The Religious Dynamic and Changing Identity of Hmong Peoples in the Midwest: Preservation and Perseverance

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Abstract

This paper looks at the Hmong peoples of the Midwest and the role of religion and clan structure in their lives. Our research determines that Hmong ethnic identity trumps Hmong religious identity. Hmong who practice non-traditional religions still retain their Hmong identity according to our respondents. During our research, we interview four respondents from different religious backgrounds. We examine the role religious institutions play in the sponsorship of Hmong families and how it relates to their spatial distribution. We discover that clan structure is a lesser factor of spatial distribution for Hmong peoples in the Midwest due to economic pressures in the United States. While our research demonstrates that clan structure is less important in the Hmong community, we nevertheless discover more unifying factors than factors that split the community.

Introduction

Hmong people in the United States emigrated from Laos to escape a country that was no longer safe and no longer their home. Hmong peoples have routinely adapted for centuries. There is no land that Hmong people can call their “home.” The Hmong, time and time again, have restructured their lives to preserve their identity where they live. The United States, with a predominantly Christian-privileged and influenced culture, undoubtedly shapes Hmong people who now call this country their home. The differences between Hmong culture and
traditions, in contrast to the general culture of Americans with a Christian religious hegemony, leads to a clash of two worlds. These two worlds have only met recently. Hmong people have been in the United States for only four decades with the last major resettlement wave happening two decades ago (Faderman and Xiong 1998). Our paper hopes to illustrate how Hmong people adapt to spiritual life in the United States. In particular, how are the religious practices and beliefs of the Hmong community morphing in the United States? The recent arrival of Hmong people provides a unique dynamic to our research because we will be able to collect information and observe phenomena occurring presently.

Our research looks to answer three questions: (1) what are the factors behind shifting religious beliefs in Hmong people when they immigrate to the United States, (2) how do Hmong integrate both Animist, or traditional beliefs, and Christian beliefs into daily life, and (3) how does this religious dynamic split or unite Hmong communities? In looking to answer these questions, we hope to discover and better understand how Hmong people are adapting to the life and culture of the United States. We also hope to document what traditions, and especially, religious beliefs are the Hmong community preserving, altering, or letting go.

Through semi-structured interviews, we hope to provide substantial qualitative data to answer our questions above. We interviewed four members of the Hmong community who each represent a particular religious identity. Our four respondents included: (1) a leader in the Hmong community in Wisconsin who represents a traditional religious background, (2) a Pastor in Madison representing a Christian background, (3) a graduate student with an animist-upbringing, however self-identifying as agnostic, and (4) a leader of a movement to simplify traditional, representing Hmongism. In selecting members of the Hmong community who
affiliating with distinct religious beliefs, we hope to be able to compare and contrast their views amongst one another. While all of the people we interview share Hmong cultural identity, their religious identities vary greatly.

Another fascinating geographic component of Hmong populations in the United States is that a large majority of Hmong people are concentrated in just three states (Montgomery 2013, 9). While California has the largest Hmong population Wisconsin and Minnesota hold the second and third overall largest populations in the United States (Montgomery 2013, 9). This research will focus on Hmong people in Minnesota and Wisconsin, both accessible locations for our research group who are based in Wisconsin. Members of the research group also have prior cultural experience and knowledge of Hmong people, an additional advantage to the mentioned geographic advantage. One member, in particular, has previous experience with Hmong musical instruments, like the qeej, an important instrument in the Hmong traditional religion. This prior experience with Hmong culture provides our research a valuable primer in understanding Hmong people and connecting with those we interview.

The following sections contextualize Hmong history and society in order to understand the research and results that follow. Without an understanding of Hmong people and their traditions and beliefs, it would be difficult to understand a research paper based on Hmong traditions and beliefs.
Literature Review

Historical Context

To understand any culture and its current issues, historical context must be properly analyzed and thoroughly dissected. For the Hmong people historical context immediately runs into several issues. To begin, Hmong people do not historically have a written language and for most of their history have spent considerable time as refugees, moving from different lands looking for safety and security (Thao 1993, 2). It is theorized by academics that Hmong civilization has roots in what is now Northern China and Mongolia (A free people: our stories, our voices, our dreams 1994, 13; Hmong Un Peuple de L’exil 2007, 3). Thousands of years ago, they began a southern migration process as wars broke out.

Hmong Kingdom

Despite the Hmong people lacking a country to call their home today, from the years 400-900 A.D., historic accounts recount a complex Hmong Kingdom existing in China (Quincy 1995, 44). The Hmong kingdom resembled a federated state (Quincy 1995, 44). Hmong people held elections within a district of approximately 20 villages with power mostly existing in these

Source: Quincy 1995 p. 46
districts and not in the monarchy (Quincy 1995, 44). The kingdom existed and thrived for a long period until Ma Yin, a Chinese rebel, battled the Hmong and crippled their army significantly (Quincy 1995, 48). Ma Yin fell to the Sung dynasty, a dynasty that eventually destroyed the remnants of the Hmong kingdom (Quincy 1995, 49). The destruction of the Hmong Kingdom and the stability it provided allows us to have an understanding of the adaptability of the Hmong people. The population succumbed to the Han Chinese in battle, but the Hmong people never succumbed to the attempted influence of Chinese culture and dominance.

**Hmong in China**

Academics theorize that the Hmong spent hundreds of years in and around the basin of the Yellow River because of the Chinese words and stories that exist for the Hmong (Lee, Tapp. 1997). In fact, there are a variety of shared cultural identifiers that the Chinese and the Hmong seem to share. Ancient Hmong folktales that are passed down from generation to generation mention the Chinese and often refer to them as ancestral brothers. Despite their shared history, the Hmong and Chinese ultimately fought to the point where Hmong peoples moved further south into Southeast Asia and Laos. Perhaps one of the more divisive aspects between the Hmong and Chinese, is the word, *Miao* (Lee, Tapp. 1997). Even today, it is an extremely derogatory word in the Chinese language used to describe Hmong as savages or barbarians (Lee, Tapp. 1997).

From the 1600s into the twentieth century, Hmong continued their migration South often due to the discrimination and violence they faced from other ethnic groups. A large population of them settled in Laos, high up on the slopes of the undulating landscape (Schmidt-
There they practiced swidden agriculture, a form of shifting cultivation practiced by ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia. Swidden cultivation begins by burning swathes of land to plant many different species of crop (Schmidt-Vogt, 2001). The crops are planted in such a way that different vegetables and plants reach harvest time at different times in order for a village to eat through a season. Once a harvest is finished, a field is left to lie fallow for up to 50 years. Due to the climate and nature of the vegetation in Southeast Asia, fallow fields tend to regrow their forest cover completely if left alone for enough time (Schmidt-Vogt, 2001). A family or village then moves on to another field and hence, swidden agriculture is often an environmentally sustainable method of subsistence farming.

From 1964 to 1975, during the Vietnam War, the United States waged a proxy clandestine war effort in neighboring Laos. This materialized itself in heavy bombing campaigns against the communist Pathet Lao (Thao 1993, 6). The United States dropped twice the number of bombs in Laos than on Germany in World War II, primarily to disrupt military movements along the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Hmong people joined the United States and the Royal Lao Government in the fight against rebel communists (Thao 1993, 6). However, as the Vietnam War and other operations became increasingly unpopular for a disillusioned American public, the US began executing its exit strategy. Despite the efforts of Hmong people in the war, they were not initially provided assistance as the United States left the region. Once the United States ended its operations in Laos and Vietnam, the Hmong became a targeted demographic of the Laotian and Vietnamese communist regimes due to their pro-American war efforts. Mass immigration began in the late 1970’s and by the early 1990s 130,000 Hmong had immigrated to the United States (Thao, 1993, 7).
Movement of Hmong People

Hmong peoples as we know of today did not originate in countries like Vietnam and Laos. Large populations of Hmong in China fled their homeland due to conflict with Chinese regimes (Quincy 1995). These populations arrived primarily in today’s Vietnam around the 18th century (Quincy 1995, 60).

