

The Hmong Qeej: Speaking to the Spirit World*

[Gayle Morrison](#)

Abstract

This investigation focuses on the unique communicative ability of the Hmong *qeej*, a free-reed multiple pipe musical instrument. Other forms of the *qeej* are used by various Southeast Asian cultures, but only the Hmong appear to use it to communicate in words with the spirit world.

This study is based on oral interviews with Hmong *qeej* players, focusing on one master *qeej* player. Discussion reviews the origin legend of the *qeej*, legendary powers of the instrument, the mystery of the *qeej* language, training of a *qeej* player, qualifications of a master *qeej* player, genre of *qeej* songs, the role of the *qeej* in the funeral ceremony, and the *qeej* as the consummate Hmong cultural identifier.

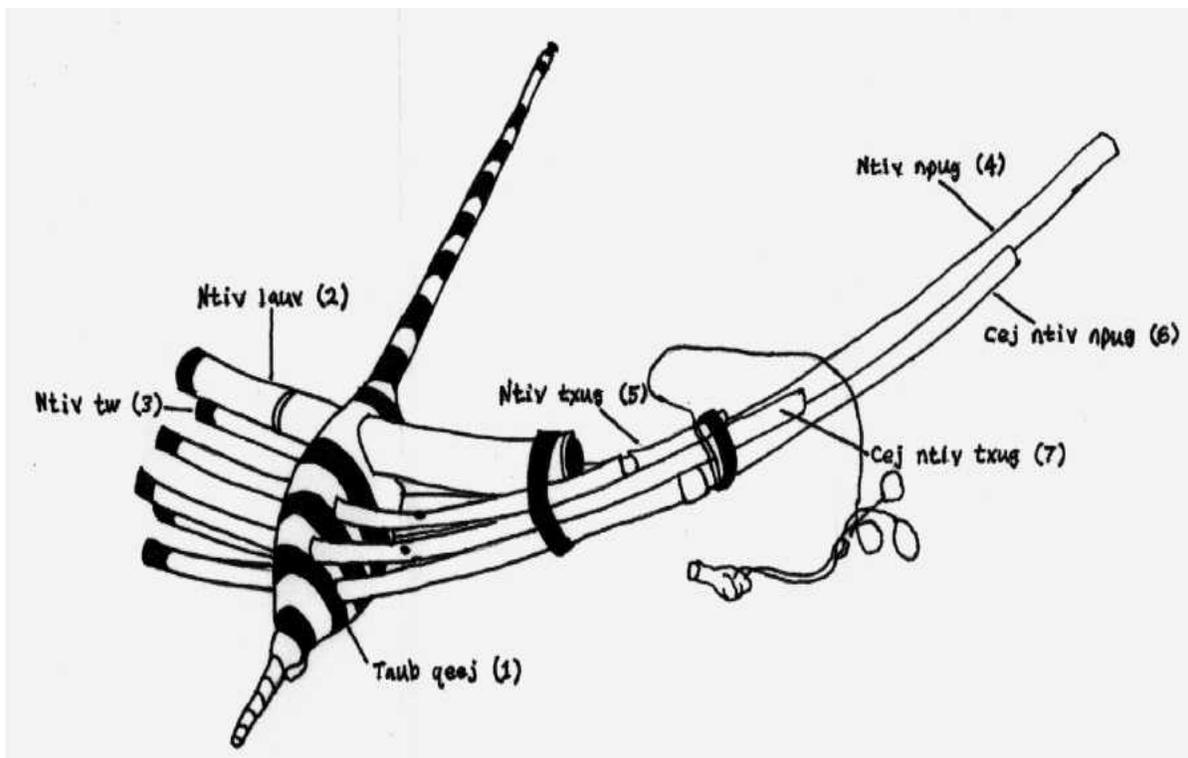
Editor's Note: The photo essay "[Por Thao's Funeral](#)" by Joseph Davy, in this issue, contains several photos of the *qeej* being played.

