

# The Hmong Cultural Repertoire: Explaining cultural variation within an ethnic group\*

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## Abstract

Data on 382 Hmong in Laos and the United States reveal three types of cultural expertise: performing spiritual-medical healing; conducting life cycle rituals; and creating arts and crafts. Only 31 percent of this sample engage in one or more of the practices in this cultural repertoire. A mere 10 percent of the sample account for 54 percent of the 247 cultural practices. This pattern reveals the paradoxical relationship between ethnicity and culture. While all ethnic groups have a culture, there is considerable variation among members in their use of the group's cultural repertoire. This paper uses regression analysis to explain why some Hmong have more cultural practices than others. The results suggest that males have greater access to the Hmong cultural repertoire due their positions of authority in Laos, but that maternal cultural practices promote use of the repertoire by their children regardless of leadership status.

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[1]

By definition, all ethnic groups have a distinct culture. For De Vos (1975, 9), "an ethnic group is a self-perceived group of people who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others." See and Wilson (1988, 224) define ethnicity as "shared beliefs, norms, values, preferences, in-group memories, loyalties, and consciousness of kind." Yinger (1994, 3) states that "an ethnic group is a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves and

others, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients."

[2]

While unique cultural practices are essential to the existence of an ethnic group, a paradox emerges as analysis of ethnicity moves from the macro to the micro level: not all members of an ethnic group engage in the cultural practices that define the group. Following Swidler (1986, 273), culture can be conceptualized as a tool kit or repertoire of formal activities like "beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life." This conceptualizing of culture as a set of practices available to members of a group, rather than values shared by all members, partially resolves the paradoxical relationship between ethnicity and culture. At the macro level an ethnic group is defined by a collection of behaviors and beliefs that distinguish it from other groups. At the micro level the cultural repertoire offers individuals pre-fabricated practices to express their identity. Yet the question remains: why do some individuals draw upon their ethnic group's cultural repertoire more than others?

[3]

This paper addresses this question by examining the cultural practices of the Hmong, a refugee group from Laos. Although a population of only 100,000 (according to the 1990 U.S. census), the Hmong are an important case for studying the relationship between culture and ethnicity. Unlike many international migrants arriving in the United States, the Hmong were a minority group in their homeland and bring with them a strong, pre-existing ethnic identity (Quincy 1988; Schein 1987; Scott 1982). This experience differs from that of the leading immigrant groups like Filipinos, Mexicans, and Chinese, whose sense of cultural distinctiveness develops in the United States because they were the majority group in their homeland. For the Hmong, a sense of cultural distinctiveness began long before they reached the United States. Numerous studies have noted the life cycle rituals,

spiritual-medical healing, and arts and crafts unique to the Hmong in Laos (Barney 1967; Chan 1994; Lebar et al. 1964; Mattison et al. 1994; Yang 1993). Practices such as shamanism (Conquergood 1989; Thao 1986), wedding and funeral ceremonies (Bliatout 1993; Donnelly 1994), and embroidered textiles (Scott 1992) continue to express Hmong ethnicity after resettlement in the United States.

[4]

Clearly, the Hmong have a cultural repertoire of behaviors and beliefs that distinguish them from other ethnic groups. Yet the paradoxical relationship between macro-ethnicity and micro-culture emerges in the data presented in this article. A survey I conducted found 247 cultural practices among 382 Hmong in Laos and the United States. These figures give the appearance of cultural density, but only 31 percent of the sample had at least one cultural practice. After presenting the survey's methodology and reviewing the Hmong cultural repertoire, this article uses regression analysis to explain why some Hmong draw upon this repertoire more than others.

### **Data Collection**

[5]

The data for this article is part of a study of 40 Hmong leaders in the ten largest Hmong communities in Wisconsin. Hmong research assistants interviewed Hmong with formal or informal positions of authority, ranging from clan heads and directors of mutual assistance associations to school counselors and municipal community organizers (see Hein 1994 for a more detailed discussion of the survey methodology).

[6]

The questionnaire used in the interviews contained a series of open and close ended questions on demographic, social, and cultural characteristics, of which the most important for this paper is: "Do you have any cultural skills that make you an authority or earn you respect?" To include nonleaders in the sample, respondents were also asked this question about their parents and siblings. Thus in addition to the 40 leaders, the sample contains information on 40 fathers, 40 mothers, 112 sisters, and 150 brothers. These 382 individuals

include Hmong refugees in the United States as well as Hmong who remained in Laos.