When the Hmong entered Laos, they were despised as intruders into the land of other people, and especially by the largest group Lao, because the Lao were Buddhists and they were animists. They dispersed into small villages in mountains “sometimes as high as five thousand feet” (Faderman and Xiong 1998, 2). The Lao referred to them as “parasites without a country”, and also called the Hmong Meo, a word originally from Chinese, but actually meant “slave” in Laotian. Later in 1893, the French governance in Xieng Khouang Province forced the Hmong to pay a high tax. Adult men were recruited for forced labor and, in result, bloody revolts took place in the hope that retaliation would force the French government to alter its policies. When the Hmong trained as secret soldiers in the Special Guerilla Units to fight the communists, they were told that they had to fight or the North Vietnamese would “invade them, take their homes, and subjugate them” (Faderman and Xiong 1998, 6; Vang 1998, 30). Many Hmong soldiers fought to be treated equally and enjoy the same social status as the other ethnic groups in Laos. As the fighting continued, the Hmong suffered such a great loss that by the end of the war the entire population was reduced to two-thirds of that before the war. Additionally, half of all Hmong males over fifteen were killed during the war, and many boys aged from ten to sixteen were also recruited into the army (Faderman and Xiong 1998, 7).
When the Pathet Lao Communists won the war, took over the territories in Laos and established the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Hmong who fought against them were seen as traitors and enemies, and thus sent to “reeducation” camps, similar to those concentration camps by the Nazis (Faderman and Xiong, 1998, 8). After the Refugee Act was passed by the U.S. Congress, many Hmong people started to flee across the Mekong River into Thailand and lived in relocation camps, where they waited to qualify for resettlement and, when approved, received basic instruction on language and other Western culture, including Christianity. Many of them experienced culture shock after this first encounter with the Western culture, especially when it conflicted with their Hmong traditions and beliefs. For instance, their practices of healing and shamanism were specifically challenged by the modern Western medicine. As waves of Hmong immigrated to the United States and other Western countries, the ones still left in the relocation camps in Thailand were increasingly resented by the local Thais as unwelcomed guests who “overstayed their visit” (Faderman and Xiong 1998, 10). They were told by the Thai to either move to a third country before immigrate to America or return to Laos. By 1996, the last major wave of Hmong immigration to America took place and the last relocation camp was closed.

Clan Structure and Dynamics

The term house or household in Hmong is tsev. The tsev, or nuclear family, is led by the adult male with his wife (or wives), unmarried children, and sometimes kin that are not capable of forming a household on their own (Cooper 1997, 21). Establishing a new household is thus a rite of passage for men to prove their economic independence. Traditionally Hmong in Laos
practiced polygamy and a man could have multiple wives as long as he could afford it, but this tradition was no longer continued after they immigrated to other countries where polygamy was illegal. In Hmong culture the idea of home is integral and the bond within a family is tight and strong, even if close family members are separated far away from the others.

Kinship organization reinforces the idea of extended families, and thus form one of the most important social structures that influences Hmong culture and traditions. Hmong society is patrilineal and patrilocal, meaning that if a woman marries into a family, she is cut off from her original family and her home village and belongs to her husband’s family and lineage. Clans, in another sense, are divided according to the surname groups. In Laos, there are 18 clans formally identified and they tend to live close to other members within their clans. As such, we see high concentrations of specific clans in specific areas. Members in the same clan are referred to as kwv tij, meaning brothers, even though they might not have blood ties. Because all members in a clan are considered to be extended family members as brothers and sisters, they are not supposed to marry within the clan, a practice known as exogamy. In other words, people with the same surnames are not allowed to marry or even have any sexual relations with each other (Cooper 1997, 39). Hmong people from one clan welcome those from other clans to live close to them, so that children would not have to move too far away from their parents after marriage. It is traditionally ideal for a Hmong boy to “marry the daughter of his father’s sister or the daughter of his mother’s brother (cross-cousin marriage)”, which allows their new family to stay close to other family members and also respect the tradition of marriage (Cooper 1997, 55).
Religion Archetypes

Traditional Animist Belief

The following is an account of the Hmong perception of the universe and the according beliefs and rituals of traditional Hmong animists. Animism can be traditionally defined as a belief that non-human entities, including animals and inanimate objects have a spiritual essence. (Stringer, 1999) Traditionally the Hmong perceived the earth as a flat surface with all the rivers flowing into a large hole in the ground (Thao, 1993, 16). The hole was the home of two large eagles, whose main responsibility was to make sure the rivers ran properly into the hole and did not flood the ground. They did this by removing logs that could block the hole and divert the earth's rivers. Every year a large flock of birds would fly to the water hole and the last bird to arrive would become the dinner for the eagles (Thao, 1993, 16). The moon, sun, and stars all rose from the underground from their own holes in the ground.

The Hmong universe can be divided into three main parts. Dab nriag teb, the space under the ground, the qab ntuj khwb, the space between the earth and the sky, and the ntuj, the sky. In the underworld, there are small creatures who look like humans who live in this space. However, these creatures do not interfere with human activity (Thao, 1993, 18). The space between the earth and sky effectively translated to the surface of the earth. In this realm humans, animals, plants and all spirits (Thao, 1993, 19)
While the sun, moon, thunder, Saub and Siv Yig are associated with the sky realm, they are thought to be under the supervision and authority of the ntuj or sky (Thao, 1993, 21). Saub is a Hmong God that is all knowing but only appears in legends and has no influence on human life. Siv Yig is believed to be the founder of shamanism and lives in the sky. He is consulted by other shamans for special powers to cure illness and combat evil spirits (Thao, 1993, 17).

The main parts of Hmong animism that shape everyday life are the different spirits (Thao, 1993, 19). There are supernatural spirits, family spirits and wild spirits. Supernatural spirits include the sky, thunder, earth and Siv Yig. Family spirits include ancestor spirits, house spirits and shaman spirits. Wild spirits include nature spirits, evil spirits and outsider spirits (Thao, 1993, 20).

The sky or the ntuj is the most powerful spirit. Without its presence, nothing else would exist in the Hmong universe. The sky knows the movement of all creatures on earth, and the sky acts as a supreme judge without bias (Thao, 1993, 20). Generally, people who disrespected the sky or thunder would be struck down by lightning. In general, the sky does not intervene in human life and does not need prayers, sacrifice or even acknowledgement from Hmong people. However, sacrifices are often made to the sky when Hmong ask for rain, sunshine, or answers to problems (Thao, 1993, 22).

The Hmong house is central to practicing animism and performing a number of rituals. It serves as a gathering place for birth ceremonies, marriages, celebrations, and ancestor and funeral rituals (Thao, 1993, 24). In the United States, domestic and religious spaces are typically segregated. For the Hmong, the house is both. Hmong houses generally face downhill and have two doors for various spirit ceremonies. Souls-calling ceremonies always occurred at the front
The location of the house was also important because a family did not want to have it close to routes or places of evil spirits (Thao, 1993, 24).

The main spirits that Hmong people worship are ancestor and house spirits. These spirits affect daily life because of their ability to protect and guide a Hmong family (Thao, 1993, 25). Some family spirits are involved in the health of livestock or financial success. Generally, these spirits are worshipped at the most important celebration, the Hmong New Year celebrations (Thao, 1993, 25). Besides these main spirits, other lesser spirits of different duties also exist in the house, for instance, spirit that "guards the door to the outside" (dab qhovrooj); family members must feed and honor their spirits, or the offended spirit, no matter an ancestor or a nature one, will bring sickness and even death to the household, which then requires a shaman's help to appease the spirits and cure the sick person, or even bring back the lost soul (Faderman and Xiong 1998, 104; Vang 1998, 98).

In Hmong animism a shaman is a mediator between the human world and the spirits. They are seen as physicians rather than spiritual leaders. Each shaman receives his power from Siv yig and the title and spirits were passed down or inherited. Although anyone can learn to be a shaman and train with a shaman if the spirits accept them (Thao, 1993, 34). Shaman cure illnesses caused by spirits and bring back or guide lost or wandering spirits (Thao, 1993, 33). Shamans do not perform funeral rites or services.

For Hmong, the Otherworld is a very important component in their belief system, as they believe that the spirits - no matter natural, ancestral or supernatural - could “live in and animate all things” (Cooper 1997, 103). Their concept of the world is similar to the Chinese otherworld, as yeeb ceeb, their dark world for spirits is similar to the Chinese world of yin.
bright world, *yaj ceeb*, is also similar to the Chinese world of *yang*. It is believed that humans could communicate with the spirits directly before the curse of the frog *Nplooj Lwg* separated the world into heaven and earth. Since then, shamans were the only ones that could safely access the world of spirits and return afterwards.