[1]

It is not only in Southeast Asia that music plays a part in discourse with the spiritual. The sacred realm is accessed through music in many cultures. Through the use of rhythm, tone, pattern repetition, melody and scale, the relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds can be explored. In this article I would like to consider some of the relationships between the function and form of sacred language, music, and ceremony by examining these aspects vis-a-vis the Hmong *qeej* ("kheng").

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The Hmong *qeej* generally is described by musicologists as a free-reed multiple pipe musical instrument. It is a solo instrument, played without the accompaniment either of other musical instruments or singing, although it is intermittently accompanied by drums at a funeral. The *qeej* pipes are played horizontally and the overall length of the instrument varies from two to five feet, depending on the skill and the preference of the player. Many Southeast Asian ethnic groups have pipes that appear to be quite similar to the Hmong *qeej*, such as the Lao/Thai *khene* and the Khumu *s'qkuul*, and on this basis it is generally assumed that they function similarly within their respective communities, i.e., they make music. But this assumption is based on a loose similarity of form, furthered by geographical proximity. To the Hmong, the function of the *qeej* is unique to their culture and any similarity of form found between the *qeej* and musical instruments of other Southeast Asian cultures is not pertinent and is, in fact, misleading.



The Hmong *Qeej*.

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For the Hmong, the indisputable difference between their instrument and those of other ethnic groups is that the Hmong *geej* "speaks." To the Hmong, the *geej* is not an instrument designed to produce music; it is a bamboo voice that intones a highly stylized and ritualistic language. Thus "music" and "speech" are inseparable.

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The *geej* is an instrument that communicates with the spirit world. However, unlike most sacred instruments, it is neither mimetic of the sounds and rhythms of the natural world nor does it communicate in symbolic or metaphoric terms. It is an unusual instrument because of its ability to express musically the innate lyrical qualities of the tonal Hmong language.

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Before beginning the body of this article, I would like to tell you the legend of the origin of the *geej* as it was told to me by Mr. Nhia Dang Kue of Stockton, California, a master *geej* player. A number of oddities appear in this legend and the audience is left at the end with more than a few questions in mind. In retrospect, the legend may appear more like an elaborate setting for the storyteller to introduce the names of the seven pipes of the *geej* rather than the origin of the instrument since so many questions about the origin are left unanswered.

[6]

Long ago, there was a god-man by the name of Sinsay. Sinsay's talent lay in his strength as a great warrior and he eagerly engaged in combat to prove it. Many challenges took place with Sinsay always the victor, and his reputation as a champion quickly spread

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If Sinsay won a challenge, which he always did, his prize was to marry one beautiful young woman from that kingdom. There would be a brief honeymoon, then he was off again in search of another kingdom to conquer. Eventually, Sinsay conquered

seven kingdoms and married seven brides.

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At about the same time as Sinsay's seventh marriage, the god-king decided to have a grand festival. Everyone was invited and preparations for it began months in advance. Excitement was high, especially for the seven young wives Sinsay had left behind in the care of their families. Each of them, knowing he would be at such a festival, made her own plans to find her husband and be reunited with him. Sinsay too had heard of the festival. He looked forward to attending it and claiming his champion status; he also looked forward to finding his seven wives, all of whom he was sure would be there.

[9]

The opening day of the fair finally arrived, bringing together thousands of people. Sinsay and each of his wives anxiously searched throughout the fairgrounds to find each other. But it had been so long since he had been with any of them that neither Sinsay nor his wives could recognize one another. Disappointed but unwilling to give up the search, each wife began to sing her own *lug txaj*, love songs about the details of their life together that only a husband or wife would know. And so, one by one, Sinsay found his wives because of their *lug txaj*. And, one by one, he sang *lug txaj* back to the women, acknowledging each of them to be his wife.

