accepted for a special intake of Hmong refugees. Those criteria included the ability to play the *qeej* and to carry out the funeral ritual. As a result, the funeral ritual, as well as various shamanic rituals, can now be carried out in Australia.

Following the drowning in Sydney, the HMAS once again played an important role. Thirty-two members from Melbourne, five from Queensland and several from Hobart converged on Sydney, to assist in both practical and emotional ways.

Variations in the performance of the funeral ritual can occur as a result of a number of factors, some of which are the result of migration and threaten the continued existence of the entire ceremony. Conversion to Christianity is an obvious example; but as Gary Lee mentioned to me, the Hmong suffered such dislocation during the war in Laos, their flight and subsequent refugee status that much of the oral tradition simply disappeared from people's memory. During this time, too, the opportunity for young people to learn the ritual repertoire was severely restricted. Hmong who were sent to the cities prior to 1975 for a non-Hmong education or who went abroad for a western education generally have an intuitive grasp of the funeral ritual in spite or perhaps because of the fact that they have become literate both in Hmong and other (western) languages. In Australia, the first Hmong arrivals consisted of 7 men who studied under the Columbo Plan (given by the Australian Government) for tertiary degrees at Australian universities, who themselves say that they have little knowledge of traditional ways of life. A more recent wave of arrivals consists mainly of Hmong from the refugee camps of northern Thailand, many of whom are illiterate in their own language as well as in English.

According to Gary Yia Lee, the funeral ritual even as it is practiced in Melbourne and Sydney shows some variations. The Melbourne ritual is dominated by a group from Samneua, the most northerly province in Laos and therefore the closest to southern China, which is regarded as being the home of the ancestors. This group performs the "original" version. It was isolated geographically in Laos and is also the most recently arrived group of ritual practitioners in Australia. The Sydney ritual, on the other hand, is dominated by a group from Xieng Khouang. They simplified the ritual, adopting some Lao vocabulary. This group suffered more in the war, had more contact with urban lifestyle, went through the refugee experience with ramifications different to those of the Samneua group, and also received a Lao education.

The changes to the ceremony in the Australian context seem to have occurred primarily in non musically specific aspects, with purely musical change being minimal and a response to two factors: the youthful age of the three deceased boys, and the time available to devote to each of their funerals. Because the deceased were young, references in the rest of the ceremony to their achievements in life and to their descendants were restricted, if not eliminated.

Each of the main sections of the ceremony which involve the singing of the ritual text and the playing of the *qeej* was performed, including one variation of the section concerned with the taking of the corpse to the grave site which must be carried out for members of the Vang clan (see attached: order of the ceremony). The order and content of the sections and subsections of the ceremony as recorded in Melbourne by Seng Thao and as performed in Sydney at the funerals of the three drowned boys seem to be almost identical to those reported in the literature: by Bourotte from the Tran Ninh province in Laos in 1943; by Graham from southwest China in 1937 and by Chindarsi from Thailand in 1976; by Lemoine in Laos in 1972 and 1983; and by Tapp from Thailand in 1989 (a and b). Although the extent and elaborateness of the funeral ritual will depend upon who has died - be they young

or old, male or female, important or not, wealthy or not - and players may have stylistic differences in small details of their performance as a result of having different teachers, the important and overriding feature of the ceremony, whether it is performed in Australia, southern China, Thailand or Laos seems to be the authentic reproduction of words (i.e. music) based in a common understanding of Hmong beginnings and essential for the correct passage of the deceased soul back to the source of those beginnings. In this part of the Hmong musical repertoire, therefore, musical change, in Blacking's terms, has not occurred in Australia:

> The study of music change must be concerned ultimately with significant innovations in music sounds, but innovations in music sounds are not necessarily evidence of music change. If the concept of musical change is to have any heuristic value, it must denote significant changes that are peculiar to musical systems, and not simply the musical consequences of social, political, economic, or other changes (Blacking 1977:2).

Traditionally the funeral ritual extends over three days, in the house of the deceased. It involves animal sacrifice, extensive preparation of meals of meat and rice both for the deceased and the extended community attending the funeral, with specific *qeej* repertoire for each meal - breakfast, lunch and dinner. The deceased is escorted from the house in a specific way, and the grave site is chosen according to a complicated set of geomantic principles. All of these crucial aspects of the traditional ceremony had to either be adapted or be eliminated as a result of the exigencies of living in an Australian environment and living under Australian law.

Some of those changes are described below.

1. Federal law allows for the storage of a corpse at home for up to 8 hours. Clearly, the 3-day ceremony could not proceed. The Sydney community applied to its local council and received permission not only to bring the corpses home but also to make the ritual sacrifices of chickens and pigs. Traditionally, a bull (buffalo) is also sacrificed. This part of the ceremony is still practiced but the bull is sacrificed at the abattoir or farm and the meat is brought home and presented to the deceased. In the Sydney funerals of the three boys, because of the young age of the deceased, the sacrifice of a bull was not required.

The sacrifice of animals in both funeral and shamanic rituals constitutes a major problem for Hmong who live in high rise housing commission flats. The community is planning the construction of a special building in which all ritual, regardless of clan, could be performed. All the funerals in the past, including the Sydney ones, were held in the large private homes of the deceased.

2. In Hmong tradition, no two persons may be buried on the same day. The community proceeded as follows: the first boy was brought home at 8.00 AM on the Wednesday and the ceremony was finished by 2.30 PM of the following day when he was buried; the second boy was brought home at 5.00 PM on the same day and the ceremony finished at 2.30 PM on the Friday, with the body being buried on that Friday; and the third and eldest boy of the Vang clan, was brought home on the Sunday at 4.00 PM. The ceremony concluded at 2.30 PM on the following Monday, when he was buried.

