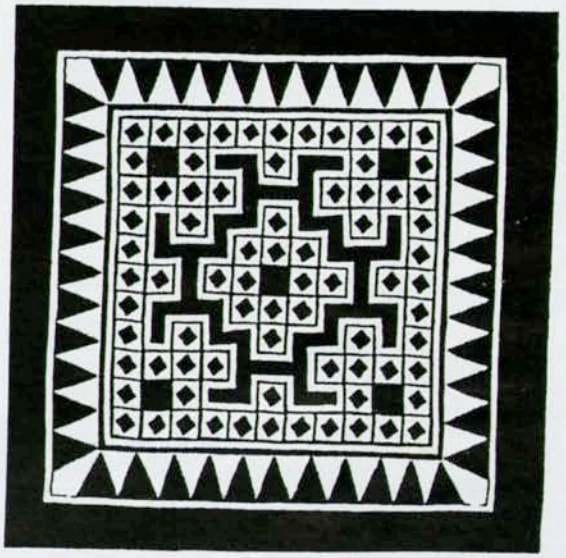
the Woman's Building presents

Textiles as Texts
Arts of Hmong Women from Laos

An exhibition of traditional clothing and songs of the Hmong women of Southern California.

December 4, 1986 – January 15, 1987

Guest Curators: **Dr. Amy Catlin and Dixie Swift**



Cover: collar: dab tshos. *White Hmong, 1960, made in Laos by Lee Vang. Cucumber seed motif, chain stitch. (Actual size.)*

Funeral Square: noob ncoos, *"seed pillow". Blue Hmong made by Yee Her. Yellow appliqued squares overlaid with red appliqued squares represent the seeds needed to grow food in the new life. Triangle borders may represent tiger's teeth, mountains, or other protective barriers. Intersecting bands abstractly depict family lineage, or the fields surrounding the village. Such "seed pillows" are presented to parents by married children in a ritual believed to extend the parents' "visa" on earth.*

1727 N. Spring St., Los Angeles, CA 90012

Seeds: ncoos

Yee Her, Blue Hmong, batik demonstration, W.B. Gallery, December 1986.

photo by Irene Fertik

Batik panel by the late Song Yang.

Acknowledgements

Lynda Lyons,
Woman's Building Gallery Director

The Woman's Building exists to support and present the work of women artists, and to inform the public about the range of women's creative achievements. We also consider it important to demonstrate the diversity of women's cultural heritage--from contemporary to traditional art forms, in the Americas and around the globe.

The Hmong immigrants to the United States have brought with them a rich visual and performing arts history. The Woman's Building is pleased to host this exhibit and to acknowledge the extent to which our own culture is enriched by contact with the arts, lore and tradition of the Hmong people. We wish to thank the artists for their patience and generosity in sharing with us their personal histories, their talents and needlework techniques, and their beautiful "paj ntaub".

Curators Amy Catlin and Dixie Swift worked tirelessly to locate artists and gather objects for the exhibition. Their concern for providing a context for understanding the work is evident throughout the exhibition.

Many other individuals worked long and hard to make the exhibition and Festival Day a success. Special thanks are extended to Gayle Morrison and Jenny Vang of the Lao Family Community Inc. of Santa Ana, photographers Mari Umekubo and Irene Fertik, Nancy Ann Jones, Sheila Newmark, Deirdre Evans-Pritchard, Vikram Jayanti, Naomi Morikawa, Anila and Arun Nayak, Susan Auerbach, and Nazir and Nish Jairazbhoy for contributing their time, talents and expertise. Lastly, the exhibit would never have been undertaken without the generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts Folk Art Program, the City of Los Angeles Folk Arts Program, the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department, the California Arts Council, the Institute of American Cultures/Asian American Studies Program at UCLA and Woman's Building members and donors.

photo by Irene Fertik

Installation snot of the exhibition.

photo by Irene Fertik

Ying Pao Her, Blue Hmong, appliqued red bands over a batiked indigo skirt panel.
Demonstration in the W.B. Gallery, 1986.

Textiles as Texts: Arts of Hmong Women from Laos

by Amy Catlin
Editor and Guest Curator

text (tekst) ***n.*** **&OF.** ***texte,*** **fr. L.** ***textus*** **texture, structure, context, fr.** ***texter, textum,*** **to weave, composeé**

The articles and sounds assembled in the exhibit represent a portion of the women's "texts" of a preliterate culture, the Hmong highlanders of Northern Laos. They were woven, composed, embellished, and shared by women in the context of their tribal mountain villages, wartime, exodus, refugee camp displacement, and resettlement in urban America. These texts, preserved through visual and oral tradition, and transmitted through female family, kin and other Hmong "sisters," express elements of worldview, beliefs and aesthetic values held by Hmong women from Laos. They are the threads and strains of tradition linking the past to the present, newly textured by the inclusion of ourselves in their communicative structures.

Caught in the crossfire between superpowers in the Indochina wars, the Hmong people who supported the American military effort became refugees in April, 1975, with the fall of Laos. After several years in Thai camps, they cautiously extended their exodus to America, where some 50,000 now live, with California's settlements among the largest.

The pieces exhibited are the family heirlooms of a past life of near self-sufficiency in the mountains of Laos. Clothing, now used as New Year costumes, was formerly made entirely by hand by the Hmong women, from the spun hemp threads for weaving to the embroidered, appliqued, and batiked designs for decoration and communication with the spirit world. Today, the same skills are passed from mother to daughter, their handiwork blazing at the annual New Year festivals. The pieces record the journey from Laos to Los Angeles, documenting the quickness of Hmong women to adapt to changing surroundings. While substituting the original fabrics of hemp and Chinese silk with parachute nylon, printed yardage and synthetic velours, the Hmong women have maintained their faultless eye for tradition. Opening outwards, the acculturated pieces for the new non-Hmong market contain ourselves in their aesthetic framework, by their use of "designer" colors, pictorial and narrative messages, and the practical uses for which they are designed — wall hangings, potholders, wallets, pillowcases, aprons, and Christmas decorations.

Three essays published in the present volume serve to interpret the textiles further. The first, "Buffalo Heads and Sacred Threads: Hmong Culture of the Southeast Asian Highlands" by Dr. Eric Crystal, Program Coordinator of the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, aptly contextualizes Hmong women's expressive textiles within the Southeat Asian highland ecological and cultural niche, transplanted to the new soil of the post-industrial west. Sacred aspects of the women's textile arts are explained in Dr. Crystal's far-reaching essay, which provides a firm historical and ethnographic footing for the ideas expressed in the exhibit.

Amy E. Skillman's "Pa Yang: A Personal Treasure" gives us an intimate encounter with a noted Hmong textile artist who has since left Gardena like many of her kin, presumably for the agricultural surroundings of California's Central Valley. Finally, in the progression from third to first person, my article entitled "Songs of Hmong Women: Virgins, Orphans, Widows and Bards" introduces a set of six translations of extemporized sung poetry performed by Hmong women. Cassette recordings of these songs will be made available in the first such publication of its kind.

Another unique offering in the present catalogue is the biographical statement prepared by each of the Hmong women artists who exhibited traditional pieces in the show. Their written work, in a genre and medium quite new to these women who were largely pre-literate even ten years ago, astonished those of us who have witnessed their transition across millenia in less than a dozen years. With assistance from family members, especially the younger generation of Hmong-Americans, the women have provided us with both emotional and intellectual insights into the textiles they continue to create today. These statements afford yet another hermeneutic level in the interpretation of Hmong textile art: the voices of the women themselves, voices which we hope to hear more from in the future.

We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Dixie Swift, Assistant Curator, and the Lao Family Community, Incorporated, Santa Ana, Mr. Cheu Thao, Executive Director, for coordinating the participation of the artists, and to the Hmong women who were selected for their commitment to artistic excellence and the preservation of traditional Hmong textile arts in the West. To all the artists, we extend our thanks for enriching our lives with their unique and exquisite work.

Opposite page:
Modern story cloth, White Hmong, 1986. Made in Santa Ana by Mary Yeu Vang. It represents the Hmong exodus to the Mekong, floating across their refugee camps, and being received by Thai soldiers.

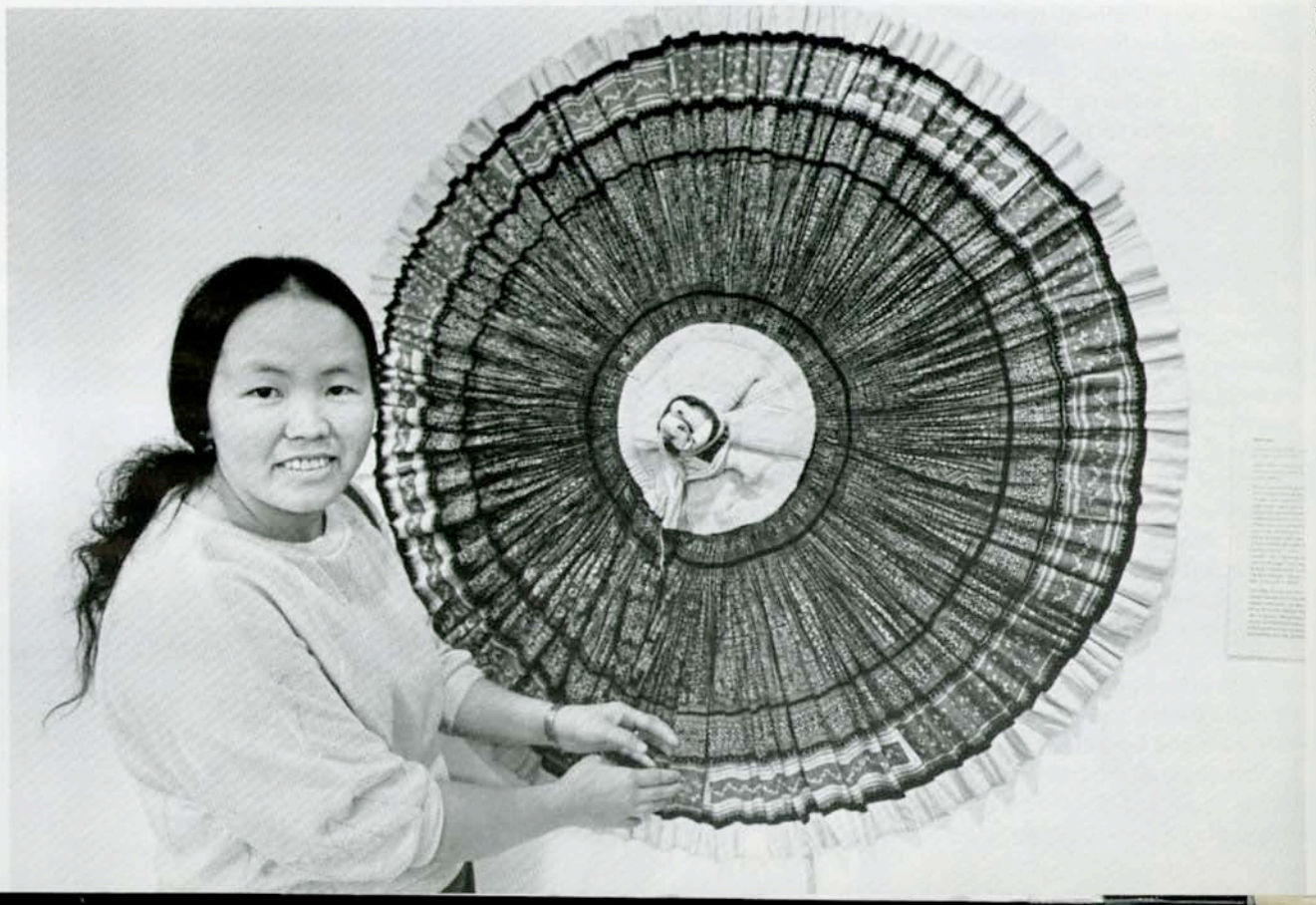
Chao Xiong

When I was living in Laos, my life was spent on farming and sewing, but most of the time I spent my spare time learning how to sing from my mother, who is a singer. Every morning around 4 o'clock I had to wake up and cook for my family. We didn't have watches and clocks then, and we didn't know how to tell time. When my mother woke up we had to start walking to the rice fields to work on them, without having our morning breakfast. We worked very hard throughout the hot, warm day, and when night fell, we walked back home. We had some chickens, pigs and horses, but best of all, we had a good strong house to protect us.

