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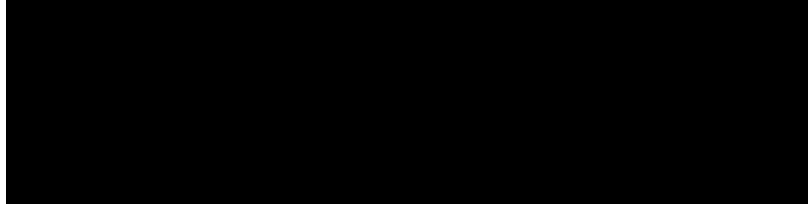
**Entangled Lives: Reproduction and Continuity In A Denver
Hmong Community**

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**PhD Social Anthropology
The University of Edinburgh
2016**

Declaration

This is to certify that that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. Signed,



Thesis Abstract

The history of the Hmong migration as refugees from Laos to the United States reveals a situation whereby the Hmong have been confronted with various political, economic, religious, and social forces that have dramatically shaped their lives. Over the past 35 years, the Denver Hmong's exposure to cosmopolitan urban centres and rural ways of life in Colorado have continued to influence and develop the character and practices of the community. Within this social and cultural milieu, numerous and contentious views regarding health, community, family, and the reproduction of family have remained entangled within the moral and ethical foundations of Christian faiths and traditional shamanic practices. Furthermore, these perspectives of community and family are enmeshed within a Hmong ethos of continuity that is derived from historical strategies and experiences from Laos and the refugee camps of Thailand.

Within the Denver Hmong community, the moral foundations of spiritual practices and a pronounced emphasis on continuity have continued to uphold the idea of family as a central tenant to being Hmong. In doing so, this has further emphasised various degrees of entanglement and mutual reliance within and between families and individuals. As a result, significant pressure has been placed on younger Hmong to strengthen the networks of family, extended family, and community by reproducing and forming families of their own. The production and reproduction of family has in turn drawn into focus generational tensions concerning ideas of family, education, gender, expectations of behaviour, and approaches to health and healing. In consideration of these points, this thesis examines how people within the Denver Hmong community negotiate, maintain, and contest the intersection of these matters while constructing and maintaining the central tenants of Hmong life and a Hmong continuity through the reciprocal reproductive qualities of the social, the spiritual and symbolic, and the biological.

Lay Summary

This thesis examines concepts of reproduction in a Hmong community in Denver, Colorado. These concepts involve social, religious, and spiritual views to facilitate the reproduction of the Hmong community and the essence of being Hmong. This is supplemented by an emphasis placed on biological reproduction and traditional approaches to Hmong concepts of reproductive health and healing. Furthermore, these matters contribute to the development of a Hmong continuity that represents multi-generational views of being Hmong.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Denver Hmong community and all those in Denver, St. Paul, Fresno, and Atlanta who assisted me with my research and who were gracious enough to offer me their insights and their beautiful personal stories and memories. I am incredibly grateful and indebted to Prof. Francesca Bray and Dr. Richard Baxstrom for the years of professional and personal friendship, patience, encouragement, guidance, and the seemingly incalculable numbers of formal and informal discussions that have given life to this thesis and thoughts of future projects. I would also like to thank my examiners, Dr. Dimitri Tsintjilonis and Dr. Mark Johnson for their thoughts and for their time in reading and critiquing my work. I am grateful and indebted to my wife, YuYeng, for years of patience and encouragement, and to the extended Vue family for their acceptance, kindness, and guidance, and my niece, Mackenzie Vang, who consistently reminded me of why I had chosen my paths of inquiry.

Additionally I want to thank Dr. Ian Harper for his support and encouragement throughout the development of this project, Prof. Janet Carsten, Prof. Sandy Robertson for challenging my perspectives and expectations, and Dr. Magnus Course, Dr. Jacob, Dr. John Harries, Dr. John Bialecki, Dr. Stewart McLean and Dr. Sidharthan Maunaguru for their thoughtful discussions and insights, and I wish to thank the rest of the staff and administration of the University of Edinburgh Social Anthropology department while under the guidance of Dr. Jonathan Spencer, Dr. Ian Harper, and Dr. Toby Kelly.

I am grateful to Dr. Sabina Magliocco and Dr. Suzanne Scheld for their profound contribution to my development as a researcher and their years of encouragement. I am also grateful for the years of friendship and thought provoking debate from Koreen Reece, Sebastian Bachelet, Diego Malara, Chrissie Wanner, Stewart Allen, Ting Shum, Sandalia Genus, Hanna Mantila, Michael Heneise, Takamasa Osawa, Juan Claux, Lucy Lowe, Siobhan Magee, Fauzia Malik, and Dr. Evangelos Chrysagis. I also wish to express my thanks to everyone who took the time to read and discuss my work during our weekly seminars.

Furthermore, I wish to thank the Duprez family and my friends Ethan Landesman, Eric and Audrey Eck, the Eck family, David and Charlene Walters, Tim Beck, Yi Zhu, Tim and Cheryl Steep, and Brian and Sarah Knott who have all offered their support and encouragement from the very beginning. And finally, I am forever grateful to Mamie Duprez and Cheryl Duprez who instilled in me early on the idea that the incredibly diverse natures of the world and humanity were worth exploring.

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Introduction

Near the beginning of my fieldwork in 2012, I met Paul who had sent his wife to the shaman, Grandma Va, for fertility treatment. Paul had wanted a family of his own since he was a small boy. In 1980 at the age of 12, he had immigrated to the small town of Boulder, Colorado with his parents from a camp in Thailand. He has vague memories of life before the camps but most of his memories before coming to Boulder are of playing with other children in the camp. When asked about his experiences, he always says, “it wasn’t that bad. The adults had it worse you know. They had to do all of their adult stuff. But we had family there and we kids just got put together, so all I really remember is playing all the time.”