[7]

The answers to the questions on cultural practices produced a long list of terms, most of which the Hmong research assistants did not translate into English. I reviewed this list with an extremely knowledgeable member of the Hmong community to create the final tally (see Table 1 below). Given the nature of the question, this study is confined to an analysis of formal, traditional cultural practices developed in Laos. It does not examine emergent and recreated cultural forms which have resulted from migration to the United States.

**Table 1. The Hmong Cultural Repertoire  
by Area and Practice (in percent).**

<b>Spiritual-Medical</b>	<b>41</b>
Shamanism	17
Metaphysical Healing	13
Herbs	9
Other	2
<b>Life Cycle</b>	<b>30</b>
Marriage	20
Funeral	10
<b>Arts and Crafts</b>	<b>28</b>
Music	15
Needlework	9
Metalwork	4
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	<b>2</b>
N=247	
Total does not equal 100 due to rounding.	

### **The Hmong Cultural Repertoire**

[8]

The cultural practices listed by respondents can be grouped into three areas: spiritual-medical healing, life cycle rituals, and arts and crafts (see Table 1). These areas fall along a continuum differentiating the degree to which a cultural practice is focused on the group or the individual. Some cultural practices are highly individualistic and allow for considerable personal expression. Other practices are largely enacted to meet the expectations of others and are closely regulated by group norms. Still other practices fall in between these extremes.

### **Spiritual-medical**

[9]

Various forms of spiritual-medical healing accounted for 41 percent of the Hmong cultural repertoire. Spiritual-medical practices are neither highly individualistic nor highly regulated by group norms. These practices are more regulated by norms than artistic-craft practices because some are derived from animistic religious beliefs. But they are less normative than life cycle practices because some allow for considerable personal interpretation or depend on individual knowledge (e.g., the use of plants).

[10]

Shamanism (*txiv neeb*) is the use of human mediums to communicate with spirits that are causing disease or mental anguish. This ability is considered innate to unique individuals, not acquired, although an expert shaman usually guides a novice in developing the skill. Shamans have assistants (*tus saib neeb*) who prevent the shaman from falling during his or her trance-like dance, and interpret the shaman's speech during the trance.

[11]

Metaphysical healing (my term) is a practice that rebalances the energy of a person or part of the body that has been physically or psychologically damaged. One form of metaphysical healing is soul calling (*hu plig*), which involves standing at a significant place, such as the door of

a house, and cajoling a person's soul into returning to its body. A second form of metaphysical healing is *khawv koob*, which many subjects described as "magic for healing." During the session the healer provides a cure by blowing, or using a knife to "cut," evil out from an afflicted part of the body.

[12]

The medicinal use of herbs (*tshuaj ntsuab*) was called "green medicine" by some respondents. Most Hmong with this practice know which parts of particular plants have curative properties for various ailments. Some respondents had specialized herbal expertise. One knew how to cure opium addiction, another to ease child birth. Other medical practices included giving massages for stomach ailments and being a mid-wife.

[13]

Gender plays less of role in regulating spiritual-medical practices than other areas of the repertoire. Both men and women are shamans and practice metaphysical healing, although it is more common for men. Women, however, are much more likely to have knowledge of herbal medicine. Of these practices, metaphysical healing tends to have the highest overlap with others. Of the 29 individuals with this skill, 68 percent also were shamans.

### **Life Cycle**

[14]

Rituals marking transitions in the life cycle accounted for 30 percent of the Hmong cultural repertoire. Life cycle rituals are the most group-oriented cultural practice in the Hmong repertoire. They are governed by norms and expectations rather than individual interpretation.

[15]

To enact a wedding ceremony, both bride and groom need negotiators who act as go-betweens (*mej koob*). Their role is to make the marriage official by negotiating the bride wealth

paid by the groom, and to settle outstanding disputes involving previous marriages to the other clan (the Hmong practice exogamy). Sitting at either end of a small table, the negotiators communicate through prescribed recitations and songs. At times they ask the other family questions on behalf of the bride or groom (e.g., "Will the bride be faithful? Will the groom provide well for the family?").