After all the evening's work, I started on my embroidery. Embroidery was hard, especially when you wanted to embroider it perfectly, but I learned the lessons well and it wasn't too hard for me. Every year I embroidered blouses, skirts, and handkerchiefs to sell to the people who didn't know how to embroider. I used many bright colors to make the skirts look more brand new. Some people loved my embroidery and came to watch and buy skirts and shirts and handkerchiefs from me. By the time I had finished with my embroidering, I had also learned a new collection of songs. On New Year's Day, I would put on my skirt and blouse and go to have New Year's fun. I sang for the young people to hear. People gathered around me to look at my embroidery and to listen to my singing. My parents were proud of me. Most of all, I want to thank my mom, who is now dead, for being such a fantastic mother to have taught me so much to be an expert in what I did and will do.

In 1979, I moved to Thailand with my two elder sisters and my younger brothers. There in Thailand I got married to Kao, who was a teacher and an English translator. My husband and I worked hard on our occupations and soon we were quite famous. People all over Thailand came and bought my sewing and my songs that I had recorded.

In 1980 my husband and I moved to the United States. I started working to support my family while my husband went to school. My husband completed two years of electronics courses at the college, and now he is majoring in electronics engineering technology at De Vry Institute of Technology in Los Angeles, California. I work with a good electronics company that works for the airlines. I am supporting my husband and five children while my husband goes to school now.



Chao Xiong, Blue Hmong, with her skirt, tab. *Made in Sayaboury, Laos with her mother Mai Ly's help in 1965.*

photo by Irene Fertik

See Lee & Family

Needle art is one of hundreds of forms of art of the Ancient World. Needle art has been passed from generation to generation. No one knows exactly when or where it first began.

Up to now the great skills of the Needle Art are still retained by many women of the Hmong tribes. In this particular family of the Lee, See Lee, Kao Lee, and Choua Lee obtained their skills from their mother Ly Lee, who says she got them from her mother.

See Lee, the oldest of the three women, said she started to practice the Needle Art at a very young age (around the age of 5 or 6). It was then the desire of a little girl to know how to needle and it was important for her to know the skills because it was the beginning of every girl to start sewing her own traditional costume for New Year's Eve.

The traditional costume varies in the different clans but no matter which clan, the costume has to be sewn together with variety of patterns and decorative ornaments on it. The costume usually consists of: a hat or shawl, dress, blouse, skirt, over-coat, decorative ornaments, and a lot of jewelry around the neck and wrists. The same costume worn for the New Year will also be her wedding dress when she gets married.

In Laos, a country of continuous hard labor, where the people of Hmong put in long days of work in their fields and on their farms to enable them to survive, having no leisure time, they often teach their youngsters the great skills of the Needle Art at night, where the light source comes from the family's fireplace. Other times on rainy days when the parents cannot go out to work in their wet fields, they will work on their needle projects and teach the kids.

The basic skills of the Needle Art are to have precise measurements of the material before any stitching can be done. Measuring includes both the perimeter and the area of the material. Also, a steady hand and eye coordination is needed for accurate stitching of the pattern or patterns involved.

There are hundreds of patterns which are used to design the art. All the patterns must be kept well known in the Needle Art person. These patterns are being slowly learned one by one. As if you were learning a foreign language, you would have to slowly build up your vocabulary.

Each of the patterns have their own specific name, such as the snail shell, ghost fingers, pig's feet, and so on. Other patterns go by the accurate counts and line-up of the stitches. One mixed count or line-up will totally mess up a whole piece of art. The Needle Arts are very complicated and to do this kind of art you must have absolute concentration and no disturbance.

Without the essential materials here in the U.S., the traditional custom-made arts have changed quite a bit in form, creation, and decorative patterns. These changes of the art help it to adapt to its environment, making it more interesting to know how the world is always changing by the study of the Ancient Needle Arts.

photo by Irene Fertik

See Lee and the flower cloth, paj ntuab. *Made in Nong Kai Refugee Camp, Thailand by See Lee and her sisters, Kao Lee, Choua Lee, Lee Vang, and Yer Lee. Cross-stitch center bordered by applique.*

The Lee sisters.

Bai Lee

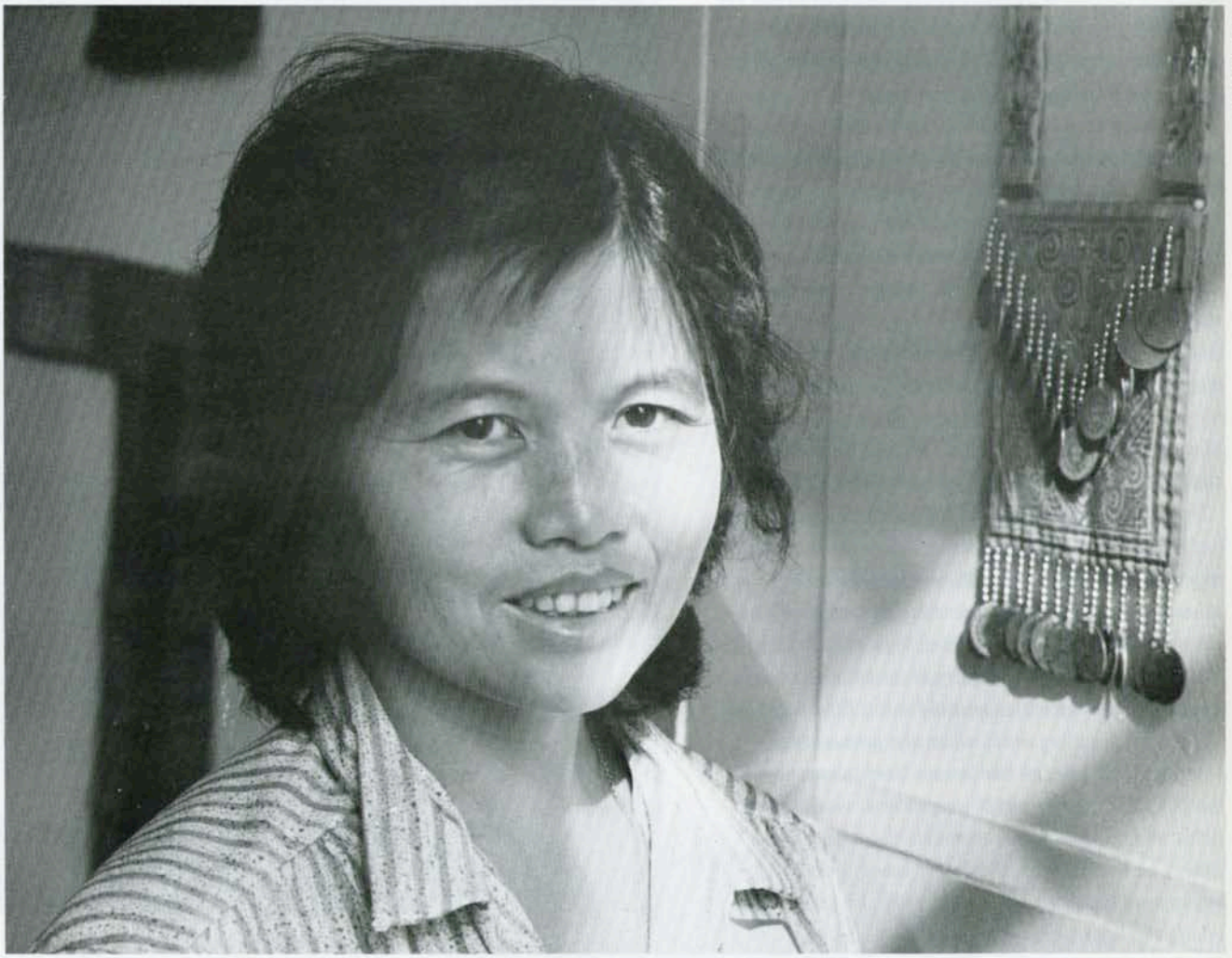


photo by Amy Catlin

Bai Lee beside her silver coin purse and collar.

Bai Lee in her traditional clothing and jewelry.

According to our great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers, the making of fabrics for clothing started at the beginning of time. People have taught their children from one generation to another to make clothing. That is why we know how to do it today. In earlier generations, people didn't have to buy fabrics in the city. Because they were farmers, they planted hemp and used hemp bark to make thread, which they wove into fabric for clothing and *pa ndau* decoration. The cloth made from hemp was very white. If someone wanted black or blue cloth, he had to cut indigo to color it. The fabric made from hemp was stronger and tougher than the fabric bought from the city, which was soft and not sturdy.

When I was five or six years old, I remember I saw my mother's loom comb. Because of the war, we had to move constantly from one place to another, and she lost her comb.

Today, the older women still keep their white skirts made from hemp, which they still wear when they die.

Text was translated by Shur Vang Vangyi

Hua Vang

My name is Hua. My mother taught me how to sew when I was only nine years old. She knew only to sew, but did not know how to cut the material, so she had to ask other people to cut it for her. Later, when I was 11, I used my imagination to try to cut material to make clothes, like trousers and shirts. When I was 14, I could do everything the way I felt and wanted, so I was very happy that I did not need anybody else to help me any more. My mother was very happy too.

I remember, when I was little and did not know how to cut the material, we had to ask other people to help us. Sometimes some people were considerate enough to help, and some others were not. That is why I had to decide to start my own life by trying to use my time wisely to do my own work, with the hope that some day I could help myself and help my family and my fellow relatives. I was not angry at those who did not help us, but when I knew how, I was happy to help anybody in any way I could, because I realized that when I helped people, they would remember me, and I would earn a good name and have a good reputation. When I helped other people, I did not take any fees, because I knew that when I helped other people, God helped me.

In June 1975, we fled to Thailand. In the refugee camp, we were very poor. We had no food and no clothes to wear. We met one white woman. We were not sure if she was an American or other nationality.

Hua Vang in her traditional clothing.

photo by Irene Fertik

She came to the camp and asked us to start embroidering our paj ndau again, and she said that she would buy them. She then bought a lot of material for us. I was then, and still am, a slow person. I wanted to help other people who did not know how to cut material. After I had helped others, then I was happy to come back and did my own work, so sometimes it took me three months to finish just one or two pieces. When I sold it, I got only twenty dollars, and sometimes a little bit more. This was my life in Laos and in Thailand.

When we came to the United States, I felt sad because my skills could not be of any use to me. I do not know how to speak English, and besides, I am an ugly person, so I didn't want to continue my life like this.

In 1983, I was trained to use a power sewing machine at the Laotian Handicraft Center, and the people there said that I have a good knowledge of sewing, embroidery, cross stitching, and cutting several styles of paj ntaub. So they took me to many places to sell my paj ntaub, dressed in my Hmong traditional costume, and demonstrate my needlework to the Americans, our viewers.

Hua Vang with her boy's hat, kaus mom menyuam tub. *White Hmong, 1980, made in Oklahoma.*

Dhrou Lo

Hello. My name is Dhrou Lo. I am 45 years old, and I'm going to talk about my culture and a little bit about myself.

When I lived in my own country, I wore my own clothes that I sewed by hand. I wore them every day, to work on the farm and to sleep. It was very complicated for me, but that was my culture, and everybody had to wear them.

Suddenly, in 1975, our Hmong government went to Thailand, and left all of us behind in Laos with lots of people. We had no food or water to drink. Also, the Vietnamese came to our country and destroyed our houses, so we moved away to live in the mountains for a long time without food and water. Sometimes at midnight our husbands came home for food, but there was no chance to get any. We only ate things that we found in the mountains, things like fruits and leaves that we could eat while still staying at home. They were sort of like vegetable leaves, but not exactly like vegetables. We were very poor and didn't have anything, so we lived in the mountains and ate only mushrooms, potatoes, and other things that we found.