After their arrival in the US, Paul and his family were met by other Hmong in Colorado, and while he was enrolled in the Colorado public education system, he often stayed around the growing Hmong community and his closest friends were his cousins. He was married when he was 30 to a Hmong woman and they have since been married for 10 years. He often mentioned that he being 40 and his wife, Ka Gua, being 36, they were incomplete without children of their own and his mother and his mother in law have continued to mount pressure on them to establish a family and they have insisted that a child would help strengthen and stabilise their marriage. This pressure has come in the form of the two mothers verbally chastising Paul and his wife, together and separately, about denying them grandchildren and reminding them how better their own lives would be if they had grandchildren. To further their point, Paul’s mother and Ka Gua’s mother often borrowed their friend’s grandchildren at social events and would then walk in front of the couple or talk to the couple while parading the child in an effort to demonstrate how adept they would be at being a grandmother. In one instance at the Baptist Hmong New Year, Ka Gua’s mother sat down with her daughter and I while holding Ka Gua’s cousin’s baby and asked what we were talking about. When Ka Gua explained that we were discussing Hmong families her mother simply said, “Are you telling him why you don’t have a family of your own? Why I don’t have any grandchildren?” Ka Gua sighed and visibly sagged as her mother returned to smiling, laughing, and playing with the infant she was holding. As part of their response to this increasing pressure,

Paul and Ka Gua had continued to make an effort to spend their weekends with Paul's young niece so that they could experience what it would be like to have a child around and to show the rest of the family, most importantly their mothers, that they will make suitable parents and that they had a real interest in having their own family. Generally, Paul's father and Ka Gua's father chose to remain out of the intervention and relied on their wives to address matters of fertility with the young couple. As Ka Gua's father told me, "It is a women's thing. Her mother will know what to do."

In addition to the direct comments, the public displays of pressure on the couple, and an overt longing to be grandmothers, there are other ways in which mothers and mother in laws inject themselves into the affairs of couples. Soon after the comments at the New Year, Paul's mother contacted a shaman in Laos about health issues that Paul's father had been having. His father had been ill for some time with an undisclosed form of cancer and had gone to see several shamans, some who are in Denver and others in St. Paul, but he had not been able to find one he felt fully answered his questions concerning what was wrong with him. He had also gone to Western doctors and when told that he possibly had a serious, life threatening illness and that he needed further tests, he decided that he should really speak with a shaman in Laos and follow a course of traditional medicine. Paul's mother discussed the issue with family members in Laos who referred her to shamans in Laos who knew the family and who they felt would be able to best determine the exact causes and best treatments for her husband's illness. When I asked Paul about this, he explained that his father was an older man who generally distrusted Western doctors and that he maintained that Western medicine simply didn't understand everything. He felt that while it was good for some things, traditional Hmong medicine continued to be better suited to dealing with Hmong health issues. While seemingly unrelated to the issue of Paul and Ka Gua's efforts to start a family, Paul's mother also used the opportunity to ask the shaman to find out why Paul and Ka Gua had failed to conceive.

After having performed the ceremonies and blessings for Paul's father, the shaman called and informed Paul's mother that he would look into what had happened with Paul and his wife and see if he could offer advice on the matter. In

expectation of the shaman's findings, Paul's mother spoke with Ka Gua's mother who is a Christian. And while consulting a shaman is contrary to her Christian practice, she agreed to contribute half of the shaman's \$300 USD fee. After several calls back and forth to Laos, the shaman completed his tasks and he had identified some of the issues he felt Paul and Ka Gua had been experiencing. He explained to Paul's mother that the souls of Paul and his wife had known each other in the spirit world and that they had been madly in love and were promised to each other there. In the spirit world the shaman had seen five gourds with them and these were the five children that Paul and his wife were destined to have. One day, while walking and playing together, the spirits of Paul and his wife came to a magnificent gate that had been left open. Looking through the gate, they saw fields of beautiful flowers and sunlight and they set their five gourds down at the threshold of the gate and went to play in the colourful fields. The two quickly became separated in the tall flowers of the fields and they then became trapped in the world, unable to find the gate, their gourds, or each other. Their spirits were then called and they were born into the world as children where they then grew up apart but were destined to be reunited as adults. However, the five gourds were still lying at the threshold, waiting for Paul and Ka Gua to call them through the gate and into the world to again complete their family.

The two mothers had kept their inquiry private but once the shaman's results were heard, the matter quickly became public as the couple was told the news, the news then circled through the families, followed closely by the church, and finally by the larger social circles of the community, with the subject always being talked about as extremely exciting news. The mothers felt that they now had a way to understand and explain the couple's lack of children and that the potential for them to produce a family offered a renewal of hope. While telling Ka Gua and Paul about the shaman's findings, the pressure to conceive and to call their "gourds" through the gate continued to increase over the following weeks with the majority of pressure being placed on Ka Gua.

It is quite rare for a Hmong man to acknowledge that he may potentially have reproductive issues and so often times the blame is placed solely upon the woman. In this particular case, Ka Gua was first accused of being selfish and a poor mother

for not going back for her children whom she had left at the spirit gate and that she should accept responsibility for claiming her children. As the accusations began to subside and the initial fervour passed, other potential causes were considered, examined, and discussed with the couple but mostly between the couple's mothers. It was decided that Ka Gua would need to first seek traditional fertility treatment to see if that would hurry things along for the couple.

While Ka Gua had reluctantly agreed to the treatment, she told me on several occasions that she has never had any desire to have five children. She felt that as a working professional who had spent many years developing her career and furthering her education, too many children would take away from her career and her livelihood as well as diminish her role as the main earner in the household. She was also very uncomfortable with others deciding how her body should be used. Unknown to Paul or their mothers at the time, she had chosen to delay having children over the past few years because of these concerns and had simply taken matters into her own hands and had chosen to remain on birth control pills until she felt that she was ready to have a child. However, with the increased pressure from her mother in law and her own mother, she decided to stop taking contraceptives shortly after the shaman had come back with his explanation and because she worried that too many questions would arise should Grandma Va's treatments not work.

Grandma Va, a very well known and respected fertility expert, was consulted and it was determined that Ka Gua would begin treatments immediately which would include herbal medicines, prayers, and massage. While Ka Gua is a practicing Christian, she gave into the pressure of her mother and mother in laws and deferred to their opinion on the matter. If for some reason Ka Gua was still unable to conceive after Grandma Va's efforts, it was decided by her mother and mother in law that she would then go and see a Western fertility expert to see if there were additional causes surrounding Ka Gua's perceived infertility and, if needed, the doctor could prepare and administer hormone treatment to try and boost her fertility, or should the situation be more dire, they could then consider In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF).

When I first heard about the traditional fertility treatments I was pleasantly surprised to hear that Ka Gua would be going to see Grandma Va. I had spent

considerable time with Grandma Va prior to knowing Paul and his wife and I was familiar with her practice. Grandma Va was a very petite woman with a gentle and loving disposition who at times would reveal an extremely powerful and fiery character. During my visits she would always speak to me as though looking at the ceiling as my height and large frame dwarfed her four foot nine inch height. While telling stories of demons or spirits, or while discussing approaches to treatments or sensitive topics, she would always take on a very serious persona. Once she had finished her explanation or story, she would often pause and then look at the person she was addressing and erupt into a crackling fit of laughter to ease the mood and make light of the situation.