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Although a champion warrior, Sinsay was unable to allay the outrage and wrath of the seven women when they found out that he had married seven times. A heated argument broke out as each of the women shouted, "He's mine!" The situation got so bad that it came to the attention of the festival host, the god-king himself

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The god-king intervened and asked, "What is the problem?" All seven wives shouted, "He's my husband!" The god-king thought for a moment then told the women, "If all seven of you say that each of you are his wife, then each of you must go and make something so that when all seven parts are put together into one thing, words will come out of it. If it is your destiny to be his wives, then you will be able to make something that speaks. If you cannot do this, your claim is

not true." So each of the women went off to make something.

The first wife made a pipe we call *taub qeej*.

The second wife made a pipe we call *ntiv lauv*.

The third wife made a pipe we call *ntiv tw*.

The fourth wife made a pipe we call *ntiv npug*.

The fifth wife made a pipe we call *ntiv txug*.

The sixth wife made a pipe we call *cej ntiv npug*.

The seventh wife made a pipe we call *cej ntiv txug*.

[12]

When all the women gathered again with Sinsay and the god-king, the seven pipes were put together into one instrument and when it was blown it made words. Then the god-king declared that all of the women were Sinsay's true wives.

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The legend of the *qeej* is provocative, with several curious leads that are not resolved. For example, one suspects that the seven wives and the seven pipes have more than a coincidental relationship. Are the names of the pipes also the names of the wives? Do the pipes have discreet "voices" that are associated with the separate personalities of the wives? I asked Mr. Nhia Dang Kue these questions and he assured me there was no connection whatsoever. The names of the pipes are the names of finger and pipe positions and the single "voice" of the *qeej* is made from a blending of the multiple pipe tones; it is not several separate voices played together. Another question that comes to mind is why, except for the Hmong in China, the instrument is played now exclusively by men when it was invented by women. Many questions remain, calling for further investigation.

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In the body of this article, I would like to follow up on two particular aspects of the *qeej* instrument. The first aspect is the mystery of the language. In this section I will look

at some of the characteristics of common Hmong speech and the sacred language of the *qeej*. The second aspect is to delve further into the use of the *qeej* in the Hmong funeral ceremony. Regarding this, it is interesting to note that the *qeej* is most often associated with the funeral ceremony even though the legend of the *qeej* places its origin at a festival or a big fair, something that will be mentioned again later.

Language

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Although exceedingly different from English in structure, Hmong is a simple language and almost all Hmong words are monosyllables that contain consonants, vowels, and one of seven tones. Spoken Hmong is a richly inflectional and intonational language. These qualities go far to explain why the pipes are able to imitate the spoken language. According to the Barney-Smalley RPA (Roman Popular Alphabet) sound system for the Hmong language, the seven tones or pitches are described as high, high falling, mid rising, mid, low, low breathy, and short low with an abrupt end (William A. Smalley, ed. *Phonemes and Orthography; Language Planning in Ten Minority Languages of Thailand*, Canberra, Australia: Linguistic Circle of Canberra, 1976). Each of these tones can be replicated on the Hmong *qeej* along with all of the Hmong vowel sounds. Consonants, however, cannot be pronounced by the *qeej*. The reedy mimicry of vowels, tones, inflection, and rhythm, without the consonants, heightens the mystery of the language.

[16]

Perhaps the mention of seven tones has caught your ear and you are wondering if there is a direct correspondence between the seven pipes and the seven tones. The symmetry of sevens would be pleasing, but again there is no connection. First of all, only six of the pipes are playing pipes. Second, all of the pipes are used in various combination in order to create a single tone-word.

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According to legends known primarily by *qeej* players, the *qeej* originally had powers far beyond a speaking voice. The

grand master players were wizards who, with the power of the *qeej*, could fly through the air, read other people's minds, and even disappear. Mr. Nhia Dang Kue says, "They had so much internal power they could make fire out of the enemy. They could do that much with the *qeej*."