Our children couldn't eat these things, and cried all day long, because they were very hungry. The Vietnamese came after us and some of the other women gave their children medicine to stop them from crying. Some small children didn't survive, because it tasted so bitter that they left their parents. The Vietnamese still came after us, until we realized that we cannot live lives like that. Then we decided to come to Thailand.

We came on our own to Thailand, with the Vietnamese still chasing after us. We could only walk, so it took us a whole month to reach the ocean (Mekong River). We had no clothes or blankets to cover us. Mostly the people that had little children couldn't survive because they couldn't cross through the ocean (Mekong River) to Thailand. They all drowned and died. My three brothers died, and we didn't know what to do. We just dropped them in the water and let them float away. My daughter-in-law died on the way, just because she didn't have anything to eat, and one of my brothers named Zoua Lo almost died when we came. The Vietnamese kept following us and we were scared, so we left him along the way and gave him a little rice and left him alone.

We all found our way to Thailand. There was no boat or ship to pick us up, so we only swam. Other people got so tired, they died on the way to Thailand. When we got to Thailand we didn't have any money, so when we got there the Thai people put us in jail for two or three days before they released us. We didn't have our names on the list, so they took us to Ban Vinai. We didn't have anything to eat so we went to work on the old Thai farm for a couple of days. They paid us a little money each day. They only paid us ten dimes or fifteen dimes a day. It was all very complicated so we decided to come to the United States.

I like living here because my life has changed a lot.

This story was about myself and my culture.

photo by Irene Fertik

Dhrou Lo with her two baby carriers, nyas. *The one on the left, made in 1976 in Nong Kai Refugee Camp, has a batik center; the right one, made in 1981 in Santa Ana, has a machine-stamped center to replace the batik.*

Ying Pao Her

photo by Irene Fertik

Ying Pao her with her elder's robe, tsho laug, *Blue Hmong, 1986, made in Anaheim. The elder's robe or funeral coat is prepared long in advance and worn occasionally so that it will be comfortable in the afterlife.*

I am Ying Pao Her.

I would like to tell all of you a little bit about my life, and why we came to the United States.

In 1975, the communists came to our town and wanted to take over everything that we had. That is why we had to run away. We stayed in the jungle for a year. The communists came again and shot machine guns at our tents. We had to move again. We had no food to eat, or clothes to wear. We were so hungry that we ate anything to survive.

In 1979, the communists came back looking for us again, and shot their machine guns at our houses again, and we ran as fast as we could to escape. We could not even pick up anything to bring with us. All that we brought was our children.

One or two days after the shooting, we decided to escape to Thailand. On our way, we had no food to eat. We ate leaves and anything we could to keep from dying, so that we could take care of our children on our way to Thailand. I carried two children, one in front and one on my back, and every part of my body was numb. It took one month and fifteen days to escape from Laos to Thailand. Before we reached Thailand, we cut bamboo poles to make a boat to cross the Mekong River. My husband and my brother made the boat and guided it across the river to Thailand.

While we were in Thailand, we had no money to buy food or clothes for our family. My husband looked for a job, and found a part-time job to buy clothes for our children and ourselves. We stayed there for eight months, and applied to come to the United States.

We came to the United States on October 27, 1980. Now we have 9 people in our family, with six children, and we are receiving welfare. Now the children all go to school. My husband and I are trying to learn English, and he is also training as a mechanic.

We want to show everyone the colorful and beautiful handmade clothes we used to wear. Mother nature taught our great-grandparents how to make them. We will pass them on to our children, who will pass them on to their children, and so on. Every year we still wear our handmade clothes to celebrate the New Year. This is our custom, and we will never forget it.

Ying Pao Her and her husband.

Mao Vang

photo by Amy Catlin

My name is Mao Vang. I am 35 years old. I have been doing needlework and sewing clothing for 25 years. In the old Hmong way of life, a young girl's duties consisted solely of housework, farming, and sewing. I started by learning simple patterns from my grandmother. Gradually, I learned to do more complex and beautiful embroideries, the intricate patterns in the skirts, sashes, lapels, and headdresses. These skills are passed down from the past generations. When I lived in Laos, I saw a sewing machine, but did not want to use it. Sewing by hand for two or three days every month, it took me two years to make one skirt. The rest of the time, I worked on the farm, going to the fields, planting the crops of grain, corn, pumpkins, and cucumbers.

photo by Amy Catlin

Mao Vang with her woman's outfit. Jacket, tsho, *with embroidered collar,* dab tsho, *and apron panel with embroidered belt,* sev.

Mao Vang, needlework workshop at the W.B., December 1986.

Yee Her

photo by Irene Fertik

Yee Her, surrounded by her baby carriers, nyas *and contemporary pieces using baby carrier motifs.*

I am Yee Her. I would like to tell all of you about my life, and why and how we came to the United States.

My life before 1975 was good. We lived in a small village in the North of Laos. We had our own lands and animals. We had seven horses, and many other animals.

In 1975, the communists came to our village and wanted to take over everything we had. We decided to move out when the communists weren't watching. We had to move to a safe place, across the tall mountains. We lived there for a year. The communists found out where we were. They came and shot machine guns at our tents. We had to escape from that place to another safe place. On our way there, the communists came after us and captured me, my two daughters, and two of my sisters-in-law. My husband and son got away. The communists took us to a small city where no Hmong people lived. We stayed there for one month and eighteen days. My husband found where we were and came as a spy to rescue us. Three months later he was killed. My children and some other families moved to another place. There was not enough water for us there. We moved to another place, and began to starve because we could not grow food. We had to cut down palm trees, and carry the inside pith home. We cut it into small pieces and waited for it to dry out. We smashed it until it looked like flour, and then cooked it like rice. Our family ate that for a year and a half. Finally, we found out that one of our brothers-in-law was a farmer. We decided to move close to where he lived, so we could help him with his farm. The communists came and killed him, and then left.

Thirteen days later they came back and started shooting machine guns into our houses. We had to run away as fast as we could. We could not grab anything to take with us, not even clothes or food. A few hours later we were lucky to find each others. We hid for a couple of days and then decided to come to Thailand. On the way there, we had nothing to eat, or clothes to change. The communists shot at us many times on our way to Thailand. Five days before we reached the Mekong River, I was shot in my left knee. I was badly injured and could not walk. My son, son-in-law, and two of my brothers-in-law carried me for five days.

Right before we reached the Mekong River the communists started shooting at us again. Everybody had to run as fast as they could. My son and one brother-in-law put me under a big tree for 10 hours and left me there alone. I stayed there until dark, and the communists went away. My son and his uncle came back to pick me up and get on the boat. The Thai boats waited for whoever could pay them 2,000 ***baht*** in Thai Money (about $100).

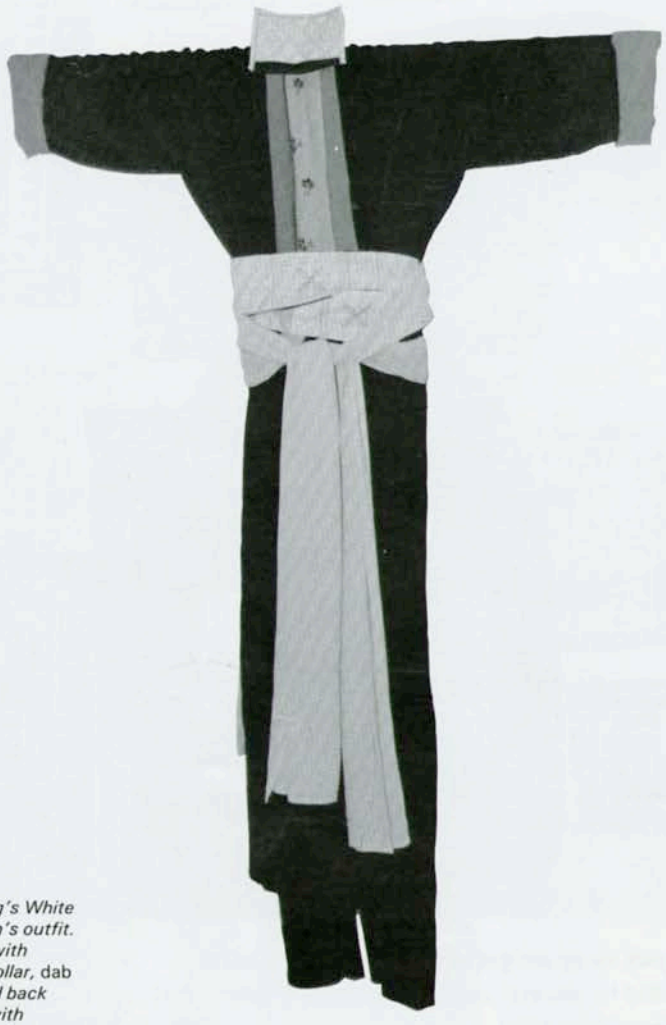
There is an island in the Mekong. The sailors dropped us off there and told us to wait until morning. After they left, we had to swim the rest of the way to Thailand. The young and middle-aged men and women swam, and the children held them very tight.

When we arrived in Thailand, they put me in a hospital for ten days, but my knee didn't feel any better. They took me out of the hospital, and I went home. My brother helped me find medicine for my knee. Two months later, I was better. I needed to prepare for New Year, so I went to help some farmers with their farm. That's how I got some money to buy new clothes for my children for the New Year.

Two months later, our application was accepted to come to the United States, and we arrived in August, 1980. Now my son and daughter-in-law are studying English. I am taking care of his children, and my daughter graduated from high school on June 13, 1986.

Text was translated by Shur Vang Vangyi.

Mary Vang



Mary Yeu Vang's White Hmong women's outfit. Jacket, tsho, *with embroidered collar,* dab tsho. *Front and back apron panels with embroidered belt,* sev, *and loose trousers,* ris.

Mary Vang shows the techniques of needlework at Barnsdall Park, October, 1986, as part of a Folk Arts Program of the City of Los Angeles.

Nyob zoo!

I am pleased to introduce myself and the ways of Hmong culture in Laos.

My family and I came from the northern part of Laos, called the Plain of Jars, in Xiengkhouang Province. We all moved to Long Cheng when I was about five years old. We lived in a country home which was a whole day's walk to town. My family spent most of the time farming, using our hands and shovels. We planted rice, corn, pumpkin, cucumber, bananas, and fruit trees. We had pigs, chickens, ducks, and horses. We used horses for transportation to town. We made our own clothes by hand, of cotton and silks. Every woman had to know how to sew without a sewing machine.

My dad and mom named me "Yeu", which means "last daughter". I had one brother and four sisters. They were all married, and my brother went to Sayabouri Province to serve as a judge. My father served as mayor, and my mother taught me so much about being a Hmong woman.

Late in 1969 we fled to Vientiane, the capital of Laos, for a couple of months. Then we moved back to Long Cheng, and I got married early in 1970.

On May 12, 1975, we escaped to Thailand because the Communists took over our home town. On December 30, 1975, we came to the United States, sponsored by the International Institute of Los Angeles. My husband started working to support the family while I went to school. From 1977 I worked in electronics, and now I work for the Lao Family Child Care Center. My husband still works for New York Life.

Last May, my husband and I took our vacation in Bangkok, Thailand, to see our relatives remaining in Ban Vinai refugee camp. Then we drove along the Mekong River to Nongkhai. We looked across the Mekong to the Vientiane side and said, "Just like the old days again!" We saw people riding bikes along the other side of the Mekong River. It made my heart cry and cry. After a while longer, we returned with sadness back to Bangkok and then to California.

Now my brother lives in Merced, and my two sisters live in Santa Ana with me. I especially feel grateful to my super mom, who takes care of my six children while my husband and I are working. I would like to say thank you very, very much to the United States Government that brought my family to the United States of America, a country of freedom, a country of equal opportunities. God bless all of them, and God bless America.

Mao Kue Yang

I was born in Phu Kang, Laos in 1960, my parents' fourth daughter; I also have three younger sisters. One still lives in Laos, another in Thailand, and the rest are in America. In 1974 I began to learn needlework, and my mother taught me to make one skirt. It was not very pretty, because I was just beginning, and also we could not get all the colors, just yellow and red.