By sending Ka Gua to Grandma Va, the two mothers felt confident that Ka Gua would conceive a child. Grandma Va's task was to establish why Ka Gua was having difficulties conceiving and to then to address any issues that had arisen. Most importantly, Grandma Va's treatments would prepare Ka Gua's body for conception and she would do this by ensuring that Ka Gua's body and spirit were in a copacetic state. This procedure would involve prayer, traditional medicine, and massage therapies. If IVF would be required to conceive, then Grandma Va's efforts would have positioned Ka Gua's spiritual and bodily health in a state which would then permit the IVF treatments to be effective. It was felt that if these matters were not addressed, the IVF would simply be ineffective and potentially cause further complications.

Over a three month period, Ka Gua visited Grandma Va once a week for massage and twice a week to have Grandma Va prepare her traditional medicine involving an egg remedy. At the end of the three month period, Ka Gua became pregnant and the news was well received by the families. Grandma Va's efforts were cited as the reason the pregnancy was successful and it was then decided that Ka Gua would continue to see Grandma Va over the course of her pregnancy to maintain her health and to also have Grandma Va try to increase Ka Gua's chances of having a boy. To do this, Ka Gua was placed on a secret herbal medicine that was prepared in advance by Grandma Va and then given to Ka Gua's mother to administer to Ka Gua over the course of another three to four months. In addition to following this regimen and continuing to see Grandma Va for massage and blessings, Ka Gua

began seeing a Western doctor in order to follow what she felt were the proper steps for prenatal care. She was placed on a vitamin and dietary regimen by her Western doctor and follow up visits were scheduled to check the health and development of the baby.

When it was determined through ultrasound during one of these visits that the baby was a healthy female, word quickly reached her mother and mother in law. Immediately Grandma Va's medicine was identified as the cause of what they felt was extremely good fortune. Later that day when her mother came to congratulate her, Ka Gua was told that she would have to pay Grandma Va up to a thousand dollars for all of the work that she had done and that she would also have to hold a much larger banquet in honor of Grandma Va than they had originally planned once the baby was born.

Central Questions

I had set out to examine how the Hmong form an efficacious understanding or synthesis of medicine and reproductive health and fertility found within the forms of knowledge that encompass Hmong approaches to traditional medicine and Western bio-medicine. Within this thesis, traditional practices refer to those practices, beliefs, and worldview which were understood and performed by the Hmong prior to Christian conversion and which have survived as a counterpoint to Hmong Christian understandings of the world. Ka Gua's situation exhibited qualities of Hmong reproduction that challenged and redirected many of my initial expectations and questions. Most notably, I began to ask what reproduction really meant within the Hmong experience beyond the biological and in turn, what was really being reproduced and how? Through further observations, discussions, and analysis, I came to understand the idea of reproduction through a much wider context that contained within it an organic reciprocal reproduction and critical emphasis on matters of the social, the symbolic nature of the spiritual, and the biological. Together these factors form the foundations and structure of Hmong life. And through interconnections and dependence on one another a profound degree of entanglement comes to light wherein each factor is reciprocally reproduced and validated within an enveloping understanding of what it means to be Hmong while

simultaneously developing and nurturing a sense of continuity. Through the development of this perspective, the following key questions emerged and shaped this thesis:

- How do concepts and experiences of community and emphasis on family come to effect a wider Hmong reproduction and what is being reproduced and marshaled within these social domains?
- How do disparate ontological and spiritual practices and views relate to a symbolic reproduction of being Hmong through their understanding of self and relation to one another, and how do these perspectives lend themselves to matters of reproducing family and community?
- In what ways do these approaches coincide with, inform, and direct approaches to biological reproduction and reproductive health?

In consideration of the questions I have posed, the views that will be considered below, and my field experiences and reflections, I have chosen to structure this thesis in a very specific way. As we saw with Ka Gua, efforts were made to put her soul and body in a copacetic state. As a reflection of this, I have constructed this thesis along similar lines relying on essential factors that constitute being Hmong: community, family, and spirituality. The first chapter addresses the importance of community and the recreation of traditional village life and social strategies, which further marshal the borders of community. As an extension of Chapter 1, Chapter 2 examines perspectives and challenges to the construction and maintenance of family. Chapters 3 and 4 are directed towards Christian and traditional spiritual perspectives and practices of the Hmong, which permeate Hmong ontological constructions and understandings of the self. Just as the relationships between body and the soul and the balance of those components produce a desired image of being and health, the wholeness and wellbeing of the Hmong aggregate is constituted by the social bodies examined in Chapters 1 and 2, and by the spiritual understandings and perspectives of Chapters 3 and 4, which feed the social consciousness. In Chapter 5, these matters of the social and spiritual domains are brought to bear on Hmong views of reproductive health and approaches to medicine. Chapter 6 will offer an examination and overview of these key subjects and demonstrate how they culminate into a social and spiritual gestalt of Hmong

reproduction and continuity. In each of these chapters lie deep seated entanglements which reveal areas of overlap and interdependence throughout the Hmong life cycle. Here again, the reciprocal reproductive nature of the social, the spiritual and symbolic, and the biological further broadens an understanding of what Hmong reproduction is and what it means to be Hmong.

In the sections that follow I will address the historical foundations of the Hmong diaspora and the Hmong in America, leading up to the very beginnings of the Denver Hmong community. Additionally, brief overviews of the Hmong in Denver, as well as Hmong social structure, language, and marriage practices are provided to form a contextual base of understanding that relates to the different topics addressed throughout the thesis. This is then followed by a literature review, which addresses key anthropological debates and views concerning reproduction, the intersection of medicine and religion, the anthropology of religion, kinship, and matters of gender. The literature review also incorporates works involving the Hmong which speak to these bodies of literature and which demonstrate approaches to past and current issues. And before getting into the chapters, I will be addressing the methods I employed in collecting data and constructing this thesis, and a review of ethical considerations. With that said, I first mean to address the terms tradition and traditional as concepts and their use throughout this thesis.

Tradition and the Traditional in the Denver Hmong Community

Within the humanities there has been critical debate surrounding the concept of tradition and the traditional as forms of knowledge and practice. Le Gall's work, "Defining Traditional Knowledge: a perspective from the Caribbean" (2012), notes that tradition is reflective of a collective knowledge of practices and cultural expressions that survives from generation to generation. However, she goes on to explore the difficulties surrounding the definition of what constitutes traditional knowledge, practice, and cultural expressions by acknowledging a need to account for the variations of what these forms of knowledge mean within a particular group's epistemology. Moreover, the problem is further compounded through an institutional perspective attempting to resolve the issue through its own theoretical trappings.