The Otherworld is controlled by two deities. *Ntxwj Nyug* judges the dead and decides the form of reincarnation for the soul, and in some cases prolongs one’s life under the shaman’s request. *Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem*, issues the rebirth licenses for the soul going on the next life cycle. *Siv Yis*, in contrary, came from the sky to heal illness and raise the spirits of the dead. He had a brutal battle with *Ntxwj Nyoog*, left the earth and his shaman tools on earth, and thus started the practices of shamanism for the Hmong. Shamans, today, are also considered to inherit the title and tools of *Siv Yis*. The belief in a spiritual dimension to illness is so strong that many Hmong people prefer to consult and seek cure from shamans instead of Western medicine in America today (Vang 1998, 91).

*Txiv neeb*, the Hmong shaman, is seen as the “practitioner of the *neeb* spirits” (Cooper 1997, 123). Unlike the destructive *Ntxwj Nyug* and *Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem*, the *neeb* spirits have healing powers and choose a specific person to be shaman and fight with *Ntxwj Nyug*. Shamanism cannot be passed on from older shamans to younger ones. Because *dab neeb* reveal themselves and guide the shamans in their dreams, younger shamans typically have a clearer and stronger guidance as their encounter with *dab neeb* occurred more recently than older shamans. When shamans perform their service, they use a hood of cloth to cover the eyes, plant a sword before a small altar, wear bell-rings around the left index finger and also use a rattle made of iron as the “harness bells” of their “winged horse”, a long bench they
bounce on to represent that they become Siv Yis who rides the “legendary winged horse” as they are performing (Cooper 1997, 125).

**Christianity**

Christianity is also not a new introduction to the Hmong, nor is it the only external religion to which the Hmong convert or participate. As early as the late 1600s Jesuit missionaries were in contact with the Hmong (Capps 1994, 164). Protestant missionaries arrived in 1885 and offered basic things like medicine in exchange for curating an interest in Christianity (Capps 1994, 164). By 1954, more concerted efforts were in place and there was an estimated “4,000 Christians in 96 villages” in one province of Laos alone (Capps 1994, 164). Hence, many Hmong were familiar with Christianity before immigrating to the United States. As a result, the concept of the church or Christianity was likely not an alien concept for Hmong immigrants. Instead, it may have brought a sense of familiarity when arriving in the United States. In that way it directly relates to Winland’s key point that Christianity is simply part of a continuation in Hmong history.

**Buddhism**

Buddhism much like Christianity is not a new phenomenon within the Hmong community. What makes Buddhism in contrast Christianity is that it appears to have a longer history in Southeast Asia. For the Hmong in Thailand and Laos, it is not uncommon to for young men to choose to become a monk and join a monastery. By doing so they are able to receive an education and gain things that may not be available within their own community (Lee, Tapp,
2010). The Hmong have also interacted with Buddhism in a new way after the Vietnam War. Many Hmong fled Laos and sought refuge in temples like Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand. This has allowed the Hmong to have even more direct contact with the religion. Although Buddhism appears to be less dominant for Hmong in the U.S., we found one interesting example of a Hmong Buddhist Temple that opened in St. Paul, Minnesota (Zander, Yang 2013). Chung Yang, a co-founder of the temple, discovered Buddhism in the U.S. after being healed by a Thai monk. This reflects the important role of healing in Hmong religions.

**Shifting Religions**

A large section of our literature used deals with the Hmong in transition, the role churches played, and other factors that had an influence. The Hmong in transition refers to the emigration of Hmong from Thailand and Laos into the social context of American society. First, we examine the means in which the Hmong immigrated to the United States. Secondly, we examine the role of churches, we are looking to see if they sponsored Hmong families, if there was an active role to convert individuals, and if the churches filled needs that were not met by other resources. Finally, we consider other external factors that may have influenced or support the Hmong in their transition into the United States.

Before we examine the role churches play we need to consider a key point. According to Winland, Christianity can be used as a means of “adjustment,” but also a “continuity with the past” (Winland 1994, 22). We need to remove the idea that Christianity and its associated religious conversion is diametrically opposed to the history, or the continuity of the Hmong dialogue today. Instead, as Winland suggests, we need to consider it an extension of the past.
We also need to remember that there are many variations and definitions of religious identity for the Hmong. A Hmong individual can be more than Christian or animist, they can fall in between or even outside of these labels. In one study we see Blia Yang, a Hmong refugee, holding a leadership role in her church while also a medicinal healer and shaman. In Winland’s words Yang was, “...a model Christian, but also a shaman” (Winland 1994, 22).

If we examine the first waves of Hmong immigrants in the United States, we can observe the role Christianity and churches have played. One study found that, upon arrival, many refugees did not have access to “traditional religious institutions...in their new communities” (Lewis, Fraser, Pecora 1998, 273). If we examine the role religion plays in an individual’s life, we can see why this is important. According to the same study, religion is used as a means to “help cope with life’s experiences by assigning meaning to events” (Lewis, Fraser, Pecora 1998, 273).
Methods

The Hmong people in the United States today tend to be situated in certain parts of the country. California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin are the three states with the largest Hmong populations (Montgomery 2013, 9). However, in the Midwest, unlike California, the Hmong are more visible because they account for the largest percentage of the Asian population in states like Wisconsin and Minnesota (Montgomery 2013). Hmong arriving in the United States are, in large, refugees from Laos, a country with a tropical climate. Wisconsin and Minnesota are not typically places one would expect a person familiar with year-round warm and humid conditions to decide to live in. Christian churches, predominately Lutheran congregations, sponsored Hmong refugees and created a channel for Hmong people to resettle in places like Wausau, Wisconsin.

Lewis, Fraser, and Pecora provide the key driving force behind our research and methods, “to understand refugees, it is important to learn more about the place of religion in
their lives” (Lewis, Fraser, Pecora 1998, 274). We as researchers need to examine the social
function that religion plays in the role of Hmong immigrants. This could be examining the clan
structure of the Hmong and how it influences religion, or how religion influences clan structure.
The latter seems more relevant to our research as observations seem to imply that religion has
a greater impact on the clan structure than vice versa.

Because of the unique nature of our research question, we must determine the best
way to obtain detailed and useful information. Qualitative data is more important to our topic
as we want to frame the Hmong experience from an individual’s perspective. It is our belief that
surveys fall short in this regard as they fail to allow an individual to elaborate on responses and
give personal information that may not be included in the survey. By conducting semi-
structured interviews, it is possible to create a framework of questions we would like answered
but also allow the respondent to additional opinions or observations they would like to share.
The other advantage of an interview is that it allows us to hear audible clues, and see visual
cues that can let us know how strongly one may feel about a particular subject.

An important thing to consider when conducting an interview is why we are doing it.
Booth, Colomb, and Williams note, the sole aim of an interview should be to ask a respondent
questions that we would not be able to find from already available resources (Booth, Colomb,
Williams 2008, 82). It is of the utmost importance for us as researchers to learn as much as
possible about the topic and Hmong culture in its entirety. By doing so, we can streamline the
interview process to focus on what we need to know. As a result, we formulated interview
questions to get answers on what we do not know and what we would like to know. We also
have to make sure our questions are not intimidating or overwhelming, and that they ensure
the respondent feels valued for their contribution. Coming well prepared with extensive background information on the topic and asking more concise questions allows the respondent to give “his or her insights” (Phillips, Johns 2012, 162).

To formulate interview questions, we had to look at all of our previous research and determine what gaps needed to be filled. We also had a list of key points about Hmong culture and identity that needed to be addressed. There are two key types of interview questions, primary and secondary. Primary questions open up or initiate a new discussion, whereas secondary questions help to elaborate on a previous question (Dunn 2000, 6). Many of the interview questions are designed in such a way that they help to reinforce key concepts about Hmong culture that often are not brought up in enough detail in our other sources.

A starting point for our questions comes from another study conducted that looked specifically at changing Hmong marriage ceremonies and rituals (Mouavangsou 2010, 161). The methods section of this particular book shows the exact questions used when conducting interviews. While these provide a great reference point, we need to elaborate and expand so as to include all aspects of Hmong religious identity as well as clan structure. Our questions look at four key items: an individual’s background in regards to when they emigrated here, their experience and perceptions of the Hmong community, their perceptions about religious practice and its influence on clan structure, and their perceptions on Hmong clan structure and its influence on their daily life.