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In those legendary times, only the grand master players held such power, and different masters held different powers. Wizardry was not available to every *qeej* player; it was guarded like treasure and one had to learn it from a master player-teacher. In those days, the magical powers of the *qeej* were tested in public competitions. All was in fun and the power displays were only to show how much each player had learned. However, over a period of time, the intensity of the competition escalated, and the goodnatured challenges turned into fights where people were killed. The grand masters began to say to the student players, "I know if I teach you this magic either you will be killed or you will kill somebody. I'll teach you everything else, but not this." Because of this interdiction, the magical powers of the *qeej* were lost.

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In current times, in Laos and Thailand, interested boys who are eight to ten years old begin to learn the note-fingering of the *qeej* from one of the several adult *qeej* players (*txiv qeej*) who live in their village. Often the first teacher is a relative. With daily practice while walking to and from the rice fields and again after the evening meal, the boy will become familiar with the various sounds that come from the different note-fingering positions on each of the six playing pipes. At the same time, he will practice walking in small circles, wheeling in one direction, then reversing direction, circling the same number of times each way in order to maintain balance. In a short time, if the beginner's interest and dexterity permit, he will be able to move from the level of discreet sounds and notes to a more expressive level of playing, one which blends the sounds and notes into "words," and he will develop the turning steps into a spinning dance that will punctuate the songs he plays with accompanying acrobatics.

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By speaking of a more expressive level of playing, I do not mean to infer that this is a creative process. Young players are taught each song note by note, word by word. The stylized speaking of the *qeej* demands that finger positions are memorized for each word in the Hmong language. Players memorize the language; they do not "create music." As they learn how to make the *qeej* speak, they also learn how to listen to its peculiar voice. Even though the *qeej* speaks in Hmong, not every Hmong knows how to interpret the sounds into understandable words. Certainly the trained *qeej* players know how, some of the old people know how, but for young or untrained ears, the ritual language, without any consonants, is incomprehensible.

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Ideally, every family should have a son who can play basic ceremonial songs, especially the songs that are necessary to be able to bury the dead with the proper rites. For a variety of reasons, this ideal has been difficult to fulfill for the past many years. Nevertheless, there are usually several men in each village who have learned the basic ceremonial songs. These players are called upon regularly to perform the *qeej* rituals for all village families, though they are far from being master players. To be a master is to know by heart all of the hundreds of songs in the seven major genre as well as all of the songs in the five funeral sub-categories. To accomplish this is to be highly educated. I have heard repeatedly from the Hmong that, within their tradition, becoming a *qeej* master is considered to be "more difficult than earning a Ph.D." since the language of the *qeej* songs holds their entire cultural body of cosmological knowledge. Not surprisingly, expert *qeej* players are highly respected for their skills.

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To illustrate how demanding it is to become a *qeej* master, I am told there are only two of them living in the United States, Mr. Nhia Dang Kue of Stockton, California, and Mr. Chia Chue Kue of Providence, Rhode Island; one is in his mid-60's, the other in his mid-70's, and, although some young

Hmong men continue to learn the *qeej* in the United States, no one here is studying to become a *qeej* master.

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While it is true that the player must memorize the finger positions for each word played on the instrument, it is a far greater challenge for him to memorize all of the words that are played. Memorization and recall of the words is what defines true mastery of the *qeej*. In fact, the masters are so adept at recalling from memory the precise language of each song that Seng Kue, Mr. Nhia Dang Kue's son, has this comment to add:

Every once in a while, an old *qeej*-playing friend of my father's comes to stay overnight, just so they can talk about who knows more. When they talk about who knows more, they don 't even need to use the *qeej*! They can just speak the *qeej* words. Without playing the instrument at all, they can tell who knows more because the *qeej* speaks the words.

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While the language of the *qeej* is ritualistic and ceremonial, improvisational use of the *qeej* for nonritualistic speaking is not prohibited. For example, a player might create a welcome song for a friend he has not seen for a long time. Even so, incidental use of the *qeej* for other than ritual purposes is seldom done. A player's reputation is based entirely on his ability to recall and play the ritual formulations. The *qeej* is essentially an instrument for communicating with the spirit realm and using it for other purposes has neither incentive nor value within the culture.