This is a sentiment that is shared within the work of Nirmal Sengupta's (2003) critique of institutional views of traditional knowledge in India. Here, Sengupta argues that from an Indian perspective, a false dichotomy has been created wherein colonial institutional forms of knowledge have suppressed the traditional by casting past practices and forms of knowledge as being less sophisticated when compared to what is construed as modern knowledge and practice. In this institutionally constructed diametric view of the traditional and the modern, Sengupta calls for an acknowledgement and appreciation of the effectiveness and successes of traditional practice in order to progress an Indian economic agenda. Most importantly, his arguments assert that tradition and the traditional should not be relegated to moments in the past but are much better understood as being a critical part of the present and as part of the modern.

These two works speak to the idea of tradition and the practices of the traditional as being rooted in shared cultural pasts and ways of understanding that inform the present. However, as Humphrey's (1989) examination of traditional foods and culinary practices points out, ideas and understandings of what constitutes tradition can be understood as forms of knowledge or practice that are constructed by a cultural or social group indicative of continuity, but as concepts they are also attached to an imagination of the past and are therefore subject to interpretation, invention, and change.

As these points pertain to the Hmong and this thesis, we can now question what the term traditional means to the Hmong of Denver and to what degree the concept or framework of traditional practice and categorisation are connected to the past and how the traditional is rooted in the contemporary defining of a Hmong American experience. Within this we may also address how the use of the terms tradition and traditional are subject to imagination, invention, and interpretation.

To clarify these issues we can turn to the works of Jean Langford (2005 and 2009) concerning mortuary rites of the Indochinese diaspora in the US as families struggle to meet the needs of the dead. Here, issues of indebtedness to the dead and the handling of the dead have been modified due to the constraints of socio-political and bio-political factors yet the practices retain a connection to the past as it is understood for those involved. As examples Langford notes that the Hmong in the

US have had to contend with issues involving embalming, maintaining the purity of the dead in regards to metal objects used in modern burial practices, the length of mourning and material offerings to the dead, sacrificial offerings of livestock, and challenges to the physical orientation of burial sites. In the case of the Hmong in Denver, the community has built relationships with different funeral homes over the years to ease this burden. The funeral homes have made an effort to honour Hmong funerary rites as best as possible and in return the Hmong have at times had to make alterations to their practices. During the funerals that I observed, space and time were granted by the funeral home in order for the families to dress the body and to ensure that no metal was in or on the body in preparation for the funeral. Moreover, as we will see in Chapter 4, the funeral home has established a relationship with the Hmong community that allows for the Hmong to perform three day long funerals with 24 hour access to the body, as was done in Laos. Most importantly, the funeral home has welcomed Hmong shamanic practice as part of Hmong funerary rites which includes the playing of the *qeej* flute that provides instructions to the spirit of the deceased, and the home has made provisions for food preparation and feasting.

While material offerings to the dead are permitted and can include prepared foods, such as those used in the final remembrance ceremony and appeasement and releasing of the dead, a *tso plig*, that is usually held at the funeral home weeks or months after the funeral, the offering of sacrificial livestock is of a different matter. Where the slaughtering of the sacrificial animals would have normally been carried out in a village setting at the funeral, it is now done offsite, such as on a family farm, and the animals are symbolically represented by the tying of string to the wrist of the deceased during the funeral process. Finally, as Langford points out, in the past there were concerns over geomancy, or how the dead would be oriented at the gravesite as a means of contentment for the dead (2005: 165). However, the matter was not brought up among my informants as a point of concern when determining a proper grave site. The most important factor was that the gravesite should be as close as possible to the sites of deceased relatives.

Within these processes, there are clear adaptations to practice and understanding that conflict with past practices and which the Hmong have come to accept as part of life in the US. Even with these modifications, these practices fall

within what can be understood to be representations of traditional thought and practice and which are in keeping with the function of authentic practice as they understand it. They are able to care for the soul of the deceased as best and as closely as possible as they had in Laos and in doing so, work to appease the deceased and honour their memory.

Most importantly, these adaptations reveal that notions of the traditional can change and can be subject to invention. Again, as we will see in Chapter 4, in the past a dog was sacrificed at a funeral as part of the funeral process. In place of this, a stuffed toy dog is now symbolically sacrificed and tethered to a spiritual gate used by the shamans. When asked, even elderly Hmong who have first hand knowledge of practices in Laos offered conflicting answers as to the reason why the dog needed to be sacrificed, it was simply a matter of course. For the younger Hmong, sacrificing the toy dog was simply what is done. They openly acknowledged that a real dog had been used in the past but in the US the stuffed toy fulfilled their needs and this was now part of the process. Even so, these changes reveal what they see as a form of knowledge and practice connected to the past.

It should be noted that the concept of tradition and the traditional vary across generational lines. We have to consider matters of language competency which further complicate the situation as generations struggle to understand one another and to convey meanings of practice rooted in the past and those in the present. For the very elderly Hmong, it can be argued that practices such as these funerary rites are not understood as being categorically traditional, rather they are simply part of the way they understand life as process and no categorisation is needed. This is not to say that the elderly have not had experiences beyond the community or have been denied interaction with the different ways of living in the US that influence their understanding of past practices. Rather, they have drawn from their own first hand knowledge of life in Laos, as well as their knowledge of Hmong spiritual practices and folklore, which has retained importance and which permeates their understanding and experience of life. In contrast, younger Hmong are presented with what they can call a traditional way of knowing and traditional forms of practice that are supplemented with their own experiences drawn from contemporary US life and knowledge of alternative funerary practices, such as those of Christian

practitioners. Because of this wider exposure, we can see a dichotomy emerge, such as that marked by Sengupta, which gives further weight to the construction of knowledge and practice as a category of the traditional that exists in opposition to contemporary US life outside of the Hmong community, or what many of my younger informants referred to as modern life. However, just as Sengupta suggested, this is a false dichotomy as these practices and connections to the past contribute to the overall contours of what it means to be Hmong in a present sense. The past remains an integral part of the cultural present, despite its categorical limitations. This can be seen more clearly in matters of family structure and concepts of relatedness that will be examined in Chapters 1 and 2 where historical structures of family and social relatedness continue to define a contemporary Hmong experience and identity across generations.