Because of the lengthy nature of the interview questions we are limited in the amount of respondents that we can interview. The Hmong community of Wisconsin was estimated to be 49,240 in 2010, it would be nearly impossible to survey even a reasonable fraction of the
population (Pfeifer, Thao 2013, 9). For this reason, we decided to find people with distinct positions as well as vantage points in the Hmong community. We found our respondents through the contacts of a professor at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. One respondent, a second generation Hmong-American comes from an animist background and has a parent that is a shaman. Another respondent, holds a leadership role in the Hmong community and has had a unique opportunity to view conflict over religion in the community. A Pastor in the Madison area was selected to offer their views on the changing religious dynamic in their parish as well as community. Finally, we selected a respondent who holds a high position in a Hmong religious movement attempting to make traditional Hmong practices fit better within the framework of American society.

Our methods of interviewing have some shortcomings. For example, one source emphasized that it is very difficult to make an assumption about an entire population based on such a small sample size (Phillips, Johns 2012, 146). We also feel that our choice in respondents does not completely reflect the entire socioeconomic or demographic spectrum of the Hmong in the Midwest. On the other hand, there are many difficulties in trying to establish contact and interviewing people from every background because of limitations due to language, an individual’s work schedule, and more. The respondents we interviewed were all deeply involved and compassionate in their engagement with the Hmong community, were fluent in English and Hmong, and also strongly rooted in their own Hmong identity. For these reasons they were ideal candidates to start answering our research question.
Results

This section details our results from our semi-structured interviews of four Hmong participants. Responses from our questions are summarized in the first half of this section. The latter half of this section will detail more specific observations and assumptions from our questions. More detailed notes from our interviews can be found in Appendix B.

Summary of Questions

Demographic Details of Respondents (Question 1 & 2)

All of our respondents are Hmong men between 35 and 55 years old. All of our respondents were born in Laos and arrived in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s.

Location and Assistance Upon Arrival (Questions 3 & 4)

All of our respondents were sponsored by religious entities to the best of their knowledge. The Latter Day Saints sponsored one of our respondents, two of our respondents were sponsored by unspecified Christian Churches, and another was sponsored by a church to the best of his knowledge. All of the respondents arrived in the United States in their youth, some as very young children. Most of the respondents did not remember specifically the resources provided to them upon their arrival, but, from their responses, we can infer that all received some level of support. Our traditional respondent told us that he was sponsored by a
church and that this sponsorship provided him assistance to attend school and find employment.

*Characteristics of Communities: Midwest versus elsewhere (Question 5)*

All of our respondents said that Hmong communities are structured similarly in both California and Wisconsin. California, Minnesota and Wisconsin are the three states with the highest Hmong concentrations because they offer better welfare systems for Hmong than the other states, according to our agnostic respondent. This same respondent also mentioned that the United States originally attempted to separate incoming refugees. Also, as communities formed, new Hmong refugees wished to be near these communities. Our Christian respondent said that because there was, initially, a larger Hmong population in California, these larger communities could maintain Hmong culture. He also stated that they could better insulate themselves from American cultural influence. In the Midwest, the less numerous Hmong were forced to interact more often outside of their community. Also, in California, Hmong could more easily maintain their agricultural lifestyle than in the Midwest.

*Religious Demand of Hmong-practiced religions (Question 6)*

Our respondents varied in their responses largely based upon their own religious affiliation. One respondent who follows a self-described “traditional” religion of the Hmong believed Christianity to be more demanding of its practitioners than the traditional Hmong
religion. He said that a practicing Christian was required to attend church every Sunday. On the other hand, in traditional practice, one may call upon the spirits or perform their religion at their own disposal. In this case, our traditional respondent viewed his religion as less demanding than Christianity. Our Hmongist respondent described his religion as an effort to simplify and make the traditional religion and its practices easier for Hmong people to practice in the context and demands of American life. He states the need to "adopt from other places [religions]" to "help simplify" religious practices of Hmong people.

Traditional ceremonies (Questions 9&10)

Traditional ceremonies changed a lot as compared to when the Hmong first came to America or how they practice them back in Laos even today. Because of the time constraint, many rituals like funerals and festivals in America are moved and clustered during the weekend to be performed, and many are shortened in length. Our Christian respondent stated that American life affected Hmong Christians more than traditional animists because Hmong traditionalists hold onto traditional beliefs more strongly. This "keeping the culture" of traditionalists makes them more impervious to change than that of Hmong Christians according to the respondent.
**Vulnerability to change (Question 11)**

According to our Christian respondent, Hmong Christians are more open to change, but traditional animists stay more connected to the traditional culture of Hmong peoples. Our agnostic respondent stated that ceremonies like the ox ceremony are up to the lineage because they must determine when the ritual is required. This respondent also said that more complicated ceremonies might be more vulnerable to change even back in Laos, because the culture is passed on through oral history. Those who perform rituals (often the head of household or lineage, community) would change the ritual slightly if they were unable to remember its original performance. This also depends on how often the rituals are performed, which is up to the needs of each family or lineage. In other words, if the same ceremony is practiced regularly in a household, it would be remembered more clearly and less likely to be altered than a ritual practiced only once every three years. Some households may perform the same ritual by name, but due to changes of rituals by individual households, ritual may end up being performed quite differently.

**New Year Celebration (Question 12&23)**

All of our respondents stated that New Year is not as important in a religious sense as we had anticipated. It is more of a cultural gathering than a religious practice. According to one respondent, the Hmong New Year becomes a time for everyone and there are New Year parties where anyone who wants to go could join. However, there are still rituals and ceremonies tied to specific clans or lineages.
Role of Language (Question 13&14)

All of our respondents concluded that the Hmong language is very important for performing traditional rituals and maintaining the culture. Translations often could not express the meanings fully, either from Hmong to English or from English to Hmong according to our agnostic respondent. Our agnostic respondent also mentioned that the Bible in Laos appeared incorrect in its translation. He also mentioned that the younger generations no longer know the language or understand it poorly where some youth could only understand but not speak Hmong. Our Christian respondent mentioned that his church offers service both in Hmong and in English, a potential reflection of the change in Hmong language comprehension. All of our respondents stated that RPA is most widely-accepted script used and taught for writing in Hmong language. When asked if our respondents knew or used Pahawh none of our respondents used it or were even familiar with the script.

Religious and ethnic identity (Question 18)

All of our respondents defended other ethnic Hmong's identity as Hmong regardless of their religious background. Our traditional respondent said that Hmong people still maintain the language and culture of Hmong people, regardless of their religion. Ancestral beliefs are crucial for traditional Hmong people and especially the older generation, but most Hmong people are either Animists or Christians, with very few younger Atheists. Our agnostic respondent stated that people "choose what works for them." Our traditional respondent said
that the personal choices of different people would not affect their ethnic identity as Hmong as long as they are of Hmong heritage.

*Clan Structure (Question 19)*

Clan structure is described as family by our respondents. Our agnostic respondent notably said that clans are "like a superorganism, like a beehive or ants." Our Hmongist respondent said that the strong structure of clans emerged after 1975 when people started to organize on a clan basis. People with the same last name are considered family that share common ancestors at some point, and so they could count on these people from the same clan when they go to new, unfamiliar places stated our Christian respondent. Individuals have to rely on their clans and the big decision making process is always collective and based on the benefit of the clan.

*Changes regarding clan structure (Questions 20&21)*

Clan structure is generally weaker in the United States than when the Hmong first arrived, especially with younger generations, according to our respondents. Our agnostic respondents said that "laws in the United States put more emphasis on individuals [than clans]." He also stated that along with the focus of the individual in the United States that people are also more focused on their personal well-being more than where clan members are located. An example of the clan still maintaining some importance came from our traditional respondent. He mentioned that the 18 clan council remains present in many states across the country. Help and
assistance are provided to Hmong people, and he said that Hmong people will approach clan leaders before calling police when they face problems.
Detailed Observations and Discussion

One of our first assumptions in regards to clan structure, was that it is so strong that it determines where one chooses to locate. For the ancestral religion one’s particular clan or lineage would determine how a ritual would be performed. This can be so specific that according to one respondent, there may be specific spirits associated with a particular lineage. For three of the four respondents this was not necessarily the case. Although the focus of this paper is on Wisconsin and Minnesota, two interviewees had their earliest experiences in Utah and also Illinois. When asked as to why they chose to reside in our region of study, family seemed to be the primary driving force. In this case, family was referring to immediate relations. Another reason our respondents chose to migrate to Wisconsin and Minnesota was the fact that emerging Hmong communities were thriving there. All of the respondents mentioned that when children grow up, finding a job and financial security tends to dominate their choice of where they live.