Since then I have had ideas to build things and make things that people like, and now I have come to be this good! The basis and techniques for making *pa ndau* crafts were made from my own ideas. I never trained from other people; even my mother didn't know how to teach me. I just discovered the beautiful things in my mind and then made them by hand. I saw the hanging beaded ornaments, *paj,* others made by tying the threads, and I thought, "Why not use embroidery, it will be prettier." Then I told my mother I wanted her to make a big one, and she said yes. I bought the beads with my money for working in the factory making fishing hooks in Rhode Island. I taught my mother to finish the largest *paj* ever made, four feet high. We sold it to the biggest museum in Washington, D.C. She finished another one like it only a few months before she died. We keep it hanging in our living room, but since we know how to make more, we will sell it if anyone wants to buy it.

photo by Amy Catlin

Paj, *ornamental flower tree, derived from traditional decorations hung from horse's ears. Made in 1983 by Mao Kue Yang's mother, the late Song Yang.*

photo by Amy Catlin

Mao Kue Yang, serving Hmong food she prepared for the opening festival, December 7, 1986.

Buffalo Heads and Sacred Threads: Hmong Culture of the Southeast Asian Highlands

by Eric Crystal
University of California Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies

Across five continents are dispersed scattered Hmong communities consisting of adults whose world views and skill inventories were molded by life in Southeast Asian mountain villages far removed from the culture of the post-industrial western world. The Hmong who have fled their native Lao villages reflect much that is essential of the mountain dwelling minority peoples of East and Southeast Asia. In recorded times such highland peoples have never been able to form their own country, define precisely the boundaries of their habitation zones or exist unfettered by the demands of external government authority. The Hmong are one of the largest and most widely dispersed such mountain minority groups, residing in hinterland highland areas of China and Southeast Asia. Hmong villages are found in Burma, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam and in the provinces of southern and western China where they are said to number five million individuals. Despite this wide dispersion, which has occurred in the context of a centuries long "push to the south" in the face of Han Chinese demographic and political expansion, the Hmong have managed to keep intact their mutually intelligible language, their characteristic shamanic ritual tradition and their highly refined textile arts.

Although Hmong culture (language, religion, aesthetics) is unique, it suggests much of a universal mountain tradition. The primal religious concepts of mountain people usually reflect their intimate knowledge of and adaptation to highland ecology, involve sacrificial offerings of domestic animals and encompass shamanic or other techniques for direct communication with the spirit world. In Southeast Asia a fundamental distinction obtains between the peoples and cultures of the mountains and those of the lowland plains. In attempting to understand the culture of the Hmong it is well to recall the fundamental configuration of Southeat Asian mountain culture and society. Oftentimes Westerners suddenly confronted with resettlement enclaves of recently arrived Hmong find it difficult to comprehend, much less empathize with, the village world from which these refugees have emerged, the transitions which they have been forced to undertake, and the trauma which they have experienced over the past two decades.

Throughout Southeast Asia an elemental dichotomy distinguishes the cultures of the hills and those of the lowland plains. Leaving aside for the moment the phenomena of urbanization and acculturative modernization, mountain and plains peoples reflect certain cultural characteristics which command our interest and attention. On the plains reside peasant villagers — oftentimes speaking the national language if not universally able to read and write it, practicing religion in a manner conforming to state sponsored norms, participating in market systems, educational networks and communication grids linking them to a national culture and political entity. In contrast, hill peoples are often both geographically and cognitively far removed from the font of national culture and from the centers of political power. The culture of the majority — encompassing national language, cuisine, religion and national costume — is oftentimes entirely unfamiliar to minority groups residing in the hinterland mountains. Mountain peoples do not share with the lowlanders a sense of strong identification with the nation-state or participate centrally in the fervent nationalism which has characterized Southeast Asian politics in recent decades. Politically and culturally marginal, they have always devised strategies for preserving their own minority culture while at the same time manifesting formal obeisance to the dominant people of the plains. The language of highland villages is the ancestral tongue of their forbears, oftentimes far removed in linguistic structure and vocabulary from the national tongue. Highland language arts in terms of bardic traditions, oral poetry and ritual languages are rich and diverse but in almost all cases do not include native literacy. Wherever possible mountain peoples advance at least token representatives to master the tongue and writing system of the lowlanders. If schools are available in adjacent regions then at least a few youngsters may be remanded to them so as to better acquire skills enabling them to intermediate and interpret between the realms of lowland officials and traders and their natal villages. The religious traditions of the mountains usually contrast significantly with those of the plains. In the Southeast Asian lowlands the great world religion of Hinduism, in the historic past, and Buddhism and Islam today bind millions of villagers into trans-national communities of believers.

Mountain peoples characteristically practice small scale, primal indigenous religions which lay great emphasis on the spirits of the fields, the presence of ancestors at appointed times and the life-soul of the living. Minority religious "Little Traditions" are intimately connected to the mountain environment of tropical Asia where plagues of voracious birds and wild pigs, howling destructive

photo by Eric Crystal

Hmong refugee, Xiaxing Moua, cherishes snapshot of relatives with whom he has had no contact since his escape from Laos in 1979. Merced, 1984.

Opposite page:
Hmong woman in Laos, 1957
photo by Clyde Searl

Newly planted slash and burn field, southern Vietnam, 1966.

photo by Clyde Searl

Harvesting opium poppies in Xieng Khovang Province, Laos, 1957.

winds and epidemics of fatal diseases are cyclically wont to visit terrible disasters upon isolated settlements. Here then, religious belief typically involves the sacrifice of chickens, pigs or cattle to supernaturals, cyclical agricultural ceremonies and reference to ancestral presence at large communal feasts to which both living and deceased members of the kinship community are invited. Mountain villages are too small and too impoverished to support full time religious specialists such as Buddhist temple dwelling priests. Instead, part time specialists are called upon when needed to exercise their special skills in orchestrating ancestral offerings and in communicating with the spirit world. Common concern for propitiation of powerful nature spirits, manifest execution of planting, growth and harvest rituals and the reinforcement of kin group solidarity by means of ancestral offerings are characteristic of many highland religious systems. What is most intriguing, important and essential about mountain religious traditions is that they reflect the deepest cultural traditions of Asia. On the plains the autochthonous folk religions rooted deeply in late neolithic times have been syncretized with prevailing world religions, sometimes submerged beyond recognition. In the mountains, however, it is the indigenous folk tradition which prevails, oftentimes obliquely influenced by the Great Tradition of the plains but normally maintaining essential fealty to ancestral rite and ritual which predate the dawn of civilization in Southeast Asia some two thousand years ago.

The relationship of the mountain cultures to the mountain environment is inevitably intimate. Keyed to the rhythms of dry and rainy seasons, crop growth cycles, care of domestic animals, and exploitation of the surrounding jungle, local ecological relationships figure prominently in the ritual and expressive culture of Southeast Asian highlanders. Wholly dependent upon nature, highland cultures reflect their detailed knowledge of the natural world in diverse expressive arts confirming the interrelationship of man, the supernatural world and the natural environment.

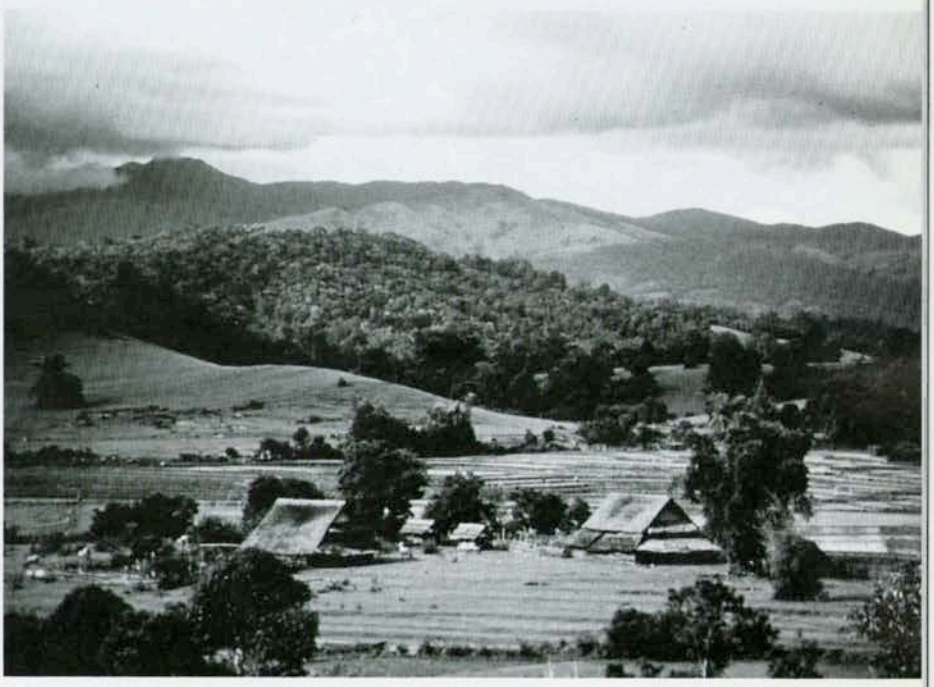
Concern for the natural environment is oftentimes reflected in a wide range of expressive arts, arts which flourish in an essentially sacral atmosphere. Symbolic meaning is invested in textile design, three dimensional wooden sculpture, incised patterning of bamboo tubes, and in woven and plaited objects for daily use including sleeping mats, baskets and containers for carrying cooked rice. Wedding garments oftentimes manifest fertility or fecundity themes, suggesting the importance of reproduction for the maintenance of the minority culture by means of metaphorical depictions of virile animals such as male water buffalo or paired sets of invertebrate water creatures suggesting marriage and commitment to procreation. Whatever the artistic product — forged jewelry in precious metals, wooden three dimensional sculpture, bamboo incision or batik or ikat dyed, appliqued or embroidered textile design — motifs employed are rarely devoid of symbolic significance. Aside from themes derived from the natural environment often employed in a meta-

phorical manner, metaphysical themes expressing concern for the precious life-soul are often a vital element, especially in highland textile design. In sum, the tribal art of a host of peoples of highland Southeast Asia expresses dependence on the natural environment, concern for future procreation and the desire to insure fertility and fecundity of the fields. Reference is made as well to essential cosmological beliefs relating to the central role of the life soul to the health of the individual. As might be expected, each of the many mountain peoples (and there are over fifty highland peoples found in Laos alone) has developed its own unique expressive art forms. Nevertheless, common themes prevail throughout, based upon shared environmental concerns, common agricultural productive systems and universal consciousness of minority status. Finally, in the ethnically diverse social environment of the Southeast Asian mountains, costume design especially serves to mark and reinforce ethnic identity, clearly establishing boundaries between groups in addition to the linguistic affiliations which mark ethnic affiliation.

The Hmong are by all estimates one of the numerically most prominent, culturally resilient and artistically gifted of the scores of highland peoples residing in the northern tier of mainland Southeast Asia. Those Hmong who reside in the United States today (at least 62,000 individuals by official estimate) hail from several provinces in northern Laos. It is well to recall that those Hmong found in the western world today come from a nation which in 1975 supported a national population of no more than 3.5 million persons of whom no more than 500,000 (by the most generous estimate) were of Hmong descent. Recalling that the Lao Hmong population in 1975 was approximately 10% of the worldwide Hmong total of 5 million the diversity and geographic dispersion of the Hmong is yet more remarkable than their absolute numbers. William Geddes, perhaps the foremost western scholar of the Hmong has written: "The preservation by the Miao (alternative term for Hmong, *ed.*) 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 geographic 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 features they preserved seem to be more numerous." (1976;10).

Hmong subgroups are normally identified by their costume, thus giving rise to White, Blue, Black, Red, Striped and Flowery Hmong among many others. According to the Human Relations Area Files standard reference, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, "Most observers agree that the Miao are remarkable among all the hill tribes of Southeast Asia for their strong sense of independence, demonstrated organizational ability, enterprise, and initiative and adaptability" (LeBar 1964;63). In speaking specifically of Hmong refugees in the United States it is well to remember that such immigrants come from but one of several lands in the Far East which are host to major Hmong populations, bear with them in the

photo by Clyde Searl



Hmong village in northeastern Laos.

photo by Clyde Searl

Hmong picnic in the fields. Laos, 1957.

photo by Clyde Searl

Hmong woman in Laos, 1957.

photo by Eric Crystal

Shaman's sistrum. The hollow bronze ring contains pellets which rattle to the rhythm of the shaman's "horseback" journeys to heaven. The beater for his gong is also shown.

diaspora traditions which remain embedded in the Asian mountains across a wide area of Asia, and manifest only a fraction of the diversity in dress and costume design of Hmong populations today.