From this stance, we may also consider Hmong Christian views of past practices and the traditional. During my fieldwork, Hmong Christians repeatedly referred to non-Christian Hmong practices as traditional. When pressed on the matter, they perceived the old ways of understanding the world and spiritual matters as being in direct conflict with Christian teachings. As such, traditional views were seen as being Satanic in nature or synonymous with Satan and were therefore dangerous for their understanding of Christian spiritual countenance and health. In this regard, there is a return to the construction of a dichotomy of practice as traditional ways, specifically spiritual practices, that are seen as antithetical to Christian teachings. Even so, the Christian community is not without its connections to the past in that they continue to organise and structure their families and relations while continuing to emphasise the importance of spirituality as a key component to Hmong life, just as was done in Laos. To this point, some past practices, such as that of family, are seen as positive and as critical to the maintenance and continuity of being Hmong. And in a similar manner to generational perspectives, through the oppositional nature of this dichotomy of experience and perspective, there exists a further strengthening and reinforcement of the category traditional as it pertains to the other.

In light of these points, the use of the term traditional in this thesis can be understood to be a form of rhetoric in current use by many in the Hmong

community. This rhetoric is reflective of a coherent understanding of the past and shared culture, as well as the dynamics of adapting practice among the older generations. However, it is also subject to the interpretations and adaptations of later generations as they mesh their own understanding of the traditional derived from their own experiences and engagements with the older generation. As such, the use of the term traditional can refer to an understanding, adherence, or opposition of or to practices, perspectives, and material culture that are thought to be rooted in the past, or are a derivative of the past, and which can further contribute to the formation and expression of their own identities or their relation to, or differentiation from, others. Additionally, as we saw above within the use of the term there exists a false dichotomy as the influence of the past and the traditional continues to exert its influence in the present. This is particularly evident within a Christian context wherein both sides of the dichotomy, that of Christian and traditional spiritual practice, reinforce the contours of the other. Furthermore, Christian Hmong have continued to emphasise select features of the past, namely social structures and the meaning of family, that continue to shape the character of contemporary Hmong Christian life.

While use of the term traditional by my informants is used as a descriptive and categorical term, my own usage of traditional provides a means to understand and analyse groups of Hmong, through generational or spiritual perspectives and practice, relative to one another. This is of particular importance when addressing Christian views and shamanic practice as well as in understanding current points of view concerning the construction of the self and the ensuing issues of health and matters of social, symbolic, and biological reproduction. Moreover, my use of the term assists in demonstrating how practices of the past have continued to affect daily and overarching experiences of the Hmong in the US as well as shaping the desires and efforts to maintain a Hmong and Hmong American continuity.

An Overview of the Hmong, Their Diaspora, and Life in the US

In order to approach understanding and researching matters of reproduction across the contemporary Hmong experience and within Hmong communities, it is important to address the history of the Hmong and their migration to the US. The

Hmong are part of the Indochinese Refugees Diaspora which includes six major groups: Vietnamese, ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, Khmer from Kampuchea (Cambodia), and ethnic Lao, Mien, and Hmong from Laos (Koltyk 1998: 8). While the early history of the Hmong places them in Southern China, conflicts with the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) during the 18th century forced the Hmong into South East Asia where they primarily settled in Northern Laos and Northern Vietnam; an area that has been referred to in a historical sense as Zomia and which has continued to garner contemporary scholarly attention and interest (Hamilton-Merrit 1993, Scott 2009). In particular, over the past few years through the fresh historical perspectives of James Scott. His work centers upon a pronounced characteristic of self determination on the part of hill-top peoples in the region while highlighting the effective means and strategies of evading the power of the state. This perspective has in turn generated new debates about life, power, the marginal, and the state in both historical and present-day contexts. In consideration of this, I wish to begin a more detailed examination of the Hmong experience and migration from the highlands of Laos to the US which has been indelibly marked by conflict in the region.

In the hopes of finding a new route into China, the French began to establish themselves as a colonial power in South East Asia in the 19th century, beginning with Vietnam. Believing the Mekong River to be the key to entering China, the French further acquired Laos as a colonial area with Thailand operating as a buffer zone between French interests and British held Burma. Over the following decades leading up to World War II, the French were unable to find entrance to China and settled into governing its colonial interests in South East Asia. With the outbreak of World War II the French called upon the montagnards, which included the Hmong, to fight the encroaching Japanese forces in the region. The Hmong proved to be an effective fighting force for the French and were valued for their knowledge of the terrain and their resourcefulness.

Following World War II, the 1950s proved to be a tumultuous time in South East Asia and the Hmong in the highlands of Laos were greatly affected by the French colonial system of rule as it began to collapse amidst swelling communist sympathy. With the rise of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, French colonial rule faltered

with the fall of Dienbienphu. The French conceded the northern half of Vietnam and the region renegotiated itself to reflect a communist voice opposing the West and the injustices that the West had imposed on much of South East Asia. From the shared and porous border of North Vietnam and Northern Laos, the Vietnamese communist supported Pathet Lao engaged in a civil war with Royal Lao forces which would last from 1953 until 1975. In turn, the Hmong became embroiled in conflict while stuck between the two opposing forces. With this expansion of communism in South East Asia, the United States reacted by expanding its military and economic programs in Thailand, South Vietnam, and Laos thereby fueling further conflict. Between 1955 and 1959 money was laundered by the Defense Department through the CIA to conceal US operations in Laos from Congress. With this, the United States became thoroughly involved in the South East Asian situation (Quincy 2000: 127-129, Hillmer 2010). With corruption in the Laotian military and the French sitting idly by, the Hmong again proved themselves to be the only reliable soldiers in Laos. From this point the CIA turned their attention to acquiring them as guerilla fighters to help secure the Laotian and North Vietnamese border areas in the growing conflicts of the 1960s. In so doing, the US began the Secret War in Laos that would last from 1961 until 1975 (Morrison: 1999, Kolyk 1998: 3, Quincy 2000: 134, Hillmer 2010).

With the fall of American forces in South Vietnam between 1974 and 1975, the Hmong of Highland Laos were abandoned by US forces after serving as soldiers in the Secret War for well over a decade. This abandonment led to the persecution of the Hmong by encroaching communist Pathet Lao forces and the Hmong were forced to seek asylum wherever possible. Recognizing the abandonment of the Hmong stemming from the fall of American forces in Southeast Asia in 1975, the Pathet Lao communist troops began attacks on the Hmong population which amounted to genocide for the Hmong in Highland Laos.

While a small few had the means to leave immediately with the popular Hmong leader, General Vang Pao and the remaining Americans, the majority of the Hmong were not as fortunate and were left to negotiate the hazardous journey to Thailand to seek refuge in the crowded impromptu refugee camps. The journey to the Thai border was extremely perilous and many Hmong died at the hands of

communist forces while trying to escape through the jungle or while trying to cross the Mekong River on makeshift rafts and other hastily assembled flotation devices (Quincy 2000, Morrison 1999, Hamilton-Merritt 1993, Koltyk 1998).