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The Hmong *qeej* is most often associated with the Hmong funeral ceremony, though in fact there are seven major genre of *qeej* music including Release of the Spirit (*qeej tso plig*), the Second Funeral (*qeej nyuj dlaab*), the Wedding (*qeej tshoob*), the New Year (*qeej noj tsab*), the Big Fair (*qeej tsaa hauv toj*), and one for the death of the first daughter in a family of the Hang clan if she has not married before she dies (*qeej yug*), in addition to the Funeral

Ceremony (*qeej tuag*). As if seven wives, seven pipes, and seven tone's are not enough, now we have seven genre, another coincidence that I mention in passing, even though it bears no relationship to wives, pipes, or tones.

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Before beginning the second section of this article, specifically the nature of the funeral ceremony, I would like to make a few observations.

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Every culture has to deal with the fact of death, and most consider the possibility of an afterlife as well. As animists, the Hmong have developed a complex cosmology that includes multiple personal souls, ancestral spirits, spirit helpers, spirit demons, and distant gods of good and evil. This cadre of invisible forces actively affect the mundane world and must be attended to if health and balance are to be maintained, both personally and communally.

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While the Hmong shaman (*txiv neeb*) is called on to heal the living by assuaging spirits and reclaiming absent souls, the *qeej* is called on to pacify the dead by safely guiding departing souls to the ancestral spirit home, thereby also offering comfort to those left behind. It is a lengthy and complex process to insure that all needs have been attended to in the prescribed manner; a funeral may last up to nine days and nine nights, although it usually is only a few days long -- two days for a child and four days for an adult. Whatever the length of the ceremony, if it is not handled properly and the departing spirit does not reach a peaceful place, the spirit of the deceased may wander back from time to time, possibly bringing misfortune to the family.

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Although the use of the *qeej* in the funeral ceremony is well known, the specifics have been less clearly observed. For the remainder of this article I would like to describe the function of the speaking *qeej* in the funeral ceremony where it is used to give comfort both to the living and to the

deceased. In particular, I would like to describe some interesting possibilities for players who have mastered the genre of the Funeral Ceremony (*qeej tuag*).

II. Nature of the Funeral Ceremony

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Given that the Hmong *qeej* is an instrument that can speak, not symbolically, but actually make words, one begins to wonder what kind of things this instrument might say at a funeral ceremony. As mentioned previously, the *qeej* offers guidance and solace both to the departing spirit and to the living community of relatives and friends. The *qeej*'s accompaniment of the spirit on its journey to the ancestral home creates a pathway that links the temporal and eternal.

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While the Western mind separates the seen from the unseen world, this is not true for the Hmong. The job of the funeral *qeej* is to bring the personal life story of the deceased into the right relationship with all that is and ever has been. If the funeral is for a young person, the songs played will be uncomplicated, reflecting the simplicity of youth; an average player is all that is required to successfully complete the funeral rites for a young person. For a person of maturity and stature, the funeral songs become more complex, and more skilled players are called upon to play them. Elders command the highest level of respect for the wisdom and guidance they have given their families and community; it should come as no surprise that an elder's funeral can be played only by an expert *qeej* player because of the complexity of the required songs.

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Beyond the increase in the complexity of the songs played, there are two noteworthy differences about an elder's funeral. First is the *has txiv xaiv*, "message speaking" performed by a spirit translator, the *txiv xaiv*. The spirit translator is a man who, similar to the *qeej* player, speaks from within a memorized ritualistic framework. However, different from the *qeej* player, the *txiv xaiv* has no instrument to play. He chants in unrhymed lines of standard

Hmong speech. The *qeej* player and the spirit translator will alternate their speaking parts: the *qeej* will speak to the departing spirit and the *txiv xaiv* will bring messages back to the family and friends from the departing spirit. Because an elder's wisdom and leadership are highly valued, a large number of the messages are didactic in nature. Repeatedly they encourage the family members to love and help one another, and to remember and be grateful for the elders who did their best to provide for the family's needs before they died; now it is the responsibility of the next generation to take care of the family.

