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Por Thao 's Funeral

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[1]

It was September of 1996 and I was in Appleton, Wisconsin helping a friend of mine with a movie on a Hmong shaman. While we were there, a close relative of the shaman passed away. What follows is a personal account of my experience of the traditional three-day funeral which ensued.

[2]

I first met Por Thao when he came to America in 1984. He originally came to Chicago, shortly thereafter he moved with his relatives to Appleton, Wisconsin. Por was a deaf-mute who was very skillful in weaving baskets and making things with his hands. A Hmong tribesman from Laos, he possessed all the skills that were necessary for survival in his homeland. Working in the fields and caring for the young ones, he could do these tasks as well as any of his fellow tribesmen.

[3]

He used to wake up early in the morning to work on his baskets. One morning his family found him lying unconscious on the basement floor. They rushed him to a nearby hospital where he lay in a coma in the intensive care unit. Soon about eighty to one hundred of his clansmen came to the hospital, waiting for him to pull through. Later that day he passed away.

[4]

Although I had been to many traditional Hmong funerals over

the past years this was the first one I had really participated in from start to finish. The moment one of Por Thao's relatives' came up to me and pinned a "xyom cuab" (close relative to the deceased) badge on my shirt I became a participant, not just an outside observer. During the funeral I kept my camera close by to capture those moments I felt embodied the spirit of the Hmong funeral.

[5]

The funeral began with the dressing of the body. All the close relatives gathered around to help put traditional Hmong funeral attire on Por Thao's body. Because the wrong casket was ordered the Hmong temporarily placed the body on a lowered gurney until an all wooden casket could be ordered. The Hmong use only wooden caskets because they believe a metal casket or metal object buried with the body could be used by someone to put a curse on surviving family members.

[6]

During the three days of the funeral it is important that relatives are at the funeral home day and night, and never leave the body alone. As in thier everyday lives, the Hmong are always there to help their relatives in time of crisis. You must show your support. By staying awake and mourning those three days you show your commitment to your clan.

[7]

The "qeej" (pronounced "geng") is the most important symbol in Hmong culture. A mouth organ made from bamboo and wood, it's voice beckons and guides the soul of the deceased to journey to the ancestral heavens. Older Hmong men take turns playing this instrument day and night -- guiding the soul on it's long journey.

[8]

Aside from the constant music of the qeej was the ever present sound of Hmong women wailing over Por Thao's body. It seems the women do most of the mourning, while the men's role is performing the rituals. Several times throughout the funeral myself and the close relatives ("xyom cuab") would form two lines leading to the casket. Kneeling with our heads

bowed down we waited giving our thanks to the Hmong who had brought a cow for the funeral. As they walked between our two lines they would pick us up by the arm and lead us to the casket. There we all knelt down together with one hand covering our faces and began to wail. Engulfed by the sound of people wailing, I too began to cry. After what seemed like ten minutes or so people started to get up and walk away from the casket, their tears drying up almost immediately.

[9]

Throughout the funeral, relatives of the deceased would search out people who had contributed money towards the ceremony. Then they would take them aside one by one and form a semi-circle together. Bowing over with outstretched arms and cupped hands, Por Thao's relatives formally gave their thanks and gratitude. I listened as they spoke in Hmong, "We give you thanks. We the grief-stricken did not call upon you -- it is our custom. You have come to console and comfort us. You have brought money to help our relatives. Next time we will help you. We will remember you forever."

[10]

Downstairs, in the lounge area, men would take time out from their duties upstairs. Walking through the smoke filled lounge I saw another world. Men playing cards, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer or Mountain Dew, informally chatting as they passed the time -- trying to keep awake. Then, after a while, someone from upstairs would call some names and it was back to their duties upstairs.

[11]

There are many duties to perform at a Hmong funeral. Some people cook the rice, others are in charge of butchering the cows or pigs, while others perform the various rituals. Most of the males present have some sort of task to perform. Everyone gets involved to show his or her support for the deceased one's family.

[12]

At certain points during the funeral the younger male relatives and I would kneel down in rows holding incense

sticks. We all listened carefully to the elderly *geej* player in front of us. Swaying back and forth blowing the bamboo pipes, he was the voice of the ancestors. At each cue from him we would all bow down touching our faces to the floor in respect for our ancestors.

[13]

The last day of the funeral, just before the body was taken to the cemetery, paper spirit money was burned so that the deceased would have wealth in the afterlife. Late morning we all drove to the cemetery. Upon arriving there one could sense the change of emotion from sadness to peace of mind. The mourning and wailing was over with. Por Thao's ascent to the ancestral heavens was almost complete.

[14]

Walking around the casket I noticed two women simultaneously reacting to a tombstone of one of their relatives. They were caressing the picture on the stone and talking to it in Hmong. I immediately rushed over to take a photo of them. It was like that person was still there. They caressed his photo with such feeling such emotion that you felt he was right there. But after several minutes of charged emotions they were pulled away by other relatives.

[15]

Walking away from the grave their tears dried up. Approaching Por Thao's grave site we waited as the diviner tossed split bamboo sticks on the cool earth. Finally, the sticks confirmed that Por's journey was complete. With the consummation of Por Thao's journey to the ancestral heavens we all walked back to the cars. Life for the Hmong continues on.

Joe Davy has worked with the Hmong for over 16 years studying their language and culture. He has a B.A. degree in cultural anthropology and worked in Hmong refugee camps in Thailand for 3 years. Presently he works as a free-lance documentary photographer and resides in Chicago. Those interested in

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