Initially, the Thai government was ill equipped to handle the large influx of refugees and makeshift quarters were provided. As more and more arrived, the Thai government and the American government were forced to address the swelling refugee population and turned their attention to the creation of more permanent refugee camps within Thailand. These camps provided a space where Hmong refugees could be detained while waiting for clearance for immigration to the United States. Jo Ann Koltyk's work, New Pioneers in the Heartland: Hmong life in Wisconsin, describes the refugee camps as liminal places that are essentially betwixt and between; a place where the occupants experience a suspension of their identity and of their lifeways (1998: 25).

Many of the accounts in I Begin My Life All Over (Faderman and Xiong 1998) express that camp life in Thailand was very harsh. The camps were extremely overcrowded and there was very little food to eat and many had difficulties regularly accessing water. Initially the Thai government had made arrangements for the acceptance of the refugees and had a tolerant attitude towards the Hmong refugees. According to several of my informants, the hospitality afforded by the Thai government was done in the spirit of keeping foreign aid from the West flowing into Thailand for use by the Thai people. However, as time went on, the Hmong refugees became the targets of violence and state disdain. By the late 1970s, the Thai government had begun to reduce the assistance and resources available to the camps and began to forcibly turn people away who were then detained by the waiting Pathet Lao forces. The last refugee camp in Thailand was closed in 2010 and all of the inhabitants were repatriated to Laos.

In a social sense, memories of the camps among those who were there serve as a reminder of the Hmong displacement, their flight from Laos, and the lived experience of years of hardship and suffering. Memories of the camps operate as a locus for remembering what it was to be Hmong at that time and the problematic transitions they faced in relocating to the West. In comparison, younger generations born in the United States, and who are much more accustomed to, and adept at,

maneuvering the contemporary American cultural and economic milieu, understand the camps as the beginnings of their family's American experience and a part of their migrational history in the 20th century.

These different ways of understanding life in Laos and Thailand has led to a romanticization of their past and a plurality of understandings and imaginings concerning what life in Laos was like. In Louisa Schein's "Homeland Beauty: Transnational Longing and Hmong American Video" (2004), this romanticization of the Hmong homelands is seen as stemming from the eroticization of South East Asia during the 1960s and 1970s by the West. It is also coupled with the fascination of the CIA's Secret War that was centered in Laos. Schein's work reveals that there has been a flow of Hmong back to Thailand to see family, to partake of tours, business trips, and on the part of many men, to engage in sexual encounters where they seek out mistresses, wives, and in some cases, second wives. In my own experiences, some possess a tattered memory of Laos that recalls a time of violence and loss, mixed with childhood memories of family, the forests, hills, and occasional moments of beauty and tranquility in everyday life. Within many of the minds of the younger generation who have never been to Laos, conjured images of life there come across as a peaceful existence within a rustic village or farm setting speaking to what they understand to be simpler times. It is an imagined space and experience that is away from the crowded and hectic cosmopolitan nature of life in the US. In this sense, where the Hmong came from, what they experienced, and how they came to be in the US, are understood differently by the different generations and this continues to shape cross generational relationships and the Hmong American experience.

Regarding Hmong migration to the United States, it was only after spending several years in the Thai camps that the Hmong refugees began their journey to the US where they immediately occupied a marginalized position as a refugee group within US society. The stories collected in Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America resonate with the difficulties many Hmong faced while adapting to life in America. Cultural misunderstandings and resentment towards refugee groups was particularly strong in America because of the perceived growing dependency of refugees on social programs, such as Welfare. As a result, the Hmong's transition to

American life was uneasy and at times extremely difficult (Chan 1994, Kolytk 1998).

Through the first migration and subsequent resettlement, the traditional Hmong clan structures were put under enormous strain as families and communities were spread around the country due to the US government's relocation policies of assistance and sponsorship. The majority of those who came to the US found themselves in urban and semi-rural environments and living in difficult and poverty stricken areas. These areas included places such as Houston, TX, St. Paul, MN, Fresno, CA, Atlanta, GA, Charlotte, NC, and Oklahoma City, OK. Even with access to the rural landscape of these places, the Hmong were far removed from the availability of resources, and environmental and cultural conditions they were accustomed to in the agricultural highlands of Laos.

Conversations with numerous informants revealed that they were relocated to areas near to the institutions that had sponsored their immigration to the US and where they could be checked on by US immigration officials. The majority of these institutions were Christian churches and the initial resettlement areas for many of my informants were trailer parks or tightly packed apartment blocks in the poorer sections of their host cities. Missionaries who had sponsored many of the families were able to find work for many of the newly arrived men and women in industrial and manufacturing sectors. The missionaries also provided them with English lessons and with much needed assistance in finding places to live, obtaining food, and getting their children into schools. The initial shock of the transition, their refugee status, and overall lack of skilled labor positioned many families in lower economic brackets and they found themselves living in government housing and using government assisted programs, such as Welfare and food stamps. From their stories, it seems as though the sponsoring institutions and the US government had not accounted for the emphasis put on family and extended family by the Hmong and how these matters constitute the core of Hmong sociality. Instead, the institutional agendas favored a nuclear family centric agenda, and through this many of my informants felt that this generated tensions and aggravations between families, the community, and their sponsoring institutions.

In addition to the stresses emanating from their situation with the

institutions and their adjustment to their new lives, many of those I spoke with recalled becoming a target of racism and social hostility that they associated to being misunderstood and labeled as a South East Asian refugee. Moreover, the bitter pains of the Vietnam War were lingering in US society and the Hmong offered a constant reminder of the conflict. In one case, a man explained to me that for the first few years after he arrived in Texas he would receive angry and threatening telephone calls where the person would threaten not only him, but his wife and children. He explained that he was uneasy reporting the matter to the police and felt that if he did so, it would only exacerbate the problem and perhaps incite violence. In another case, the owner of the trailer park used by the church to resettle the Hmong was in a squalid state with several of the toilets being non-operational. The leader of the Hmong community felt that the owner did not see them as being full human beings and that they were merely ungrateful chaff from the war who were taking advantage of everyone and all they could. After several weeks and continued refusal by the owner to fix the problem, the leader of the community went to the news station to report their living conditions. While the publicity caused the owner to fix the situation, this resulted in several threatening phone calls and further harassment by the surrounding community.