One of our research questions directly addressed this assumption. We asked respondents if traditional clan structure, where particular clans live near amongst one another, was important for choosing their place of residence. Three out of the four respondents stated that it was not important in their decisions. One respondent gave a notable perspective. He said that in the beginning years of Hmong immigration to the United States, Hmong were often brought in via sponsors, which was the case for his family. After the families arrived and settled in the United States, they first sought out family when relocating. Financial opportunities were an important secondary reason for relocating. Although living among clan members or lineage
is an important tradition of Hmong worldwide, this tradition has diminished to some degree in the United States for Hmong people. Another reason we made the assumption that clan structure is an important factor in Hmong relocation is because of its social role. A respondent used the analogy that a clan is akin to a superorganism like ants or bees. The individuals in this organization work together as a whole, including decision-making. A different respondent further emphasized this by explaining how the clan can serve as a medium for people to seek help in times of need. As a whole, a clan is able to offer the support that its members need. The collective decision-making process also helps keep the group intact and provides continual communication amongst its members. Clan structure is also broadly encompassing. A third respondent mentioned that even if a Hmong person returned to Laos and visited a village of their same clan, they would be offered food and shelter and undoubtedly welcomed. According to this same respondent, the clan also offers a sense of ancestral connection. If one person were to trace back their lineage in their family, they likely would be able to find how they are related to other members of the clan.

We used specific questions, like question number 18 in Appendix A, to understand if traditional beliefs were a definitive part of what it means to be Hmong. None of the respondents disregarded others’ religions and label them as non-Hmong. Perhaps one of the most interesting perspectives was from one respondent who stated that, regardless of religion, all Hmong are still Hmong because they maintain other key elements of the culture. This respondent listed language, clothing, food, and music as the cultural characteristics that maintain the Hmong identity. Furthermore, we initially assumed that the Hmong New Year held an important central value in Hmong tradition and ceremony. All of the respondents stated that
the New Year Celebration is primarily a cultural celebration amongst all Hmong people. This might be a result of the secular nature of New Year's practiced in America or a natural shift away from the religious ceremonies traditionally associated with Hmong New Year.

Another point of interest was to look to see if there was change in Hmong rituals, and if so what is causing the changes, as well as what they are. Questions 10 and 11, located in Appendix A, specifically address this. We must emphasize here that ritual is being applied to all Hmong religious backgrounds. All four respondents unanimously agreed that there indeed were changes. Most interesting was the perspective our agnostic correspondent, they referred to the fluidity of ancestral religion. Time is a constant and since many traditions are orally transmitted, some liberties can be made when conducting rituals. Our agnostic respondent mentioned that practitioners can often change ritual based on what is memorized, and "tweak" it as needed when memory fails them on how it was done before (Appendix B). Often rituals can change in cultural context, with a more fragmented clan system in the U.S., one has to wonder if this has an impact on how rapidly ritual may change.

Another ritual we sought to learn more about was the Hmong New Year celebration. We wanted to determine if there were religious elements to it, if they would be observable, and also if the New Year acted as a means of building bridges between clans and religions. Questions 12 and 23 look at this. Initially we had also hoped to go and observe several New Year celebrations but time and resources did not allow us to do so. Luckily one of the authors has been to these celebrations over the past couple decades and was able to note that they did not observe any religious imagery at the events. When asking our respondents whether or not it was a religious event, all agreed that it was not. Our Christian respondent did note however,
that for some families they may hold a ceremony at home to ward off evil, and welcome
prosperity and good health. Although religious imagery was not visible at New Year events, it
was evident in one part of the research.

While visiting the Hmong marketplaces in Saint Paul, it was extremely evident that
religion plays a huge role in the life of some Hmong. At Hmongtown Marketplace for example, about 10% of the
merchandise available for sale has a religious significance. We are able to spot gongs, rattles, rings, and water buffalo horns
throughout, all of these are important to shamanic ritual. Also very prominent were vendors of traditional herbs, most often
these vendors were the ones selling supplies for shamans. At Hmong Village, another marketplace, we saw a high
concentration of stores selling items specifically for Hmong that practice Christianity. Religious texts, audio recordings, and iconography were all available for sale. We had been under the impression that RPA was a script preferred by Christian Hmong and in these stores all of the items we saw had RPA rather than Pahawh script.
Referring back to our research question and the observation of change. It was observed in one perspective that marriage customs are starting to change. According to our Christian respondent, here was knowledge of inter-clan marriages that had been conducted, something unheard of before. Hmong traditional law would not allow for something, but that brings in the idea of factors causing change in the United States. Our Hmongist respondent found that a big factor for change was that of laws in the U.S., also economics. Another perspective shed light on how work schedule can change how rituals are practiced. It was noted that often rituals are only practiced on weekends. For a particular individual they may have to attend multiple families’ rituals. Because of this time factor, our Hmongist respondent noted that Funerals which often lasted for many days have now been reduced to starting on Friday evening and finishing Monday morning.
**Future Research & Conclusion**

Although our results offer a unique insight into the way religion and Hmong identity interact, there is still a lot more that needs to be researched and analyzed. In an ideal world, we would have had a much larger sample size, however, our research had limited resources and time. Qualitative data is both time-consuming to collect, interpret, and analyze. Also, our selection of respondents has some shortcomings. For example, our respondents are all men and also come from a similar socioeconomic background. In the future, we would like to include female perspectives as well as individuals from a broader range of age and socioeconomic group. All of our respondents were born in Laos and, as a result, they represent first generation immigrants. Perspectives from younger generations would be highly valuable on topics like language preservation, culture, and general perspectives on religion. Also due to the positions of our respondents, all holding relatively important positions in the Hmong community, we may be lacking a view of what one could call “the general public.”

We admittedly have a narrow scope when it comes to religious perspectives. Through our initial research we were able to learn that there are many unique perspectives within a given religious system. In addition to that we did not interview anyone from a Buddhist background, which although not as prominent as the other religions, is very important to the Hmong of Laos and the United States. All of this could be accomplished simply through more detailed research including more participants. In an ideal world, we would choose respondents covering a wide range of the Hmong demographics, old to young, college-educated to not, in order to have research results that reflect better the Hmong population.
Acknowledgements

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Appendix A - Interview Questions

**Interview Questions**

01) What is your full name?

02) How old are you?

03) Where and when did your family first arrive in the United States?

04) Which organizations, programs, or individuals were particularly helpful during your family’s transition to life in America?

05) What do you think is unique about the Hmong population in the Midwest compared to the Hmong population of Laos, or even California?

06) Do you find that a particular religion in the Hmong community is more demanding or time-consuming of its practitioners, if so, why?

07) Do you find similarities between Christianity and Hmong animist religious practices or other religions?

08) How do you feel about incorporating elements of one religion into another religion?

09) How has American life affected traditional Hmong ceremonies and rituals?

10) Do you think that there are differences in Hmong ceremonies/rituals now compared to those performed when the Hmong first came to the Midwest?

11) Are any traditional Hmong rituals or ceremonies particularly vulnerable to change? Why?

12) Do you find the Hmong New Year celebration to be of religious importance?

13) Do you feel that conducting religious ceremonies in the Hmong language is important to maintain the culture?

14) Do you feel that RPA is an appropriate script for the Hmong language?

15) How would you describe your personal religion/beliefs?

16) How important are traditional Hmong religious ceremonies/rituals to your life?

17) Do you feel there are adequate financial, social, and community resources for ritual and worship in your community?

18) Do you feel that religious identity is connected to Hmong ethnic identity?

19) Can you briefly explain your understanding of Hmong clan structure?

20) Have you observed any changes in Hmong clan structure in the U.S.?

21) Do you feel that clan structure is important to choosing your place of residence or work?
22) Do you feel that one religious identity is more common in the Hmong community or a particular clan?
23) Do you find the Hmong New Year celebration to be important for clan (religious) relations?
24) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Additional questions:
01) What does your position as president reverend entail in the church?
02) How long have you been involved in the church?
03) What is your main objective for the Victory Hmong Alliance Church?
04) Please explain the main events that occur at the church?
05) What does the church provide for its participants? (socially, financially, mentally)
06) What demographic is particularly engaged with the church?
07) How does the church differ from Hmong traditions/churches in Southeast Asia? If there are differences in the practices, why do you think they exist?
08) Do you have any youth programs?
09) Where do you see the church in 20 years?
10) Is there anything else you would like to add?
Interview with Pao Vue 11/04/2015

01) **What is your full name?** Name changed to Pao for pronunciation. Grew up in LaCrosse, lived in Salt Lake City, has 5 siblings but five passed during the war. Has two older brothers living. Two youngest survived because babies. 5 in between couldn’t be carried but couldn’t walk far so they died. Wide gap between brothers and his sister is closer to hi He was named Pao by the kindergarten teacher so that would be easier to pronounce.