3. Traditionally, immediately following the death, the village and surrounding villages are notified that there has been a death by the discharge of a rifle three times. In Australia the telephone fulfilled this function, including notifying the relatives of one of the boys, including his father, who live in the United States. The Department of Immigration was also approached with an urgent request for a visa for the father so that he could attend the funeral. This was granted.

4. An autopsy was performed on each of the boys as part of the legal requirement and the next of kin were notified of the procedures as a matter of public relation only as permission was not required.

5. Traditionally a drum of wood and cowhide

is constructed for use in the ritual. The drum engages in "conversation" with the *qeej*. In Sydney, a kerosene tin was cut open at both ends and leather sheeting was attached, in the traditional manner, with blocks of wood and strings around the drum.

6. The nature of the construction of western houses also caused some changes to the procedure of the ritual. In Laos the drum is normally hung inside the house to a bamboo and wooden structure which is embedded in the earthen floor. In Sydney, a bamboo pole, to which the drum was attached, was embedded in the bricks of the wall of the house. Traditionally, the site for a Hmong house is chosen with great care, as it is important that the site be acceptable to the ancestors. In Laos, Hmong houses have an earthen floor, a thatched roof, bamboo or timber walls and an open-hearth fire.

7. In Laos a casket is not used for the corpse. At one point during the ceremony the corpse is raised onto a bier which is symbolic of a flying horse. In Sydney a very small "artificial horse" was made as a symbol of the bier. It was taken to the grave, broken into pieces and placed on top of the grave.

8. The burial of the corpse is a participated in by the Hmong community. The Hmong had to prepare the graves themselves as the grave diggers and the funeral director did not understand this requirement. In Laos the choice of the burial site is subject to a geomantic system:

> we must look for certain places in the mountains: rough, jagged mountains are no good, we can use them but later the sons and grandsons of the dead will become thieves. The mountain to the left is the stronger one, that to the right the toiling one. We have to look for good loojmem (dragon veins) for our mother and father because if we don't our sons and grandsons will not be good people. When they die a good place must be chosen for them.Hmong may not be great soldiers or very rich, but so long as a good burial site is chosen for the ancestors, they will be able to live for themselves and not work for others (as related by Vaj Suav Vaj, Thailand, Tapp 1989b:160).

Obviously there is no real choice of burial site for the Hmong in Australia in the large cities. But a few families have managed to find suitable sites for their elders in the nearby hilly country towns.

9. One of the deceased is survived by a twin sister, who had to be ritually "adopted" into another clan, as it is believed that twins share the same life from birth. Her adoption would help to prevent her untimely death.

10. The cost of providing food to a large number of people, as well as the costs of the western funeral - about $6000 or more per family - were more than covered by a contribution of $10 from each member of the HMAS, as stated in the HMAS constitution, plus donations as gestures of love and support for the bereaved families. In addition, the boys of the Lee clan had life insurance.

11. One of the main problems facing the Hmong community in Australia is its small numbers and consequent lack of full representation of clans at significant times such as birth, death and marriage. As Tapp has pointed out:

> funeral customs and differences of ritual are one of the main means whereby different descent groups within clans are distinguished. A funeral can only take place in the house of the same descent group as the deceased, because only they will perform rituals in the same way (Tapp 1989a:82).

In Australia the community of the Hmong-Australia Society has to fulfil the function of the clan, as Gary Lee has indicated.

Some purely western elements were introduced, including the formation of a guard of honour at the grave side by school friends; the sending of flowers; and speech making at the grave side.

The most obvious change in the ritual is its encapsulation into a period of 24 to 36 hours in

most cases. As mentioned earlier, in the traditional version the corpse is offered breakfast, lunch and dinner on each of the days, accompanied by *qeej* songs. The longer ceremony provides the soul with ample opportunity to experience its last moments in this world before proceeding to the next, never to return. It also provides the bereaved with an extended period of mourning which acts as a form of counselling for them, binding them not only to the living community but also enhancing their understanding of the union of the deceased with the commonality of all Hmong, dead, living and yet to be born. This part of the musical repertoire appears to have been abandoned because of time constraints. However, this occasion fulfilled the traditional functions of the funeral ritual:

> beside its overt purposes, the funeral is also an occasion for learning, and an occasion when kinship structure is ritually enacted... the Hmong have no other customs to rival in depth and complexity those associated with "the way of death" which have as their ultimate aim the safe dispatch of the soul of the deceased to the underworld and its reincarnation as a member of the same clan (Tapp 1989a).

The drownings in Sydney have highlighted various problems to which the Hmong community in Australia has yet to find a solution. The three survivors of the tragedy do not know enough of the intricacies of Hmong flowery language to understand the funeral ritual and hence could not benefit from its therapeutic and cohesive functions. The family tradition is questioned and often rejected:

> From a society where age was revered, where adults knew everything needed in order to live and succeed, and could teach it to each new generation, where children were taught to respect the wisdom and authority of their elders, the Hmong came into a society where the accent is on youth, where the new is valued, where each generation is learning new knowledge unknown to its parents, is encouraged to doubt, to question everything from the past, even to resist authority, in order to find new ways to solve new problems and to cope with ever changing conditions in a dynamic culture and a fluid society (Johnson 1985: v11).

I have video of the funerals of the three Sydney Hmong boys, but have decided not to show it in this forum out of respect for the bereaved families. It should also be noted that normally there is a ritual prohibition on speaking about death or the funeral ritual inside the house (except inside the funeral home), where it may invite death upon the inhabitants.

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