Since Hmong culture is a mountain culture, Hmong arts are essentially concerned with depictions of the natural environment, portrayal of fertility themes and depiction and nurturance of the crucial life soul. Within the Hmong tradition, despite variations in regional costume design, dialectical language usage and organization of clan-based religious rituals, an overweaning pan-Hmong culture binds the inhabitants of many mountain ranges, lineage groups, villages, nations and now continents closely together. This essay will discuss Hmong traditions, seeking in the expressive culture of an uprooted people fundamental interpretations of Southeast Asian mountain life and belief.

Over the course of the past several thousand years successive waves of migrant minority peoples have fled Chinese expansion in the mountains, foothills and wide alluvial valleys of Southeast Asia. The earliest such groups were peoples speaking Malayo-Polynesian languages, enclaves of whom still remain in the mountains of the Annamese Cordillera in southern Vietnam. One of the last such groups of migrants to arrive in Southeast Asia were the Hmong, whose appearance was first noted in the mid nineteenth century. Early Chinese chronicles suggest that the Hmong were first expelled by the Chinese from the rich rice growing areas of the Yellow and Yangste River basins between 2700 and 2300 B.C. (Geddes 1976;5). The Chinese were intolerant of peoples who refused to submit to their political authority and cultural dominance, often ascribing to such "barbarians" animal like traits as noted in the following passage from a Han Dynasty record composed some 2000 years ago:

The Hmong are: " . . . a race who came from the Western wilderness, whose face, eyes, feet and hands resembled those of other people, but under their armpits they had wings with which, however, they were unable to fly."
(Geddes op.cit.;5)

Despite their long association with the Chinese, the Hmong were never influenced by Han culture in the manner that their oftentimes neighbors the Mien (Yao) were. Hmong culture never incorporated Chinese calligraphy into its cultural inventory, and reserved the use of chopsticks with which they have been familiar for millennia for only a few ceremonial occasions such as weddings. Hmong religious traditions share much with those of the native peoples of northeastern Asia, a region from which they may have originated millenia ago before their centuries-long migration led them to southern China and southeast Asia.

Dab qhuas (Rules of the Spirits), the traditional Hmong religion, is a faith as old as the tradition of village farming in Asia. As a primal religion *dab qhuas* supports no full-time specialists, builds no enduring sanctuary structures, encompasses no body of sacred text and revered commentary. Yet at one and the same time it is a religion which reflects the basic and elemental concerns of man

in confronting the trauma of death, the miracle of birth, and the uncertainties of life on this earth. It is a religion which calls upon the mutual support of clansmen, the special gifts of respected shamans and the values of mutual self help, respect and sharing which prevail in Hmong communities wherever they may be situated.

It may be fair to state that *dab qhuas* is largely concerned with the life-soul or *ntsuj plig.* Hmong rituals are often concerned with the determination of the location of an errant soul, with the search and capture of such a soul and with strategies for assuring that the life-soul of an individual will not leave the body in the future. Hmong belief suggests that there are several souls within the body of a living person. According to Geddes, the Hmong believe:

". . . that a person has several souls, often the number is said to be seven. One or more may become separated from the body, trapped or wandering. This is especially likely to happen in the case of children, whose souls get lost at the junction of tracks, confused on how to get back home. Faced by the the consequent weakness or sickness of the child in the village, parents may call upon the services of a shaman . . ." (1976; 91).

Physical illness, psychological malaise, sudden personality changes may indicate that the shaman should be summoned. The key to understanding the role of the Hmong shaman is his command of his *neem (neng).* The *neng* is a special tutelary spirit of the shaman, a spirit which can be dispatched on special metaphysical missions to hail or capture errant souls of clansmen and bring them back to the body from which they have strayed. The Hmong shaman is termed *tsev neeb* and his work normally transpires in front of his special altar of *ta neng.* Dr. Bruce Thowpaouy Bliatout has written eloquently of the role of the shaman recently, noting that when a shaman dies his *neng* will seek out a properly qualified descendant to continue the healing tradition. "Those who inherit a *neng,*" Bliatout writes, "have great status in the community as that person is thought to be able to cure illness, foretell misfortune, and ward off evil spirits. Once a *neng* selects a person, the *neng* teaches that person how to send it back out . . . in order to assist sick person. Through the *neng* it is possible to communicate with the spirit world and come up with a diagnosis for almost any illness or misfortune." (Bliatout 1982;15) The ultimate metaphysical interlocutor, the Hmong shaman serves as a link between this world and the next. Shamans must fall into a state of altered consciousness in order to perform their work, briefly departing the temporal world for that of the spirits. Hmong shamanic possession involves the covering of the eyes of the shaman with a black cloth and animated chanting and bouncing on a wooden bench. Oftentimes the possessed shaman may be seen struggling with evil spirits to wrest the *tchu plih* of his patient back from the other world. Hmong curing sessions may take two or more hours, involve several ritual assistants and normally culminate in an animated encounter of the shaman with the spirit world as he rises atop his special bench manipulating his ritual

photo by Irene Fertik

Baby carrier, nyas, *Blue Hmong, 1976. Made in Nong Kai Refugee Camp by Dhrou Lo.*

paraphernalia to free the soul of the ill person. To acquire a *neng* a shaman must first undergo an illness which brings him to death's door. In delirium he will be confronted by and accept to work with an ancestral *neng,* with which he will be associated for the rest of his life. Only at Hmong New Year does the *neng* separate for a few days from the host *tsev neng* shaman, to return to the world of the spirits to celebrate the holiday with is own kind. Some shamans make sure to lay textile and string paths on the ceiling of their homes to guide the *neng* back at the close of its holiday.

Concern for the life-soul is not confined to the work of the Hmong shaman. Such concern is also made manifest in Hmong textile arts. The life souls of children are particularly wont to wander from small bodies, attracted by beautiful flowers, sweet fragrances, or intriguing sounds. In the mountains of Southeast Asia the mortality rate for infants sometimes hovers at fifty percent of live births; the lives of young infants are fragile and always in jeopardy. Hmong carry their babies in cloth baby carriers strapped on the mother's back. Blue Hmong women are privy to a special textile art; only they among the Hmong in Laos master the art of batik. Indigo dye blue and white batik panels are used on fetive pleated skirts, on long banners unfurled at village festivals, and (most prominently in the United States) on Hmong baby carriers. Many of these carriers are complex works of textile art, involving batik, applique and embroidery work. Objects of beauty, these carriers also reflect fundamental aspects of Hmong belief. Batik motifs and applique work overlaying the batik panels recall narrow bamboo bridges, dead end paths and complex intersec-

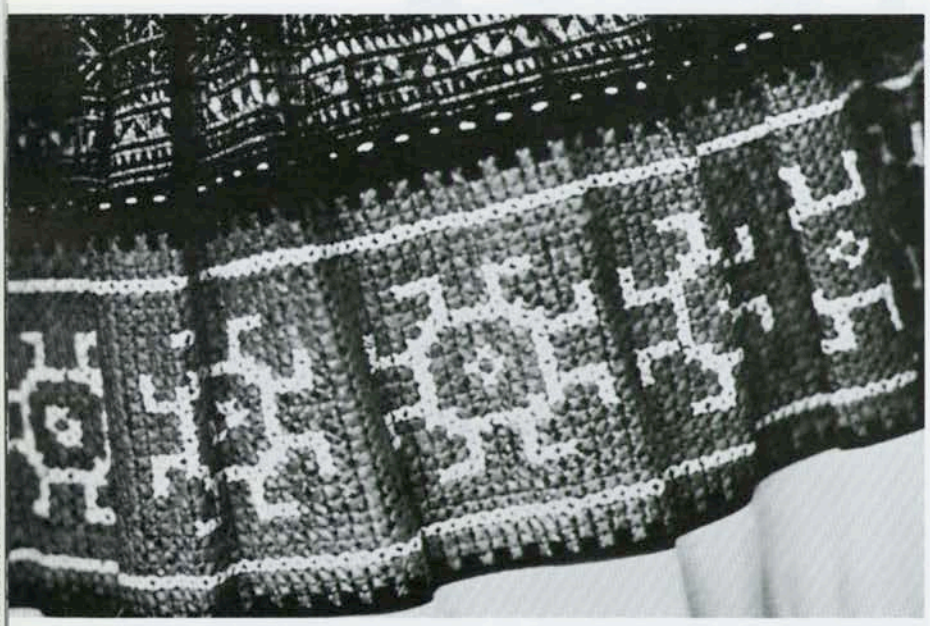


photo by Eric Crystal

Buffalo head motif. Merced, 1984.

photo by Eric Crystal

Blue Hmong baby carrier in use, Merced, 1984.

tions. Such designs are applied as foils to a potentially errant life-soul. Patterns include those known as "pig pen" and "peacock eye." Pig pens recall that valuable lifestock such as swine must be protected from harm at night by being locked in pens. So also the baby carrier—batik design and applique work—functions to enclose, to trap, to foil and to confuse a baby's life-soul lest it wander from the infant causing illness and threatening death. If the soul of the infant is to be safeguarded by the baby carrier, then what of the soul of the deceased? According to Hmong informants in Merced, California, upon death one of three Hmong life-souls remains in the body, one travels to the netherworld, and one ultimately will be reborn in a younger generation of Hmong of the same clan.

Just as maternal concern commands baby carrier symbolic textile design, production and daily use, so also does death involve special textile preparation. Funerary robes, oftentimes extremely elaborate for men and less so for women are completed well in advance of the terminal illness of a person of advanced age. The Hmong, like most people, do not like to talk about death. Indeed, when referring to the subject in the presence of elders, they make reference to a member of the ascendant generation "reaching 120 years of age." Not only are the funerary garments prepared many years in advance, but so also are the special appliqued square pillows termed *noob ncoos*. These small pieces are placed under the head of the deceased. They are prepared by the daughters and the daughters-in-law of a male patriarch. Designs on these pieces recall the tree stumps which remain after highland swidden fields have been cleared, and the padi dikes enclosing irrigation water about lowland fields. They symbolize the wealth in land and abundance of food which the deceased will take with him from this world to the next. Mountain dwelling Hmong not unexpectedly believe that the soul which journeys to the netherworld must traverse high mountain ranges before reaching the other side, the land of the dead. These jagged peaks are represented on the *au*, the funerary bib which encloses the ashes of paper money offerings used to dispatch the soul during the course of the funeral. As noted earlier, man and the enviornment are in much closer harmony in the mountains of Laos than is the case in urban America. Hmong villagers are acute observers of their environment, oftentimes their detailed knowledge of mountain Laotian ecology is reflected intheir textile production. One theme which emerges from analysis of Hmong batik design and also White Hmong embroidery of festive sashes is that of the water snail or *je*. According to Hmong Hmong craftswomen interviewed in 1983, this water snail is unique in that it is always and without fail found in pairs. No matter how many such snails may be observed, always there will be an even number. The design is often utilized on New Year garments, garments which young women wear to attract suitors at the festive New Year village celebration.

Water buffalo are commonly regarded as standards of virility throughout village communities in Southeast Asia. In many areas the price of a male water buffalo sets the standard for exchange of rice, skilled labor or land. Hmong festive pleated skirts sometimes exhibit water buffalo designs. One abstract motif suggest four water buffalo with their heads pointed towards the center of a panel; another shows an abstract of two sets of horns and a buffalo forehead. Such motifs reflect the desire of young maidens to attract strong suitors during the New Year festival. A mate should be strong, able to work the fields, and be capable of fathering many children to carry on the traditions of family and clan. Hmong designs in applique sometimes use discrete natural elements as metaphors for the life cycle itself. The pattern "fallen leaves" is applied often on funeral garments. On baby carriers the same design may appear, here recalling the cycle of birth, growth, maturity, and death through which all living things must pass.

Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops surrounded the headquarters of General Vang Pao in the Spring of 1975. American air cover had ceased to support erstwhile mountain allies, now isolated by implacable foes at strategic passes and peaks in northern Laos. The fledgling Hmong air force (fighter-bomber pilots flying combat missions out of Long Cheng headquarters base) had by this time been destroyed and most of the daring young Hmong pilots had been killed. The government in Vientiane spoke of national reconciliation, but an exposed ethnic minority people which had loyally served a defeated great power had ample reason to fear for its well-being under Communist administration. Word spread rapidly throughout the Hmong villages, domestic refugee camps and remote military outposts, that General Van Pao had departed Laos on May 14, 1975. Many Hmong veterans attempted to return to a sub-

sistence farming life, oftentimes judiciously secreting personal weapons in remote jungle caches. Those who had been allied with the Americans, and those who had managed to remain neutral during the long conflict for Laos found no peace at the conclusion of the formal struggle for Indochina in 1975. The majority of Hmong (perhaps 60-70 percent) who had served in the forces of Vang Pao or who had preserved a normal neutrality during the conflict were subject to official suspicion, harassment, "orientation" under armed guard, family separation for purposes of "re-education" and unprovoked armed attack. Repression in the aftermath of war in Laos has forced the relocation of the majority of Hmong. Entire districts have been emptied of Hmong inhabitants, forced to flee for their lives to safe haven in Thailand. Although some have alleged that the present government of Laos is determined to exterminate the Hmong minority of Laos, such is not precisely the case. Perhaps 20% of the Laotian Hmong have been allied with the Communist cause since its inception. Led initially by Faydang Lo, they found refuge in Sam Neua Province during the years of American air attacks, emerging in 1973 to participate in the Communist assumption of control. Some Communist Hmong have risen to high positions in the present government. Hmong allied with the Pathet Lao have shown no quarter to their brethren previously committed to the Americans. Survivors of the post-1975 conflict in Laos report that Communist Hmong have often been selected to execute insurgent Hmong prisoners, manage re-education centers, and guide Vietnamese troops in sweeps of suspect Hmong habitation areas.

Powerless and defeated, impoverished and malnourished, Hmong refugees have been fleeing Laos for the past decade. Uprooted from their natal villages, unable to practice their traditional agriculture, separated oftentimes from their beloved clansmen, Hmong refugees have left behind much that has been precious to their people over thousands of years of recorded (and unwritten) history. Over the millenia the Hmong have often been subject to defeat at the hands of more powerful forces, but they have never succumbed to defeat. Throughout their history the Hmong have preserved their identity, nurtured their clan structure, maintained their language and clung to their unique world view in the midst of alien and often intractably hostile host cultures. The Hmong have brought to the second countries of asylum (in Australia, Europe, South and North America) a characteristic determination to persevere and survive, not so much as individuals, but as a proud people capable of cooperation, sacrifice and competition in a wide variety of social milieux.

A recent study of major Hmong refugee community in the United States indicates that 73 percent of adult Hmong never attended school in Laos (Reder, 1982; 281). Ill-suited to meet the demands of a skilled labor market, ill-prepared to confront America in her post-industrial era, some 80,000 tribal Laotians have been resettled throughout the United States in the past decade. Cast

photo by Eric Crystal

Rooster hat with cockscomb protects child by invoking the spirit of the valiant fowl. Merced, 1984.

across the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific in a haphazard manner, Hmong refugees began immediately to seek information, about clansmen, friends and former village neighbors in Laos. Inexorably, small communities grew larger as major Hmong population clusters provided cultural sustenance in venues such as Minneapolis and Santa Ana and, more recently, in Fresno and Merced in California. Neither poverty, nor disorientation, nor distance, lack of transportation, the best and the worst intentions of American volunteers and social workers could prevent the Hmong from re-establishing kin-oriented communities. According to Cheu Thao of the Lao Family Community, Inc., this "secondary migration is almost identical to the move of a group of families from one village to another in traditional society" (Thao, 1982; 99). Such "reunification migration" according to Thao is directly attributable to the necessity for maintaining identity, preserving language, and sustaining traditional culture for the Hmong (1982; 105).

Hmong communities in the United States have grown up in great cities and small, on the Atlantic coast, in the Carolinas, and on the plains of the mid-west, in the Rocky Mountain states and in California's great central valley. Flocking to the fertile farmlands of central California in the hope that they might re-establish themselves in an agricultural environment; traditionally oriented secondary migrants from over thirty states have in the past four years reconstituted a significant Hmong community in Merced, California. Here four Hmong stores meet community needs. Indeed, one may purchase festive pleated Blue Hmong New Year skirts literally off the shelf in at least one such market. Shamans of several clans serve the needs of followers of the ancient Hmong religion, and possession rituals take place almost every week. Hmong Christians have formed their own church, strengthening ties within their ethnic

photo by Eric Crystal

Hmong baby and father, Merced, 1984.

photo by Eric Crystal

Embroidered collar attracts good spirits to the child. Merced, 1984.

community. In almost every Hmong home textile artists craft traditional garments and designs in the soft light of mid-day. The symbolically potent baby carriers so characteristic of the Hmong may be seen frequently on the streets of Merced. And sometimes a fleeting glimpse of a traditional infant's cap alerts a knowledgeable visitor to the vitality of Hmong textile and religious traditions in this small valley town. With some 5,000 Hmong residing in a town with a total population of 38,000, Merced enjoys the highest refugee to resident American population ratio of any urban area in the United States.

But in Merced as elsewhere in the West, the world view of an American born generation of Hmong can never be the same as that of those nurtured in the hillside farming tradition of the Laotian highlands. It is difficult to predict what the future may hold for the relatively small Hmong minority which has now become a distinctive element in the mosaic of multi-ethnic American national culture. Some might suggest that Hmong language, religion and textile arts should be expected to disappear, submerged by a dominant culture more concerned with consuming the products of the present than with preserving the traditions of the past. In 1930 the French historian of the Hmong, F.M. Savina contemplated the future of these people:

"It is very difficult to say today what will become of the Chinese and Indochinese Miao in 500-1000 years from now . . . But those races will not disappear for all that, and it is probable that for many centuries yet the Miao will keep their old customs and will continue to speak the age old language of their ancestors." (quote in Geddes, 1976; 265).

The traditional resilience, diligence and adaptability of the Hmong will, I believe, serve them well in future years. Many more of their number will distinguish themselves in America than their absolute population size might legitimately warrant. The sacred threads, the textiles and garments which the present generation of soldiers and shamans have spirited out of Laos, will always be kept safe and secure. And the time will come someday when American-Hmong visitors will return to the mountains of their ancestors to share the knowledge of the West, to seek out kinsmen in remote areas and to imbibe deeply the ancient ways of their people, the Hmong of the mountains of Southeast Asia.

Acknowledgements

Field research in Merced, California was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to the R. Salazar Library, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park California. This grant funded the operations of "The Indochinese Cultures Project" in 1983-84 which mounted museum and photographic exhibits and staged conferences in several mid-sized California towns with large Cambodian and Laotian refugee communities. I served as Project Coordinator and Academic Humanist on this project.

Special thanks is due Mr. Xay Lee of Merced who served as translator and research assistant during work in Merced in October, 1983-February, 1984. I am deeply indebted to Mr. Lee and many others in the Merced Hmong community for their kind assistance. Any and all errors or mis-perceptions contained in the above essay are, however, solely the responsibility of the author.

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Pa Yang: A Personal Treasure*

Amy E. Skillman
Missouri Cultural Heritage Center
University of Missouri-Columbia

When I first met Pa Yang, a Hmong pa ndau needle worker, she was living in a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a sixteen unit apartment building just three blocks off a major intersection in Gardena, California. The rectangular building is in a newly developed neighborhood with similar apartment buildings and low-income condominiums surrounding it. A far cry from the highlands of Laos. Yet, as I approached the front door, I was amused by the numerous pairs of shoes lined up on the front mat. Cultural persistence, I thought, and respectfully removed my shoes before entering.

Pa Yang was living with her daughter Nou Ly, her son Chay Ly and his wife (soon to deliver their first child), a younger son Pao Ly and a collection of relatives that I was unable to keep track of.

Chay greeted me and led me to a place on the sofa in the living room. The smell of beans cooking in the kitchen hinted at the evening meal. Soon, Pa joined us. I am still struck by the serenity of her round face which hardly looks the 50 years she claims to be.

Next to the door along the front wall was a large window facing the driveway and letting in a lot of light. Pa sits on a low stool in front of this window while she works on her pa ndau, preferring the natural light to indoor lamps. The stool is about ten inches off the ground and is similar to what she would have used in Laos. She sat there throughout our interviews. However, I was intrigued to see that when her mother came to one of the interviews, Pa relinquished the stool and sat on the chair next to her. There is also a table in that corner with a lamp and vase of plastic flowers — a constant reminder of nature's inaccessibility. The lampshade is always tilted at an angle to give maximum lighting when she works at night. On one occasion, the only live plant in the house sat on this table, absorbing necessary sunlight.

Pa keeps all her needlework supplies in a metal cookie tin on the table. Her cache of fabrics is kept in a dresser at the opposite end of the room.

Because Pa speaks very little English and I do not speak her language at all, the interviews were interpreted by either Chay or Nou. This created some interesting realizations. Whenever an interview is conducted in two languages, the researcher must be aware that information received will inevitably reflect the conceptions and feelings of the interpreter, as well as the artist. I feel this was especially true with Chay. Although he was very helpful and willing to share much of the family

photo by Amy Skillman

*The following report is based on a series of interviews with Pa Yang in 1982 for the Craft and Folk Art Museum's PET Project (Presevation of Ethnic Traditions). Our purpose was to seek out and document local traditional and ethnic artists and present them to the public in a two-day exhibition held at the Museum. Documentation of Pa Yang and the other artists in the project are on file at the Museum's Media Resource Library.

history with me, he does not do the needlework and therefore does not fully understand the meaning and value it may have for the women. The difference became clear only after the natural course of events resulted in working with Nou who is learning pa ndau from her mother. Pa ndau is the art of Hmong women and is handed down from mother to daughter. Working with Nou, I began to realize how important the skill of pa ndau is to women. It brings women together and offers a source of personal pride.

On the other hand, the advantage of having worked with Chay is that I was able to gain a fuller perspective of the issues, concerns, and creative energy of an entire family who is trying to build a life in a new world. Still, I was particularly interested in how the changes forced by the war and her move to Los Angeles may have effected Pa Yang's art.

Pa Yang was born on April 2, 1932 in the province of Xieng Khouang in Laos. As a child she lived in a Hmong village in the mountains. Her family, like most Hmong, was a farming family. She had four brothers and two sisters who all helped with the farming chores. Pa did not go to school as a child. When she was five years old her family moved to another village close to Ben Sen Louang. It was here that she met Nhia Shoua Ly, who would later become her husband. They were married in 1950. By 1970 they had seven children — three girls and four boys. Chay was born in 1959 and Nou was born in 1966.

Like many Hmong, Pa's family was involved in the Vietnam war, fighting along with the Americans. Nhia Shoua Ly was a pilot in the army so they lived on an army base. In 1972 he was shot down and killed. Pa also lost one of her sons in the war.

In May 1975, Pa and her six children escaped to Thailand to apply for residency in the United States. For a year and a half they waited in a refugee camp in Thailand. On November 5, 1976 their application was accepted and her family began their emigration. Refugee emigration is a complicated process involving individual sponsorship by a church, distribution quotas throughout the United States, and transportation availability. Consequently, Pa's family was not able to come together nor did they settle in one area. Pa and Nou first lived in Louisiana. I was not able to determine where all her children first lived but within a year most of them had come to California to be with earlier arrivers. In 1982, they were split between Gardena and Fresno. At that time, Pa told me she would probably stay in Gardena where the job possibilities were better. Since then, however, Pa has moved away from Gardena and may be in Fresno with her daughters, a sister, and her mother.

At the time of my interviews, Nou and her younger brother Pao were in school while Chay worked the evening shift at a local plant. Pa spent her mornings in an English-as-a-Second-Language class and her afternoons making pa ndau to sell.