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Sometimes the *qeej* player will double his duties and act in the capacity of the *txiv xaiv* if he has learned the lengthy spoken passages that the spirit translator must use. A spirit translator is not used at funerals for anyone other than elders or highly respected people. The Hmong would not look for words of guidance or consolation from a young or inexperienced person, either in life or in afterlife.

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The second difference about an elder's funeral is regarding the choice of songs played. Each *qeej* genre contains numerous songs from which to choose; however, the Funeral Ceremony (*qeej tuag*) is particularly rich in this regard since there are five sub-categories of funeral *qeej* in addition to the main genre songs. The five sub-categories are made up of secondary "filler" or "detail" songs. "Filler" songs are quite general and talk about illness and death in broad terms; they comprise three sub-categories. "Detail" songs comprise two sub-categories: sorrow for the death of an orphan, and sorrow for the death of a family member. Each family relation has its own songs of sorrow, e.g., songs for the loss of a father, mother, sibling, grandparent, etc. From this full repertoire, a player will choose which songs to play at an individual funeral, depending upon the circumstances of the funeral and the player's skill. For an elder's funeral, respect demands that the *qeej lub* be played. The *qeej lub* is a cluster of very complex songs that tell the story of the creation of the world and everything in it. The word *lub* means at the very beginning or at the very center of

something.

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To gain the attention of both the seen and the unseen worlds, the *qeej* starts speaking at the current point in time, the funeral itself. It asks, "Why has this person died? Who or what caused it? And do you know why there is such a thing as life and death on this earth?" Then unfolds the beautiful *qeej lub*, the story of the beginning of the world, in a time before there was any death. It speaks of the creation of the first man and wife, the first seeds and crops, the creation of the animals, the creation of the heavens, and the proliferation of human life. It also tells why there is sickness and why people are born and die. It speaks of Saub, the good god, and *Ntxwg Nyoog*, the evil god. The cyclical nature of life and death is described. Both spirits and humans are reminded that the life and passing of the deceased is a part of the whole drama. Not just the drama of the living, but also the drama of the spirits and the ancestors - the endless rejoining and separating of reincarnation.

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The *qeej lub*, the creation story, is the most difficult *qeej* for any player. It is the most difficult to memorize and also to play. The words are so archaic that even the master players don't always know the meaning of what the instrument speaks. The note-fingering is very complex and exacting of the player's skills. Note by note, step by step, the funeral *qeej* must be followed exactly. Not surprisingly, the *qeej lub* is the last group of songs the *qeej* player learns.

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At an important funeral, often there will be several *qeej* players, both experts and amateurs. The amateurs usually play the "filler" or "detail" songs during the day while the experts play the main genre songs at mealtimes and in the evenings. Sometimes no expert players can be found to play for an elder's funeral and a less skilled player must play the ceremonial songs, including the difficult *qeej lub*. If a player is not yet fully conversant in the language of the funeral songs, or if he can't remember part of it, or if the

length of the funeral dictates that the entire piece cannot be completed, the player is allowed one option: the opening and the closing must remain intact, but the player can skip over sections of the story as long as the sequence is not changed. Thus average players can play the *qeej lub*, but at a lower level of proficiency. To be an expert player, one must know perfectly the entire cluster of songs from beginning to end.

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For the expert *qeej* player, a funeral of importance offers an opportunity to participate in a funeral challenge song, *qeej lub qeej lwv*, since other expert players will be taking part in the ceremonies as well. A good challenge song is eagerly anticipated by the players, and the challenge song used at a funeral is always the *qeej lub*, the creation story. In *qeej lub qeej lwv*, the word *lwv* means contest or challenge. It is not a challenge against another player, it is a challenge that simply says, "This is how much I know." Although the creation story, *qeej lub*, is a traditional part of an important funeral, the creation challenge, *qeej lub qeej lwv*, is not a requisite part of the ceremony. If the players agree to a challenge, a special time is designated for it.