02) **How old are you?** 36 came in 1982?

03) **Where and when did your family first arrive in the United States?** 35 years ago

04) **Which organizations, programs, or individuals were particularly helpful during your family’s transition to life in America?** Doesn’t recall any particular programs. He heard about certain ones like welfare. Was an unfamiliarity with it in his family.

05) **What do you think is unique about the Hmong population in the Midwest compared to the Hmong population of Laos, or even California?** When the Hmong arrived the U.S., they tried to separate the refugees into different areas. That didn’t work well, they are social and dependent on their own ethnicity. WI, MN, and CA had the best welfare systems and it drew the rest of them in.

06) **Do you find that a particular religion in the Hmong community is more demanding of its practitioners, if so, why?** It depends on how dedicated you are. If you are a shaman it demands quite a bit. Even Christianity is demanding among the Hmong. Identifies as agnostic, sister married into Christian family and is very involved. Hmong traditions are more demanding especially if you are dedicated, like Pao’s mom being a shaman. He mentioned his sister who married into a Christian family and described their practices for Christianity was "insane".

07) **Do you find similarities between traditional Hmong traditional religious practices and other religions such as Christianity?** Lots of similarities between shaman and a preacher/father. His family was sponsored by LDS which brought his family to UT. His mother is a shaman and got sick and came back to traditional practice. Sees similarities.

08) **How do you feel about incorporating elements of one religion into another religion?** Lots of messianic movements popping up trying to integrate the traditional culture/practice into a church setting. Investing in temples/churches but using traditional practices. He feels that is kind of messed up, and the things they claim to know and do out of cultural context.

09) **How has American life affected traditional Hmong ceremonies and rituals?**

Did dissertation in Laos and saw ceremonies over there. Some funerals a day, two or three. A lot of traditional practices done on the weekend here. They wait for the weekend so may be 10 ceremonial feasts on the weekends. Even in MN(which has a more traditional community) only two day funeral, Saturday/Sunday, bury in the morning. The Hmong collect own task force, elect leader, and advertise to general population to get them to agree, and that’s how the changes happen, this is separate from the 18 Clan Council. 18 Clan Council now starting to get involved with marriage.
10) Do you think that there are differences in Hmong ceremonies/rituals now compared to those performed when the Hmong first came to the Midwest? Change is caused by the fluidity of these rituals. They aren’t rigid. Different from clan to clan, lineage to lineage. Time constraint and changing of the tide main reasons for change. Since it is an oral/memory tradition, whoever is in charge and their memory causes the change. In Laos better grip because they do it more. But even in Laos even when they can’t remember they tweak it and repeat.

11) Are any traditional Hmong rituals or ceremonies particularly vulnerable to change? Why?

More complicated ones like ox ceremony, where you call in all the ancestors you know by name who have passed and have a feast with them. To determine when it is performed it is up to the lineage, or maybe in trying times would be required. Once a year, three years, etc. All pitch in to and send the word out to collect the resources and people.

12) Do you find the Hmong New Year celebration to be of religious importance? It is, but not as much as one would think. His mother does ceremonial stuff to welcome in the new year. Majority of people are not aware of the traditional practices that were tied to the new year.

13) Do you feel that conducting religious ceremonies in the Hmong language is important to maintain the culture? Definitely. There are meanings that get lost in translation. English falls short for ceremonies and cultural practices. Words, and metaphors need to in the native tongue. Goes both ways. Read Lao version of bible and found it messed up.

14) Do you feel that RPA is an appropriate script for the Hmong language? Thinks RPA is the best written system to use for traditional and historical practices. It is able to convey it well. Not too familiar with Pawhaw. Driving force behind Pawhaw is idea that someday that Hmong may have their own country, hence the scripts teaching is more political, or its teachers politically oriented.

15) How would you describe your religion/beliefs? Agnostic, do feel that there are things out there that we don’t understand or have no knowledge of. Will attend all kinds of gatherings.

16) How important are traditional Hmong ceremonies/rituals to your life? Ritual brings positive messages. Finds because he is Hmong he needs to participate in Hmong cultural practices. To skip them it to throw away himself.

17) Do you feel there are adequate financial, social, and community resources for ritual and worship in your community? Pool resources together. $20 a family, $2 per person in family etc. Church in LaCrosse exists from this.

18) Do you feel that religious identity is connected to Hmong ethnic identity? A Hmong Christian who refuses to do traditional practices, he is not less Hmong, he does what works for them. For him the traditional practices make him who he is.

19) Can you briefly explain your understanding of Hmong clan structure? The clan is like a superorganism like ants or bees. The individuals work as a whole, they cannot survive by themselves. Decision making is always collective for the benefit of the clan not the individuals.

20) Have you observed any changes in Hmong clan structure in the U.S.? What factors do you feel are responsible if you have observed changes in clan structure? Has gotten weaker here in the U.S. because
of laws and regulations. Here we are treated as individuals, “my problem is my problem.” It also affects how religion is practiced. Those originally obligated to go to practices no longer do because of weakness. Split in lineages.

Bill: Argues that capitalism and not laws cause that sense of individualism.

**21) Do you feel that clan structure is important to choosing your place of residence or work?** Not so much here in the U.S.. Financial standing is what has the most impact. Job, career schooling comes before clan. In Laos they are still agrarian and tied to the land and one place because income comes from the land. Younger people not necessarily moving to a Hmong communities, not important anymore.

**22) Do you feel that one religious identity is more common in the Hmong community or a particular clan?** Hmong christians tend to congregate more regardless of clan. Christianity becomes more important that clan in LaCrosse. non-christians cannot do things with them. Possibly more of a divide than the clan structure. His sister doesn’t worry about the ceremonial practice that his mom had to do. Religion does divide. His mom hated when his sister was about to get married. Disownership, threatened future son in law.

**23) Do you find the Hmong New Year celebration to be important for clan(religious) relations?** Used to be, in Laos certain events are for members of a certain lineages. He doesn’t see that here in the U.S.. They have new year parties where if you want to go, you can go. Chicken ceremony in Laos still tied to clan/lineage.

**24) Is there anything else you would like to add?** Feels that religion does cause fractions in the community but can be overcome.

Within hmong community, Hmong christians are more strict than what they do and don’t do. Traditional ones more open because it is an oral/fluid tradition. Parents disowning kids over religion. Friends not seen anymore because they become strict about who they associate with. Has been in touch with some who see christians in a bad light. Goes both ways. In Laos christianity is popping up and traditional Hmong hate Christians. In his own lineage, leaders have kicked out people because they have converted. In Laos you can lock anybody up for any reason. Even parents in Laos will do this to their own kids.

There will always be some division. All the Hmong united under one banner with nationalistic views are a minority. Even nationalism causes division.

Decline in religion in mainstream American but also Hmong community as well. We have to make a living and do our own thing.

Perhaps animism is more individual vs. Christianity more communal. Society is the opposite. American society individualistic but clan structure more communal. This flip may cause tension.

**Interview with Yuepheng Xiong 11/12/15**

**01) What is your full name?** Yupheng L. Xiong

**02) How old are you?** 51

04) Which organizations, programs, or individuals were particularly helpful during your family’s transition to life in America? Had a sponsor but family was not made aware of who they were. They were nicely dressed and thinks it may have been a church.

05) What do you think is unique about the Hmong population in the Midwest compared to the Hmong population of Laos, or even California? Finds them similar, everything seems to be centered around the Midwest nowadays. This is the biggest market in regards to competition in terms of cultural practices. Biggest funerals take place in the St. Paul area.

06) Do you find that a particular religion in the Hmong community is more demanding of its practitioners, if so, why? When reform for Hmongism. Knew about traditional vs. Christian. Trying to create a niche for who they are and what they like. People elaborated on things like funerals. It is lengthy 4+ days and very costly. Hmongism is trying to simplify it to make it easier. Life is so busy here, and even christians have lots of demands and are busy. Still Hmong religion but not too time consuming beyond the funeral. They have to decide if the Hmong have an intrinsic faith and research shows yes.