To further emphasise the shock of relocation many experienced, I want to briefly relate a memory of the shaman, Grandma Va. One powerful recollection of Grandma Va's was concerned with an event which took place in the early 1980s in Oklahoma. In this particular case, when Grandma Va went to meet with the family she noted that they had set all of their buckets and pans outside of their apartment. When she asked what they were doing they replied, "Why aren't you putting yours out? If you don't, you will have no water. Water is scarce here". With that, Grandma Va walked into the small kitchen of the apartment and turned on the water faucet at which the family began to cry, with some falling to the floor in awe at simply having running water in their home. In this case the family had led a simple farming existence in Northern Laos and had not had access to public water works in their village nor in their Thai refugee camp. They had traditionally drawn water from the rivers or from small, square wells dug into the steep hillsides, with some sources being over a mile away, using repurposed plastic containers and jugs.

Grandma Va chuckled while remembering the look on their faces and how so many things had changed so quickly for everyone during that time.

Once the shock of the relocation had subsided, many of the families and clans began to organize themselves in order to undertake what can be termed the second Hmong migration within the US, which primarily occurred throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s. Families often relied on reports of living conditions in different areas of the country from other family and clan members and they were thus able to relocate and reorganize themselves along religious, clan, and familial lines in an agreed upon area of the country. This second migration was a central topic of interest for many of my informants when talking about how they came to be where they were, often outweighing their initial migration from Laos. Schein (1987) and Chan (1994) have both noted the importance of the second Hmong migration and through Chan's collected stories, and even third migrations represented a critical time of reorganization and reunion for many Hmong families.

The Denver community was initially a very small community established in the Ruby Hill area in northern Denver by roughly 1,000 to 1,500 newly arrived Hmong refugees in the 1980s. Through the second migration and additional new arrivals, the Hmong population in Denver swelled, with many recalling the population reaching as many as 9,000 Hmong by the early 1990s. With continual development of the St. Paul and Fresno communities, many of the families in Denver chose to relocate to these larger communities to consolidate family resources and to find comfort in being among a denser population. For many, incentives to relocate was found through the hope of finding improved living conditions and perceived economic and educational opportunities that surpassed those in Denver.

Connections In Diaspora

The Hmong diaspora and the research presented in this thesis in part speak to the issues surrounding anthropology's engagement with matters of migration and transnational connections. As Gardner (2013) points out, anthropology's interest in the subjects of migration and transnationalism stem largely from the examination of peasant societies in the 1960s and the regional flows of migrant labour. In response to these interests, subsequent research began to acknowledge and critique the

intricate relationships of transnational communities and the complex motivations of migration while also challenging ideas of geo-political boundedness and the duality of belonging (see Wolf 1982 and Ferguson and Gupta 1992 and 1997).

In regards to the issue of anthropology's reliance on geo-political boundedness, Gardner points out that within academic discourse leading up to the development of transnational interests there was a clear neglect of acknowledgement regarding the flow of people and the extensive networks of connection within and between these spaces. The subject has been singularly addressed by Ferguson and Gupta in their works "Beyond Culture Space: identity and the Politics of Difference" (1992) and in Anthropological Locations (1997). Between these works Ferguson and Gupta have acknowledged, problematised, and revitalised issues in anthropology's past practices of fieldwork as it was conducted within conceptualised bounded spaces which represented divisions of distinct social and cultural groups. Moreover, Ferguson and Gupta note that through this point of view which marks classical approaches to fieldwork in anthropology, migrants are incredibly problematic in that they are in principal grafted on to the cultural areas they migrate to, thus challenging the locality of culture. Within this challenge, migrants accost impressions of naturalised identities and concepts of social duality, raising further questions of belonging and the other, or the foreigner and the native, and issues of inclusion and exclusion.

One means of addressing these issues can be seen through the development of global economic theories, particularly those of Dependency Theory and World Systems Theory between the 1960s and 1970s (see Frank 1969 and Wallerstein 1984). In particular Wallerstein's World Systems theory further established the importance of flexible capital as a concept which helped further explain migrations between economic cores and peripheries. Here scholars further developed a greater scrutiny and appreciation of national developments and economic factors and motivations involved in migrational and transnational movements and connections well beyond the previous constraints and defined limitations of physical space and category. Furthermore, these theoretical concepts assisted in the establishment of globalisation as a subject of study with a substantial body of literature unto itself that extends well beyond the purpose here. Notably in anthropology, post-colonial and

postmodern perspectives which attempted to address these effects and the impressions of cross-cultural and global interconnectivity, gave rise to wider reaching theoretical models and examinations that have fortified our understanding of the politics of identity and belonging, and matters of community, family, gender, sexuality, and critiques of power, empowerment, and systematic and institutional oppression (see Said 1978, Ong 1987 and 1999, Appadurai 1996, Mills 1997, Freeman 2000).

In this, networks and points of connection, things, ideas, histories, and experiences are further connected to everyday lives and are further ethnographically validated within global and institutional frameworks. What's more, Gardner points out that bringing these entangled subjects and their processes to light presents a means by which we may challenge reductionist arguments of migratory causation and stock labels wherein the poor are migrants while the rich are mobile (2013: 312). As a response to these issues, Gardner goes on to note that there is a continued call among scholars for an increase in multi-sited ethnography involving shifts in theoretical approaches that are inclusive of the discourses surrounding diasporas and displacement, connections to places of the past, and a deterritorialisation of the world (Gardner 2013: 299-300, 309, see also Appadurai 1996 and Clifford 1997).

The issues contained within these debates and theories surrounding transnationalism, migration, and diaspora are to be found in the Hmong diaspora and the transition of the Hmong to life in the US. Beginning in the 1980s, these topics have been explored in an attempt to account for the forced displacement, migration, secondary migrations, resettlement, adaptations, and transnational connections in the Hmong diaspora (see Dunnigan, 1982, Hamilton-Merritt 1993, Schein 1987, Chan 1994, Fadiman 1997, Faderman and Xiong 1998, Vang 2000, Quincy 2000, Julian 2004, Ng 2008, Vang 2010, Cha 2013). As I will point out again in the summary of the literature review, the overwhelming majority of these works have focused on the larger Hmong populations found in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota and in Fresno, California, thereby leaving smaller Hmong communities largely unaccounted for. More importantly, these works tend to speak for the whole of the Hmong community and it is easy to accept the images and perspectives presented as representative of the totality of the Hmong American experience.

With that said, my purpose is not to challenge the validity or importance of these works, but rather to emphasise the point that life in one community may not be the same in the next. It is in consideration of this that this study has been limited to the Denver Hmong community. And while this thesis is not a comparative study, it provides a starting point from which future research can explore the nuances of difference between Hmong communities and further highlight points of adaptation, similarity, and areas of divergence among the Hmong in regards to the praxis and experiences of everyday life.