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At the designated time, one player will begin with the opening challenge line: "Can anybody tell me what caused all this and what is the beginning of all this? Who can tell me? What caused this person to die and where did it all start? Why do we have to go through all this suffering?" A player who knows the next part responds by playing it; there are no criteria by which the players decide who plays when. Around and around the challenge goes, spiraling up, level by level, to see who knows the most. If a player either doesn't know a part or forgets a part, he drops out of the challenge until, eventually, the best player is left to finish the creation story. In passing, I would like to note that of the hundreds of *qeej* songs, there are only three clusters of songs that can be used as challenges: one for a funeral (*qeej lub qeej lwv*), one for a wedding, and one for a New Year; if a challenge takes place at any other occasion, one of these clusters will have to be used since the other *qeej* genre do

not contain challenge songs.

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An interesting characteristic of the *geej* instrument is that all of its power lies in the doing. The Hmong *geej* player does not consider his instrument to have an indwelling spirit or intelligence. The *geej* is considered to be an inanimate tool and, because of this, it is not necessary to maintain a personal relationship with the instrument. A player does not call on the spirit world to assist him in his playing even though the *geej* can speak directly to the spirits.

Meditation, prayer, a reverential attitude -- none of this is required to play good *geej*. What is required is an excellent memory that will recall with great precision the particular note-fingering of each of the hundreds of songs that a master player must know. To the Western mind it may seem ironic or perhaps even shocking that at the end of five to eight years, the average life expectancy of the *geej*, the instrument is not accorded any sentimental affection; it is unceremoniously dumped in the trash and replaced. To reiterate, the instrument has no intrinsic value; all of the power lies in the doing.

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Another peculiarity is that the *geej* communicates with the spirit world but does not dialogue with it. Unlike the Hmong shaman (*txiv neeb*) who has a protracted and noisy haggle session when he dialogues with the spirits and demons, the *geej* player expects no response from the spirit world. If a message is ever received from the deceased, it is through the memorized medium of the *txiv xaiv*, the spirit translator, not the *geej* or the *geej* player. For the *geej*, the playing is all that is required; the playing puts both the spirit world and the physical world at peace. Only when the funeral ceremony is not attended to properly will the wandering spirit return to haunt the living.

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In conclusion, I would like to say something about my research for this paper. My sources of information were the *geej* players themselves. Mr. Nhia Dang Kue was my best

informant and he and his son, Seng Kue, gave generously of their time to provide me with detailed information about the *qeej* during several lengthy interviews conducted in Orange County, California, from 1987 to 1990. With great candor and concern for the accurate documentation of Hmong culture, Mr. Kue encouraged me to be cautious in my research, and to verify that a source person actually knows what he or she is talking about. He emphasized that, since the Hmong did not have a written language previously, it is difficult to prove anything. Mr. Kue told me that he himself has no proof of what he has told me, but he believes his stories are true because he translates them directly from the *qeej*. From generation to generation, changes take place in all other aspects of Hmong culture, but not in the ancient and unaltered language of the *qeej*. As Mr. Kue noted, "If you want to know the true history and culture of the Hmong, then you should take it from the *qeej*."

IN MEMORIAM

Mr. Nhia Dang Kue passed away in Stockton, California in July 1997.

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NOTE: All Hmong spellings are written in RPA. The Blue/Green Hmong dialect (*Moob Ntsuab*) is used throughout.

Gayle Morrison has worked with the Hmong community in education, mutual assistance associations, and private enterprise since 1977. She has a B.A. in Sociology and a M.A. in Psychology. She has conducted extensive oral history research within many of the Hmong communities in the U.S. After nine years of interviews, Ms. Morrison recently completed an oral history of the CIA's final air evacuation

of the Hmong from Long Cheng, Laos in May 1975; her book will be published in 1998.

[top of page](#)

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