07) Do you find similarities between traditional Hmong traditional religious practices and other religions such as Christianity? Yes, no specific example but he has heard so. They don’t convert completely and they accommodate both faiths. You have to thank people in both religions by setting up tables for offerings. Hmongism tries to remove this by allowing a small donation box that is less imposing.

08) How do you feel about incorporating elements of one religion into another religion? They do adapt and do take from christianity as well. They don’t have contribution table and have box like Americans have. Still remains “very uniquely Hmong”. Making it less contradictory is of importance.

09) How has American life affected traditional Hmong ceremonies and rituals? In the beginning it was very difficult and the Hmong didn’t know regulations and government didn’t know the practices. Not too difficult anymore. They have Hmong butcher shops now that cater to traditional practices.

10) Do you think that there are differences in Hmong ceremonies/rituals now compared to those performed when the Hmong first came to the Midwest? Couldn’t say from research background but there are some changes. They now use the same funeral home now. WE have been changed by the environment. Economy has affected it. In his family all religions get along well in his particular lineage. Most are traditional.

11) Are any traditional Hmong rituals or ceremonies particularly vulnerable to change? Why? Simplifying everything is key. Shamanism, wedding, funeral but not being too strict. You can do what you want in your home but will eventually have physical temple. People will be able to share a space. Can do calling of soul and tie string in the house.

12) Do you find the Hmong New Year celebration to be of religious importance? It is similar to other nationalities, not much spirituality but is time of the year that people perform rituals in the house to ward off evil and welcome new blessings.
13) Do you feel that conducting religious ceremonies in the Hmong language is important to maintain the culture? Yes.

14) Do you feel that RPA is an appropriate script for the Hmong language? RPA serves us very well. Has had store for 20 years but Pahawh didn’t sell well.

15) How would you describe your religion/beliefs? (self-explanatory) 

16) How important are traditional Hmong ceremonies/rituals to your life? It is important but it doesn’t have to be a burden so that’s how Hmongism came about. Shamans come in and perform for them when they don’t have family to help conduct rituals.

17) Do you feel there are adequate financial, social, and community resources for ritual and worship in your community? Not right now, but the spiritual clinic/shaman center for Hmong and non-hmong planned in the future.

18) Do you feel that religious identity is connected to Hmong ethnic identity? Yes, has been together for a very very long time.

19) Can you briefly explain your understanding of Hmong clan structure? Something new as well. In the past clan has been less structured after 1975 people began to reform around the resistance, people started to organize on a clan basis. Before that they were important but not structured.

20) Have you observed any changes in Hmong clan structure in the U.S.? Pretty big structure, 18 clan council, each clan has organization and own new year. Xiong clan election was on 7th for president of the US. Growing.

21) Do you feel that clan structure is important to choosing your place of residence or work? In the beginning not so true because they were brought by sponsors but the second migration(within the U.S.) was to be with family but no so much clan. It’s more about immediate family and financial reasons.

22) Do you feel that one religious identity is more common in the Hmong community or a particular clan? Might be true to some extent. It’s his impression that green/blue more into Christianity. They are normally smaller like Kong and Kue.

23) Do you find the Hmong New Year celebration to be important for clan(religious) relations? They don’t take it as a religious gathering so they don’t take it as a religious event.

24) Is there anything else you would like to add? He is the key researcher, and all decided to go with Hmongism which some people didn’t like the Hmong name being used for the faith. Very easy, short, and even non-Hmong or educated can still see the Hmong in it. One of the co-founders of the archives. Hmongism is non clan oriented so non-hmong can join.

01) What does your position as president(reverend) entail in the temple(church)?

Reform. Who we are what we like. Traditional propsery in USA. Funeral practices lengthy. Days of funerals – 4 days, very costly. Simplify religion, make it more cost-effective. Life is busy in us, even Christians. Young people busy, even Christians and traditional too busy. Hmong religion – but not too time consuming.
Does “Hmong” have a faith – research. Our research finds yes we have religion. Elders did not standardize.

02) How long have you been involved in the temple(church)? 2007 at least, was involved with radio program to show who they are and identity. 2012 he called half the members of the radio program and they all decided. They are not messianic; the messianic movements try to simplify but have had no success. At point of disintegration.

03) What is your main objective for the Temple of Hmongism(Hmong Alliance Church)?

04) Please explain the main events/rituals/practices that occur at the temple(church)?

05) What does the temple(church) provide for its participants?

06) What demographic is particularly engaged with the temple(church)? Many christians converting back to Hmongism, mostly his age or younger but sometimes older. Seems flexible.

07) How does the temple(church) differ from Hmong tradition practiced in Southeast Asia? If there are differences in the practices, why do they exist?

08) Do you have any youth programs? They don’t. 25-35 dollars a month per family is what they survive. They don’t want to create time commitment but do plan to have them if the members think there should be cultural or youth programs. Language, martial arts. The church is member based so members determine programing.

09) Where do you see the temple(church) in 20 years? Feels very optimistic and knows people are afraid of change. Lack of education now makes it hard to reform but when people are educated and change they will duplicate and will switch or will do something similar. 300 members right now with more members on the way. helping families as they come here. 7 families coming in march, 6 in august. MN, CA, WI, OK. Growing rapidly.

10) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Interview with La Neng Xiong 11/19/2015

01) What is your full name?

La Neng Xiong

02) How old are you? 47

03) Where and when did your family first arrive in the United States?

1976 not many Hmong here. Carbondale Illinois, with 2 or 3 other families but not stayed very long

father knew a missionary and was helped to relocate in WI

04) Which organizations, programs, or individuals were particularly helpful during your family’s transition to life in America?

missionary and the churches, non denominational
**05**) What do you think is unique about the Hmong population in the Midwest compared to the Hmong population of Laos, or even California?

midwest: progressive, have assimilated quicker to American culture, as opposed to CA, partially because total population is not as large. Smaller means they're forced to interact with other communities. Also better opportunities to gain employment, potentially interact with others more.

CA: large communities, able to remain to themselves, so culture is stronger. Could carry out the agricultural lifestyle due to the weather and climate.

**06**) Do you find that a particular religion in the Hmong community is more demanding of its practitioners, if so, why?

doesn't know

**07**) Do you find similarities between traditional Hmong traditional religious practices and other religions such as Christianity?

very different. not well-versed in that culture and born into a Christian family. varies from clan to clan, so depends on where you come from

**08**) How do you feel about incorporating elements of one religion into another religion?

Christians don't incorporate, animists might be more open.

**09**) How has American life affected traditional Hmong ceremonies and rituals?

affect Hmong Christians more than traditional animists. Traditionalists keep the culture more, especially to the religion

**10**) Do you think that there are differences in Hmong ceremonies/rituals now compared to those performed when the Hmong first came to the Midwest?

Hunch is yes.

**11**) Are any traditional Hmong rituals or ceremonies particularly vulnerable to change? Why?

Hmong Christians more open to change, whereas traditional animists are less because they're more tightly connected to the culture.

Marriage customs are beginning to change, stories of marrying within the clan, but not predominant, but as a whole and not just within Christianity. Rituals and ceremonies don't erode as quickly, but if looking back at 20yrs ago there's huge change since then. Even Hmong Christian's funerals are still 3-4 days long.

Gender issues: used to be men ate first, esp in social gatherings, and women/children ate last. But changed

**12**) Do you find the Hmong New Year celebration to be of religious importance?

Not so much for Christian community. But for animists it is of religious importance.
13) Do you feel that conducting religious ceremonies in the Hmong language is important to maintain the culture?

Yes in general. does help to maintain the culture.

Offers missions both languages. 50% don't speak enough Hmong and others don't speak English. mid 20s lose the language much quicker. But in CA the language and culture is much stronger. In here they understand but can't speak.

14) Do you feel that RPA is an appropriate script for the Hmong language?

No idea if other's accepted at all. most widely used.

15) How would you describe your religion/beliefs?

He is Christian. Church belongs to Christian Missionary Alliance. Decided when the Hmong Christians first immigrated to US and said they should go to CMA

16) How important are traditional Hmong ceremonies/rituals to your life?

not so important. varies depending on the person, the family, etc.

17) Do you feel there are adequate financial, social, and community resources for ritual and worship in your community?

Adequate.

aware of 2 Baptist church and 2 Methodist in madison area

18) Do you feel that religious identity is connected to Hmong ethnic identity?

strongly yes. tightly connected. people are either one or another. not many Hmong atheists, but the younger generation might see more of that. As Hmong you have to appease the spirits and you have no choice. Or you convert to Christianity and abandon the Animist way of life all together, which is impossible to older generations.