[16]

The cultural practices needed to conduct a funeral are more extensive than those for a marriage. There are prescribed songs to recite (*txiv xim*) and music to perform on funeral drums (*nruas tuag*). Other practices required for a traditional funeral include a cook to prepare special dishes (*niam mov*), a coffin maker to select appropriate wood (*txiv txiag*), and a master of ceremonies (*kay xwm*).

[17]

The ability to perform weddings and funerals were closely related. Of the 23 individuals who could conduct a funeral, 78 percent also could negotiate a marriage. Individuals with life cycle skills were exclusively male, indicating the importance of gender in regulating access to the Hmong cultural repertoire.

### **Arts and Crafts**

[18]

Arts and crafts accounted for 28 percent of all practices. Artistic and craft practices like playing a musical instrument and embroidery are often enacted solely to meet the needs of the individual. Although at times they may accompany a ritual (e.g., playing a reed pipe at a funeral), the expressive quality of arts and crafts make them the most individualistic cultural practice in the Hmong repertoire.

[19]

The most common artistic practice, but also the most diverse, is playing an instrument. The main instruments played by the

Hmong for musical appreciation are a reed pipe (*qeej*), a flute (*raj*), a jaw harp (*ncas*), and a leaf (*nplooj*). Folk songs (*kwv txhiaj*) can be performed in many different contexts. A person might sing a happy or sad song to another person to express empathy. The singer might also use a song to communicate with a member of the opposite sex, a type of oral courting.

[20]

An elegant form of needle work found among the Hmong is *paj ntaub*. Various embroidery techniques are used to create highly detailed geometric patterns in a variety of bright colors. Although traditionally used for clothing and household items, in the United States the Hmong have used *paj ntaub* to create embroidered murals depicting scenes from Laos and the migration to Thailand.

[21]

Although infrequent, some Hmong were skilled in metalwork. Forging agricultural implements and household tools were the most common form of metalwork in Laos. Manufacturing knives or parts for rifles took considerably more practice and earned great prestige. Blacksmiths might also be skilled at making jewelry, such as the ornate necklaces for men and women made from silver bars and French coins from the colonial era.

[22]

Unlike life cycle rituals, both men and women engage in arts and crafts. Nonetheless, there are strong distinctions with respect to particular types of practices. Women engage in needlework and men in metalwork. With respect to music, women are skilled at folk songs more often than men, while men play musical instruments. Because of this close link between gender and cultural practices, there is little overlap of skills in this area. But artistic, particularly musical, practices moderately overlaps with life cycle practices. Of the 30 individuals who could perform on a musical instrument and/or sing, 20 percent also could conduct funerals and 30 percent conduct weddings.

### **Explaining Variation in use of a Cultural Repertoire**



[23]

Although Hmong ethnicity both in Laos and the United States is expressed through a unique cultural repertoire that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups, most Hmong in the sample had no cultural skills. Of the 382 individuals: only 13 percent were proficient in spiritual-medical healing; only 14 percent could conduct life cycle rituals; and only 13 percent could produce arts and crafts. In fact, there was considerable clustering of cultural practices: 11 percent of the sample had only one, but 9 percent had two, 7 percent had three, and 3 percent had four or more cultural practices. The maximum was six different cultural practices, a man who could perform weddings and funerals, heal through shamanism and by "magic," played a musical instrument, and was a blacksmith. Although an extreme case, this individual raises the paradoxical relationship between ethnicity and culture: why do some individuals use their ethnic group's cultural repertoire more than others?

[24]

To answer this question, a regression test is developed using the number of cultural practices possessed by an individual as the dependent variable. From the discussion of the Hmong cultural repertoire above, it is already apparent that gender roles are linked to some cultural practices. Thus one important independent variable is sex.

[25]

Given that cultural practices are learned, an important independent variable is whether or not an individual's parents also have cultural skills. Two independent variables are used to distinguish the total number of skills possessed by a mother and a father. Using parents as an independent variable reduces the sample size from 382 to 302. Given the importance of family size for parental socialization of children, the number of siblings is used as a control variable.

[26]

Finally, the affect of leadership needs to be evaluated. Of the entire sample, only 20 percent had been leaders in Laos,

and only 16 percent were leaders in the United States. It is possible that leaders make greater use of a cultural repertoire than nonleaders, either as a means of attaining leadership or to maintain the legitimacy of their position. Therefore, two independent variables measuring the total number of leadership positions held in Laos and in the United States will be used.