Gardena has a large population of Hmong refugees as do Santa Ana and Long Beach. There are several southeast Asian refugee centers that offer legal, employment, housing, language, and counseling assistance. These centers also offer opportunities for the refugees to get together and share their experiences. One such occasion is how I met Pa Yang. It was an openhouse that included Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians. There was a display of the traditional arts of Southeast Asia, American refreshments, and rock 'n roll music provided by Vietnamese high school boys. It was an exciting mixture of cultural traditions.

While the centers provide an opportunity for sharing cultural traditions such as New Year's, Pa and her family have begun to adopt much of the lifestyle of the United States. Their clothing is western, they go to school and work with Americans, and they go to a Protestant church. Whether these adoptions are a matter of necessity or belief is difficult to determine.

Chay once confided to me that his uncle, a Shaman in Laos, had told him that if he were to be accepted in America, he would have to adopt the beliefs of his sponsoring church and drop those of his native Laos. This saddened me. If, in fact, traditions develop out of belief systems, as many traditions do, then the Hmong's acceptance of the Protestant faith might radically alter their own traditions. Celebrations which traditionally provide cohesiveness, a quality that is necessary in a new land, might give way to new and unknown traditions and forms of expression. Such change might create trauma within cutural continuity. On the other hand, traditional forms may continue and evolve with new meanings and motivations. This seems to be the case with Hmong women who have been able to adapt their pa ndau art to contemporary American society. While the traditional pa ndau is not used or created as often, it still remains as an important part of the lives of Hmong women.

When she was ten years old, Pa learned the art of pa ndau from her mother. As a young girl she sat outside with her friends in the afternoon sun to do the needlework. At that age, her village did not have electricity so the clear mountain sky was the best source of light. Pa still thinks so. She mentioned that in the past men also did pa ndau but now it is considered strictly the women's domain.

In a traditional context, pa ndau is used to adorn the everyday clothes of the Hmong, indicating subgroup affiliation and the region of residence in Laos through color and design. The first piece Pa made as a child was a sash for her apron which is worn over her skirt. Thinner sashes are also made for the men. The sash is often the first piece a girl makes because it consists of a repeating pattern of alternating squares and offers an opportunity to perfect those shapes and stitches, almost like an embroidery sampler. It also affirms the girls relationship to her subgroup at an early age. The woman's sash is made of embroidery and reverse applique while the man's sash is embroidered only. The stitches on these and other pieces are *very tiny.*

The pa ndau is also used traditionally as a four to six inch square flap on the back of the shirt to indicate subgroup affiliation. It is said this flap demonstrates to eligible bachelors the young girl's

skill as a needleworker, suggesting the importance of pa ndau to family life.

Ceremonial hats, carrying bags, and baby carriers are also part of the traditional repertory of the young Hmong needleworker. These pieces are usually made with reverse applique and might be embellished with cross stitch designs. Pa Yang is a member of the Black Hmong subgroup which is reflected in her style of hat and skirt as well as the tiny cross stitch patch she would wear on her shirt.

It is customary for the Hmong mother to make a complete "costume" for her daughters to be given to them by the time they are married. If a woman does not know how to make the pa ndau or does not have the time, she can buy the pieces from other Hmong women. Pa is one of those master artists that other women come to when they need the pa ndau. Pa has made costumes for all her daughters and has taught them all to do the needlework. Nou, the youngest daughter, has learned the embroidery and is now learning the reverse applique. I was pleased to learn that even at the age of 16 in California, Nou was sincerely interested in learning the art. She seemed to understand its value within her own heritage and saw it as a skill that set her apart from her classmates.

Pa explains that now that she is older and her eyesight is deteriorating, she can no longer do the tiny cross stitch embroidery. Since each stitch is calculated according to the number of fibers in the fabric, it is understandable that one's eyesight might begin to deteriorate. Pa tried to demonstrate this by comparing an older piece she had made in Laos with the most recent one she made for Nou. While the stitching of the older piece was more intricate, I found that those of the newer ones were just as bafflingly tiny. Pa does continue to use very tiny stitches on the reverse applique pieces and ocassionally creates a square cross stitch patch in the middle of a larger applique piece. These pieces are especially interesting in that they combine the traditional 4 inch square with the larger marketable applique piece, despite Pa's own perception of her diminished skill, women continue to come to her for ideas and guidance.

Pa has done pa ndau all her life. It is her most highly developed skill other than raising a family. For this reason, she and several other Hmong women have adapted their skills in order to make a living in their new world. Their art has taken a new form. Since they have adopted the clothing style of the United States, they no longer make pa ndau for everyday use. Pa does continue to make traditional sashes and other pieces for her family, but since they are only worn for cermonial gatherings, she does not spend as much time on them. Instead, she makes larger squares and rectangles that combine embroidery and reverse applique and are sold outside the Hmong community as decorative art. These are the pieces you will see at craft fairs and festivals. They are bought as wall hangings, pillowcases, and even stitched together as a tablecloth, bedspread or apron.

It is difficult to know if Pa and her family are able to make a living from selling their work. It does not seem like they sell it very consistently, although they can be found at almost every craft fair in the area. The only other souce of income for the family is what Chay brings home. But, in 1982, Pa sold her pieces for $6.00 to $50.00 depending on the size and intricacy of the piece. Today, with the increased interest in pa ndau and the extraordinary efforts to create a market for these women, she may be able to earn more for each piece.

Pa's needlework combines the techniques of embroidery, applique, and reverse applique. For the most part, the embroidery stitches used are the cross stitch (xxxxx) and the chain stitch (⊂⊃⊂⊃⊂). The applique technique involves stitching a piece of fabric of a particular shape on top of another piece of fabric. The top piece makes the design. Reverse applique, however, is more involved. Shapes are cut out of pieces of fabric and the layers are stitched on top of each other in such a way that the lower layers create the design. In both cases, the edges of the top piece are turned under very slightly and stitched down with tiny, almost invisible stitches.

With the exception of the traditional sashes and shirt panels, Pa only uses embroidery to embellish the larger contemporary applique and reverse applique pieces. More recently, however, women have begun to create story clothes which are entirely embroidered. They developed out of the refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines and depict images and events in the lives of the women and their communities. When I knew Pa, the only piece she had created that resembled a story cloth was actually more like a Colonial Williamsburg sampler. Most of her recent pieces were the contemporary squares made of applique and reverse applique. Pa's reason for this was that her eyesight is too poor to be able to do the tiny cross stitch. Another woman confided to me that the larger applique pieces are more popular in the United States and take much less time to do. Thus they are more practical for their market.

Each piece of contemporary pa ndau begins with a blank piece of fabric, thread, and scissors. The fabric is always a solid color. In Laos, Pa used silk fabric which she also frayed to use the silk fibers as thread. Silk is still used for the traditional embroidered pieces when it is available but cotton and cotton blend fabrics and thread have replaced it for the contemporary pieces. Pa uses two kinds of scissors — a very tiny pair for cutting the shapes in the fabric and a slightly larger pair for cutting thread.

Pa begins the piece by folding the fabric into four quadrants. This gives her the basic guidelines for the symmetry which is so charateristic of the Hmong pa ndau. Pa does not use a pattern and claims that she does not plan her designs ahead of time. The design seems to come out of the fabric and the way she folds it. Once she has made the initial four folds, she continues to fold in a variety of directions until she has all the guiding lines she needs for cutting the design. If the folds do not show up well enough for her to see, she will run over them with a straight pin or needle. This gives them permanence.

The next step is to cut the fabric into the desired shapes. She folds the fabric into halves, quarters, or eighths and cuts through all the layers

photo by Amy Skillman

Sash, sev, embroidered by Pa Yang, Black Hmong, with snapshot of her daughter wearing it in full black Hmong outfit.

within the areas created by the folds. Some of the more complicated shapes, such as the snailshell, need to be cut one at a time. Once the piece is cut, it is basted to the background color. At this point, Pa can cut smaller shapes to fit under certain sections of the top piece, thus creating another color in the background. Then the stitching begins. She carefully turns the edges of the top piece under and stitches them in place. When the stitching is complete, Pa will embellish it with various embroidery designs before adding the border and the back. The back piece is often the only patterned fabric.

Pa Yang's pa ndau provides a very meaningful example of how traditional designs evolve through time and in response to new experiences. In the traditional context, the pa ndau design indicates the tribal affiliation of the wearer. The Black Hmong, Pa's subgroup, use bright colors, especially pink and green. This can be seen in the pieces she has made for her daughter. The designs themselves include squares, crosses, triangles, and spirals combined in a variety of ways. Some of the designs suggest mountains, flowers, and lakes which is not surprising since pa ndau means "flower cloth." Although most of the Hmong women I spoke with were quiet about their art, researchers have suggested that the pa ndau tells the stories and myths of the Hmong people, that the pa ndau is a spiritual companion through life.

I was unable to confirm this with Pa and grew to wonder if cultural specialists tend to embue traditional art with more symbolism than is really there. Perhaps in lacking artistic symbolism in our own lives, we seek it in the art of other cultural traditions. Or, our very emphasis on it enables us to better articulate what those symbols mean. Either way, Pa was quiet about the symbols she uses. This may have ben due to the language barrier or to the fact that I was an outsider. She often responded with "I don't know" when I asked her detailed questions.

She may have been meaning "I don't know how to say that in English." She did explain that the triangular border on all her pieces represents the mountains that were once her home. Chay feels that the different styles reflect Pa's different feelings and ideas. In looking at several of her newer pieces, I noticed a sense of movement outward or toward the center. This may reflect the Hmong experience of travelling and settling in a new world or it may reflect my western interpretation of her design.

It is important to remember that, in designing her contemporary pieces, Pa has a new audience. She does not make these pieces for other Hmong women. Therefore, her new buyers will not understand or appreciate the symbols and designs she uses in her traditonal pieces. Nor will they necessarily enjoy the traditional color combinations. This allows Pa the opportunity to develop new designs and new color combinations, bringing out an artistic side that she has not been able to explore in the past. She told me that she often uses darker colors because that is what her market wants.

The content of the pieces also reflects her perception of what her market wants. The Colonial Williamsburg sampler is a good example. I was especially surprised when she told me it was her favorite. On another piece, she has embroidered "Honey, I Love You So Much" all the way around the border. It surrounds a scene with birds and bunnies. Perhaps it is significant that neither of them had sold.

When I asked Pa if she thought her pieces could be distinguished in any way from other Hmong women's pieces, she said no. She can tell them apart but only because she recognized the designs. She does not feel that her pieces carry any individual style. This contradiction reflects in many ways the essence of traditional art. As an expression of the cultural community it is indistinguishable from others, but as an expression of individuality each one has a distinct design.

Although Pa's choice of color and design in her newer pieces varies outside traditional guidelines, in fact, so do the colors and designs that other Hmong women in the United States are using. In this way, the traditional guidelines, themselves, are changing.

Pa Yang continues to teach her daughter Nou the art of pa ndau. Yet, the life of a sixteen year old growing up in Los Angeles is quite different than Pa's life as a sixteen year old growing up in a Hmong village in Laos. It will be interesting and important to watch the changes that this ancient art form undergoes through the next generation. Nou will have an opportunity to learn a variety of skills which will help her to earn a living. Perhaps she will not need to sell pa ndau. Perhaps she can return the pa ndau to its traditional place in her community. The pa ndau may provide one of the few links she will have to her ethnic identity. Her experiences in the United States will surely effect the evolution of pa ndau.

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Songs of Hmong Women: Virgins, Orphans, Widows and Bards

by Amy Catlin

A woman's voice glides alone above the silence of hushed listeners. Calm, brave, and strong, the contours of her melody extend over long sustained tones and text-laden recitation, swoop to sudden glottalized verse endings, and begin the sustained refrain again. She is a Hmong woman, weaving rhymes into melodies known to her tribe alone, placing tonal Hmong words on a gridlike tune understood only by her kinsmen, juxtaposing poetic images of love and nature first devised by her ancestors many generations ago.

The talent for singing is a highly valued gift in Hmong society, as in our own, but the occasions and purposes of singing are quite different than in our experience. Boys and girls sing to each other for days on end at the annual New Year Festival, an exercise in becoming acquainted under socially acceptable circumstances. Adorned in their most lavish handiwork, they toss a ball back and forth, while friends, relatives, and middlemen enjoy the spectacle and the poetic skills of the singer.