19) Can you briefly explain your understanding of Hmong clan structure?

sort of like family. everybody with the same last name is considered family or now at least somewhat related. If you know the family tree it's possible to trace to the same ancestor. Very important for Hmong and strong element in the culture, if he went to Laos and knew no one in a certain community, but he would be welcomed by a Xiong family even if they never knew each other before.

20) Have you observed any changes in Hmong clan structure in the U.S.? What factors do you feel are responsible if you have observed changes in clan structure?

in US Hmong still try to create community where they have

but more and more chose to resettle where they could find work. young come to university and stay but parents could be anywhere in WI.

In Laos all the people with the same last name are concentrated in one area
21) Do you feel that clan structure is important to choosing your place of residence or work?

In Hmong Christian community the clan has less influence on their lives. Certain Xiongs worship a certain spirit, these people could not die in another Xiong's home if they believe in another spirit - taboo. for Christians no such taboo and everybody is like the close friend.

22) Do you feel that one religious identity is more common in the Hmong community or a particular clan?

Hmong still predominantly animists. Most Hmong Christians are CMA, > Baptists > others. Animists population is about 60-70%, but rough estimate. - compared to 30%-40 in Hmong Christians.

23) Do you find the Hmong New Year celebration to be important for clan (religious) relations?

can be. can be celebrated within the family, clan, or even families within the clan that believe in the same spirit. immediate family - clustered families - whole community.

New Year is truly for everyone. In earlier days Hmong converted to Christian was a people movement, if one converts then those closely related to him would do the same. Reflection of Hmong's preference to settle in community.

Additional questions:

01) What does your position as president reverend entail in the church?

They have assistant pastor, between the two they do most of the preaching/teaching, planning, organizing the church and its activities and performing rituals.

02) How long have you been involved in the church?

5 years with this church.

03) What is your main objective for the Victory Hmong Alliance Church?

To help the people that come to worship to know god, to understand what the scriptures teach us about who we are and our relationship to god.

04) Please explain the main events that occur at the church?

Weekly worship service Sunday, pray night Wednesday.

05) What does the church provide for its participants? (socially, financially, mentally)

Worship, fellowship, social aspect. During the summers they gather at one of the parks for fun and activities and that is open to the community. Has a pantry that is open to the community. Important to the Hmong is the social structure for marriage and funerals, even as Christians. Many who convert without their families need the support of the church to help with weddings, etc.

06) What demographic is particularly engaged with the church?

All across the board, it stays within the family. Very few Children of Christian parents that are animists and to some extent the other way too.
07) How does the church differ from Hmong traditions/churches in Southeast Asia? If there are differences in the practices, why do you think they exist?

It goes along with the cultural differences. About 15 years ago when he first started as a pastor in his late 20s. Had some leaders from Thailand come and visit his church. Here in the U.S. not much different ion between old and you. They were standing up on a stage and he gestured for one to come first, he wasn’t the leader so he was upset. Theology is more a reflection of a culture but very similar.

08) Do you have any youth programs?

Yes, assistant pastor works with young people. Have programs for single adults, college and up, high school, and pre-teens.

09) Where do you see the church in 20 years?

One thing as a church will have to deal with is loss of language and culture. Change happens at different paces depending on location. Who will they be in 10, 15, 20 years from now? With they have maintained enough culture to be a distinct culture or church.

Interview with Blia Yao Lo 11/23/2015

President for 1st year, 4 years term, maintain cultural heritage, promote better education

10 yrs in Waunakee

born in Laos,

was in school here and then dropped out to join law enforcement

03) Where and when did your family first arrive in the United States?


04) Which organizations, programs, or individuals were particularly helpful during your family’s transition to life in America?

sponsored by a Pres church in 80, go to school, find a job, etc

80-89 Christian, have parents immigrated here and converted back to ancestral belief

05) What do you think is unique about the Hmong population in the Midwest compared to the Hmong population of Laos, or even California?

midwest: more population, particularly in St Paul, close to 90 thousand in entire midwest

CA: 80 thousand

18 council originally in CA and reached out across America from ther
06) Do you find that a particular religion in the Hmong community is more demanding of its practitioners, if so, why?

break into groups as sponsored by different 3 churches, but only 30-40%. - baptist, lutheran, christian

most still believe in ancestors

only head of family do cultural stuff

07) Do you find similarities between traditional Hmong traditional religious practices and other religions such as Christianity?

very different. Christians believe in Christ and Father, traditional Hmong believes in spirits and ancestors that would come back and protect the offspring

08) How do you feel about incorporating elements of one religion Christians don’t incorporate, animists might be more open.

some people are really strict, but depends on how you treat it. Christians always go to church on Sundays but traditional Hmong practices can be done whenever you need to

09) How has American life affected traditional Hmong ceremonies and rituals?

had to make adjustment to the country, cannot just do exactly the same. Constitution allows religion but certain things have to be changed

funerals: wait until the weekend so that people could attend, as compared to in Laos

10) Do you think that there are differences in Hmong ceremonies/rituals now compared to those performed when the Hmong first came to the Midwest?

11) Are any traditional Hmong rituals or ceremonies particularly vulnerable to change? Why?

every place and people has right to choose their own beliefs, etc. neighbors complained and called the police earlier

12) Do you find the Hmong New Year celebration to be of religious importance?

try to maintain the cultural traditions, language, so that future generations could tell where they come from

New Year is a culture, not a religion. people do religion at home, call ancestors for blessing or search help

13) Do you feel that conducting religious ceremonies in the Hmong language is important to maintain the culture?

It is, the traditional ceremonies and calling of ancestors can only be done in Hmong language

14) Do you feel that RPA is an appropriate script for the Hmong language?

use RPA personally, and also 18 clan council, and schools in CA, MN teach that
17) Do you feel there are adequate financial, social, and community resources for ritual and worship in your community?

8 yrs ago the governor put 8 million for Hmong center, but Hmong couldn't match the self funded 2 million. want to buy place of land to maintain culture but finical conditions is a problem. buy a place to maintain culture is one of the goals of 18 clan council

18) Do you feel that religious identity is connected to Hmong ethnic identity?

accept anyone as Hmong no matter what the religion is. as long as your heritage is Hmong. okay for cross cultural marriage. for Christian Hmong won't forget the language and culture and still connect with their family, and that's enough, no problem here.

19) Can you briefly explain your understanding of Hmong clan structure?

18 clan leader has to stay in the council to represent their clan. clan rituals are mostly similar, each call on their own ancestors.

20) Have you observed any changes in Hmong clan structure in the U.S.? What factors do you feel are responsible if you have observed changes in clan structure?

the clans are just the same.

the young generations preferred to be called as Hmong and like young people with heritages from other countries they want to be called American than a specific ethnic group

21) Do you feel that clan structure is important to choosing your place of residence or work?

if people have problems they would go to clan leaders first instead of calling police, etc. have clan leaders in big cities like NY, CA, 22 states in total. so there's always support when they need it

22) Do you feel that one religious identity is more common in the Hmong community or a particular clan?

Hmong still maintain believing in ancestors. future generations would probably convert to Christianity because it's easier, but focus is in traditions.

the way to treat elders, do ceremonies, pass on the traditions and be respectful to the community. - very important

others

connections back in Laos: not so much from 18 clan council.

education: would help if they need. but not enough budget. would sponsor if there's an important need for it.

teach worship of ancestor, ways to do marriage, funerals rituals, and languages. these are the key elements to maintain the culture

daily job: communicate with city officials and teach Hmong people of not violating the law.
trying to bring everyone together. put everything into one so that Hmong people would have a standard for everybody.

unity is a power, with it you would be also to solve problems, so that's why they they to have everyone together
Confidentiality Agreement

This agreement of confidentiality provides you (the signer) the following rights and acknowledgements below:

1. You are participating in an interview for a research project for a Geography course (Geography 565 – Geography Undergraduate Colloquium) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
2. You are giving consent to be interviewed and have the right to answer or not answer any of the questions asked.
3. You can change your responses and/or stop the interview at any time.
4. You have the right to remain anonymous in the interview. Your name or any other personal information about you will not be revealed.
5. If you wish to access information about our project or the resources we are using, we will happily provide you any information we have. You may also request a copy of our final paper.
6. The information you provide will be used for a final paper and presentation in Madison, WI. You are welcome to come to our presentation.

I, the signer, understand and agree to the above statements:

Signer:________________________  Date:________________________

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