[27]

Turning to the regression analysis, sex clearly plays a very strong role in explaining the number of cultural practices among Hmong individuals (see Table 2). Being female significantly reduces use of the Hmong cultural repertoire.

**Table 2. Standardized OLS Coefficients for Regression Models Estimating Number of Cultural Skills.**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
Sex Female	-.188* (2.93)		
Number Siblings		-.085 (1.40)	
Paternal Culture		.104 (1.73)	
Maternal Culture		.189* (3.25)	
Leader Laos			.458** (8.68)
Leader U.S.			-.010 (.19)
R2	.036	.047	.208
Adjusted R2	.032	.037	.203
F-test	11.04*	4.85*	39.25**
N=302 t-value in parenthesis * p < .01 ** p < .001			

[28]

Parental socialization also is an important determinant of cultural practices. Even when controlling for family size, maternal, but not paternal, use of the cultural repertoire influences children. As the number of skills possessed by a mother increases so do those of her sons and daughters.

[29]

Although gender and kinship matter, leadership in Laos, but not in the United States, is the strongest predictor. The more leadership positions an individual had in Laos, the greater his use of the ethnic group's cultural repertoire.

[30]

Developing a second regression test using only those variables that are statistically significant provides a more refined explanation for use of the Hmong cultural repertoire (see Table 3). Most importantly, sex is no longer significant when controlling for leadership experience in Laos. Males monopolized positions of leadership at the village and clan level, and it is control of the ethnic group's authority structure, rather than sex per se, that partly determines access to the ethnic group's cultural repertoire. However, maternal use of the cultural repertoire remains an important determinant of cultural practices for children even when controlling for leadership experience.

**Table 3. Standardized OLS Coefficients for Full Regression Model Estimating Number of Cultural Skills.**

	<b>Full Model</b>	
Sex Female	-.082	(1.56)
Maternal Culture	.142*	(2.78)
Leader Laos	.426**	(8.17)
R <sup>2</sup>	.236	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.228	
F-test	30.63**	
N=302		
t-value in parenthesis		

* p < .01 ** p < .001
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## Conclusion

[31]

While all ethnic groups have a cultural repertoire that distinguishes them at the macro level from other ethnic groups, not all members of the group engage in these cultural practices. This contradictory relationship between culture and ethnicity is evidenced by the Hmong, a group that arrived in the United States with a strong, preexisting ethnic identity because they were a minority in their homeland of Laos.

[32]

The Hmong cultural repertoire has three main areas: healing through spiritual-medical techniques; conducting life-cycle rituals; and producing arts and crafts. These cultural practices expressed Hmong ethnicity in Laos and they continue to be important after migration to the United States. Yet my survey of the Hmong cultural repertoire found that 69 percent of a sample of 382 individuals never engaged in these practices. Of the remaining individuals who did, 19 percent were proficient in two or more cultural practices, with the maximum being six.

[33]

Regression analysis partially explains why some Hmong draw upon the ethnic group's cultural repertoire more than others. Women engage in fewer practices than men. Women are restricted entirely from life-cycle rituals and there also is a clear distinction between male and female cultural activities in arts and crafts. Spiritual-medical healing is the most gender-neutral area of the repertoire, although there are still distinctions among the cultural practices of men and women. Sex is clearly an important determinant of access to the Hmong cultural repertoire.

[34]

Sex, however, is mediated by leadership in determining the extent of use of the cultural repertoire. Leaders in Laos made much greater use of the cultural repertoire than nonleaders. In fact, each additional position of leadership on average increased by almost one the number of cultural practices the individual engaged in. The more leadership positions held by an individual, the more cultural practices they engaged in. Because village and clan leaders in Laos were exclusively male, access to leadership positions, rather than sex per se, is the most important determinant of access to the group's cultural repertoire.

[35]

While Hmong women are limited in their access to the group's cultural repertoire, their familial role as agents of cultural socialization is more important than that of men. Even when controlling for the effect of leadership, the cultural practices of Hmong mothers, but not Hmong fathers, greatly influences the likelihood that their children also will have cultural practices. The fact that male children will likely take up different cultural practices from their mothers does not diminish the influence of maternal cultural practices. Although a unique cultural repertoire defines Hmong ethnicity at the macro level, sex, authority, and familial socialization shape actual cultural practices at the micro-level.

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