Cassette recorders capture these moments of song for circulation among potential mates, sometimes across the globe. A few Hmong girls and women even peddle their tapes at the New Year Festival, adorned with a fetching photograph in the case of young girls who have never married.

Unmarried virgins or widowed women who display skill in singing at the New Year Festival are the most sought after marriage partners, even more than their needleworking sisters. Perhaps this is an indication of the mystique which surrounds the art of musical expression as compared to the more practical textile arts. Yet, their voices are rarely heard again after marriage, except to teach their daughters when courtship age approaches. Children do not sing; there are no Hmong children's songs or lullabies. Rather, singing is a tool for courtship . . . and in exceptional cases, for conveying wisdom and pathos to the larger group.

A popular genre during courtship games is the orphan's song, *kwv txhiaj ntsuag,* which need not be sung by an orphan. These songs may elicit tears of sympathy, as the person without a family is the most pitied soul for the Hmong, and usually does not remain as such long before an adopted family presents itself. However, the new family is never the same as one's own lost parents, and many songs describe the unfortunate adopted child who is not really accepted or loved with the intensity of a natural Hmong family.

1. *Son of theirs,*
   The poor orphan girl's mother and father
   Are dead body and soul
   And the poor orphan girl
   Simply must close her mouth.
   Son of theirs,
   I feel like a dead hen,
   A hen who does not know
   How to come to a nest and lay eggs.
2. *The poor orphan girl's mother and father*
   Are dead body and soul
   And the poor orphan girl
   Is being oppressed by others.
3. *When she plows the fields*
   She is like a plowing ox
   Whose leg is broken.
   The poor orphan girl's mother and father
   Are dead body and soul
   And the poor orphan girl
   Will be without life or family.
4. *When the poor orphan girl thinks she must go and pluck vegetables,*
   Then her people close the door loudly behind her.
5. *When she returns*
   She peeps through the chinks in the walls
   And sees them eating and sharing all the meat.
6. *While they eat and share all the meat*
   They let her sleep curled up with the dogs and the pigs
   Son of theirs.
7. *They lie to her*
   Saying they have only eaten their share.
   They send her to the stove to fetch her food
   But when she looks for the meat, there is none,
   And tears stream down her face.
8. *When she sighs that she has no spoon,*
   But will manage simply with a plate,
   How the people scold her,
   Saying she has hidden her spoon . . .
   Saying she has lost her spoon.
9. *I am unhappy enough to die*
   When shall we meet again?
   Perhaps in another life . . .

May Seha: singer
kwv txhiaj ntsuag—Orphan's Song
Translation: Father Jean Mottin and Amy Catlin.

Recorded by A. Catlin at the Voice of Peace Studio, Chiangmai, Thailand, October 1979. Reprinted from: Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology: Asian Music in North America. UCLA: 1982.

Song Vang, Blue Hmong singer from Banning, performing at the Woman's Building opening festival.

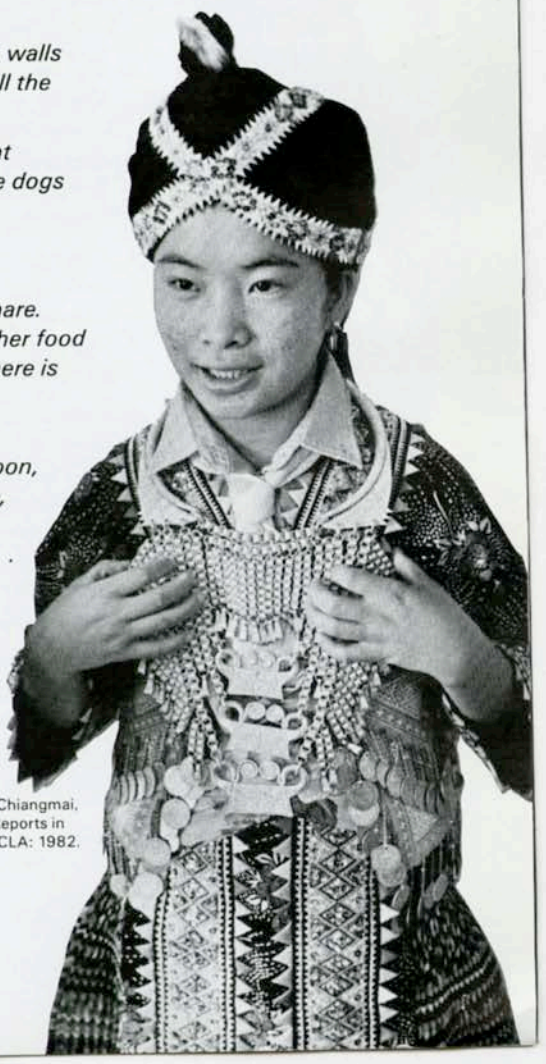

photo by Amy Catlin

Hmong boys in a line tossing balls and singing courtship songs at San Diego Hmong New Year, 1985.

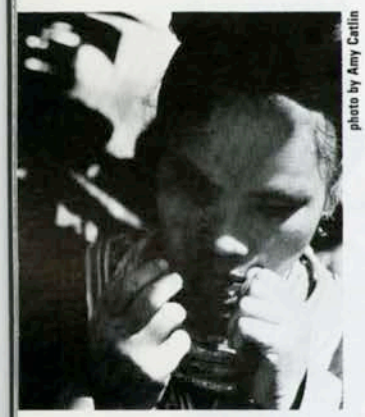

photo by Amy Catlin

The guimbard or jew's harp, ncas *is played quietly by lovers too shy to sing. Chiengmai, Thailand, 1980.*

Similarly, the "daughter-in-law" songs, *kwv txhiaj ua nyab,* inspire empathy among all Hmong women, for like the orphan, the new bride must go to a strange family as an adopted daughter. She may feel alienated and unloved among outsiders. By singing songs at the New Year Festival which express her fear of this aspect of marriage, she can observe the responses of potential mates, judging which one will offer her the most support, sympathy, and protection from overbearing in-laws, usually personified as a "wicked mother-in-law" in the songs.

1. *This year,*
   The Hmong brothers do not have good livers
   They have destroyed all the trees
   In the great jungle
   So the quails have no place to cry/howl

   This year,
   The young Hmong girl has become
   The great Hmong Vang family's bride
   And the young man no longer has a place
   To come/stop by
2. *The young man arrives in the foreign*
   market/street
   On his business trip
   He hears that the young girl has become
   The great Hmong Vang family's bride/wife
3. *The young man returns home*
   He is too slow/late
   The young girl has already crossed
   The great Hmong Vang family's
   grey/black *lake*
4. *The young girl arrives home*
   She picks up the great Hmong Vang family's
   water bucket
   And places it on her waist/ledge
   Tears are pouring/dropping *down*
   her cheeks
5. *The young girl works very hard*
   Her fingers and toes are hot
   Like burning oil/blood
   She has time to work with others
   But does not have time to eat/dress
6. *The young girl is married*
   To the great Hmong Vang family
   Who are not good
   She wonders,
   "If my parents can return/take home
   Their animals into their stables
   Then I can stop being their bride/wife
   And I can stop crying/being lonely
7. *Oh! Young girl,*
   Your parents' hands are not firm/tight
   Their money has been destroyed/capital
   is lost
8. *After the young girl*
   Became the great Hmong Vang family's
   bride
   They say that her liver is not even/good
   The young girl will not be able to live
   With the great Vang's family
   Throughout the day/year

   How angry I am!

from Bertrais, Yves, Meo Songs of Love,
#88 *Kwv Txhiaj Ua Nyab* — Daughter-in-Law Song
Translation: Shur Vang Vangyi, Amy Catlin
Note: words in slashed pairs (i.e. cry/howl) represent replaced and rhymed parallelisms in the Hmong original.

When a girl likes her partner, she may sing *kwv txhiaj plees,* love songs encouraging him to elope with her, one of the accepted methods of marriage in traditional Hmong life. By singing of her desire for him, couched in romantic imagery derived from nature, such as birds, flowers, streams, mountains, as well as the happiness of her own parents, she may well be abducted within hours.

Oh my dear boyfriend
Now that our love has developed fully
If you do not want me
Don't be involved with me
But if you really do,
Let us hold our hands
And climb to the
mountaintop/rocky mountain
Since our love has developed fully
Let us go away to start our family life
And see whether our parents
will miss/like *us*

Oh my dear boyfriend
Since our love has developed fully
Just as the crow who knows how
to fly and land
It will land on the dry branch/thorns
Since we really love each other
Let us go away to build our life
And not let our parents know/hear

How happy we are!

XIA MUAS, singer
Kwv Txhiaj Plees — Love Song
Translation: Shur Vang Vangyi, Amy Catlin

photo by Amy Catlin

Hmong boy sings courting songs while tossing the ball. San Diego Hmong New Year, 1985.

Back page:
Hmong girl from the Ly clan, dressed in Sayaboury style. Merced, 1984.
photo by Eric Crystal

If she is not in such a great hurry, she may sing of the importance for the boy to attend school before their marriage, promising to wait until he returns. Such songs are known as *kwv txhiaj kawm ndawv,* "schooling songs."

1. *Now, oh my love . . .*
   The female bird is howling in the meadow
   And the male is answering from the hill/river
   My love, this year you are going to school
   in another world
   And you will go to live in the other country
   My love, I will stay with my parents
   A single girl waiting for you/you (pl.)
2. *Now, my love . . .*
   As for me, I will stay
   I will become my parents' wooden beam
   For drying hemp cloth/thread
   And this year you will go
   And stay as your parents' single boy to wait
   for me/us
   How happy I am!

Song Yang, singer
Kwv txhiaj kawm ndawv — Schooling Song
Translation: Shur Vang Vangyi, Amy Catlin

Widows with a talent for singing may appear at the festival carrying a black umbrella overhead instead of the gaily flowered parasols of their more fortunate sisters. Holding a courtship ball covered in a black cloth, she sings the widow's songs such as *kwv txhiaj kev tuag,* explaining and lamenting her husband's death. Should a partner appear, they exchange verses back-to-back, in deference to her mourning.

Oh, my Hmong brothers, sisters,
and relatives . . .
When we came from heaven in the
last generation
It was not my husband who led/wanted *me*
But it was I who wanted/led *him*
And we forgot to ask God for our marriage
licenses/certificate

My Hmong brothers, sisters, and relatives . . .
When we came from heaven in the
last generation
We forgot to submit our life letters
To the Chinese educator at the gate
To confiscate/prepare *them*
So that when we got old we could
fall/die *at the same time*

Oh, my Hmong brothers, sisters,
and relatives . . .
Now it is sunny in your world
But it is raining in my world
And floods are racing down everywhere
This year I, Maiv Muam Npliaj Lig
Have received a bad letter/notice
from the great demon, Ntxwj Siv Lis
Nyoog

Pa Soua Her, Singer
Kev Tuag — Song of Death
Translation: Shur Vang Vangyi, A. Catlin

The most gifted women singers, the rare ones who continue to sing after marriage or who remain single, achieve great renown as the bards of their people. Their poetry and songs cross continents on cassettes, and their names are held aloft as the eloquent preservers of the aesthetic essence of Hmongness. Ia Xiong, Pa Soua Her, and Doua Her . . . these are the three most famous singers today, whose voices can be heard in most Hmong households. The first two specialize in traditional Hmong subjects: the history, folktales, and myths of a dispersed people. The third, Doua Her, is best known for her retellings of Biblical stories in Hmong style.

Whereas Hmong men guard the oral texts surrounding ritual activities for communication with the spirit world, it is the women who preserve the spiritual and artistic life among the living, as reflected in their sacro-secular textiles and in the purely secular, or sometimes Christian, verbal and musical art of *kwv txhiaj:* sung poetry.

A copy of a cassette tape of these songs can be obtained by writing: Amy Catlin, 6539 Greenbush Ave., Van Nuys, CA 91401

Hmong girl catches a ball while singing courtship songs for many cassette recorders at the national Hmong New Year in Fresno, 1984.

photo by Amy Catlin