While the Denver community is smaller and may be considered marginal within the US sphere, it is very much a part of the vibrant threads weaving between Hmong communities and contributing to the structures and flows of the Hmong diaspora. Many of my informants maintained contact with relatives in France, Australia, and Canada on a regular basis through monthly, weekly, and in some cases daily, phone calls and emails. Many of those I had spoken with had sent remittance to family still living in Laos and some had even travelled back to Laos and Thailand on a regular basis to visit relatives and friends.

In addition to maintaining contact with family and friends, as we saw in the introductory vignette threads of contact are maintained in order to address spiritual and health matters. In this particular situation Ka Gua's mother had agreed to use the services of a shaman in Laos to find insight and answers concerning her daughter's perceived infertility and to ask for blessings for her daughter. At the same time, Ka Gua's mother in law had sought advice, guidance, and blessings concerning the health of her husband as well as answers and blessings for Paul and Ka Gua. In another case I was told about early experiences of the community where community leaders were unsure of the exact time to conduct the Hmong New Year. In order to resolve the issue they had contacted relatives still living in Laos in order to determine the seasonal conditions in the old country so that the New Year celebrations could be held at an appropriate time. In these situations lines of communication were called upon to maintain relationships as well as to address community, spiritual, and health matters.

As a further example of transnational connection, we can consider the production of story cloths and embroidered works which have been produced by

modern makers as a means to connect to a rustic Hmong past. The cloths can be small or quite large and are embroidered works that generally depict the Hmong flight from Laos or themes from folk tales. They are meant to tell a story and speak to the days before the introduction of a written Hmong language developed in the 1950s although some cloths are intertextual and display writing in romanised Hmong or English. I acquired one such cloth during fieldwork that depicts the Book of Revelations. The cloth was produced by Christian Hmong women in Laos and was then sent to the US to be sold by other Hmong Christians in the Denver community for the purpose of remittance. In this case, the theme of the cloth was selected by the Christian women imagining what Christians in the US would find appealing, and it took on a very fiery depiction of Revelations, complete with demons, cursed peoples, and heavy millenarianist leanings. The cloth also shows the struggles of the Hmong in Laos as part of revelations, as they stand in front of tanks and planes, while being led to a brighter future for those Hmong who have accepted Christ and are therefore redeemed and worthy to enter Heaven upon Christ's return to the world. And while there are clearly ties of connection regarding remittance, there are also the transnational flows of ideas and expectations through a Christian context present which influence understandings on both sides. Thus the production of the cloth and the cloth itself supplements the imagination of what it means to be Hmong and to an imagination of a Hmong past as well as to a Hmong Christian future.

In sum, the Denver Hmong community remains very much an active part of the Hmong diaspora. While a single sited ethnography presents critical issues and challenges as I discussed at the outset, the purpose here has been to acknowledge the presence of transnational connections in the Denver Hmong experience and to establish my purposes in examining Hmong life in a marginal community as I focus on the issues and mechanics of reproduction through this particular regional and analytical lens. That said, it is my intent to provide a point of reference from which future comparative works examining relationships and experiences between Hmong communities, big and small, will have a chance to develop and contribute to the critical discourse surrounding the Hmong in the US.

The Denver Community: Differences, Sociality, and Marriage

As mentioned in the preceding section, much of the research concerning the Hmong diaspora and their communities in the US has centered around larger Hmong communities such as those found in St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno, California. The population that I chose as the focus of my research live throughout the Denver metro area and tend to live within community pockets and areas that are heavily populated by Vietnamese and Laotian peoples, such as the cities of Westminster, Thornton, Northglenn, and parts of Aurora. Several of my informants revealed to me that in the past, many Hmong have identified themselves to the census bureau and those outside of the Hmong, Lao, Thai, and Vietnamese communities as being Lao, Thai, or Vietnamese. This has created discrepancies in the census records and complications for outsiders attempting to define ethnic and cultural lines of belonging.

Since an exact census of the Hmong population in Denver is not available, I was able to determine the population size and their residency through previous fieldwork experiences and through conversations with older informants who had lived in the the Denver area since the 1980s and 1990s. It was determined that the Denver Hmong community consists of approximately 4,000 people who choose to identify themselves as Hmong or Hmong-American. Within this population, roughly 2,000 to 2,500 people identify themselves as Christian practitioners and acknowledge belonging to the several Hmong congregations and church networks found throughout Denver. Of this number, nearly half follow various prominent faiths with the remaining Hmong following the Catholic faith. The exact sizes of the congregations were difficult to determine due to people wavering in their faith, practice, and church attendance. The remainder of the population primarily follows traditional spiritual and shamanic practices.

Due to its size, the Denver community has been marginalized and neglected in academic bodies of literature. The most notable work involving the community is that of Dia Cha (2003) who explored Hmong attitudes towards health and healing. And while the community shares common views, practices, and social issues and concerns with the larger Hmong communities in the US, there are variations of life that refine the nuanced character of the Denver Hmong. These differences of character speak to a unique experience while challenging idealized and homogenous

views of Hmong life, practice, and experience in the US. In effect, while the communities are intimately connected, they are not the same. The views and practices that constitute the shifting nature of Hmong life, future visions, tensions, and concerns in the larger communities that dominate the public image of the Hmong and scholarly bodies of literature, do not necessarily speak to, or account for the dynamics of life and perspectives of the Hmong in Denver. So while the Denver Hmong are reproducing what they understand constitutes being Hmong, they are in effect also continually developing and reproducing a contextually dependent form of being Hmong that is unique to the Denver community; all while deftly negotiating obstacles and cultural barriers as individuals, as families, and as a cohesive community. This was a subject brought up in numerous conversations by several of my informants, young and old.

Considering the population, location, and the nature of the community, my choice of Denver as my primary research site presented an opportunity to study a diverse and underrepresented Hmong population. The proximity of the community to the urban and cosmopolitan spaces of Denver and the rural areas in the surrounding countryside, further contributes to the dynamic nature of the community. This permitted me a chance to easily travel between sites within Denver and observe the flow of daily life through the Hmong's utilization and negotiation of two very different environmental contexts. In what follows I wish to briefly address an overview of the Hmong language, Hmong practices, and social structures that are critical to approaching a study of the Hmong, social divisions, and interactions.

The Hmong Language and Clan System

A study of the Hmong language is beyond the scope of this thesis and what follows is a brief explanation of the romanized spelling of Hmong words for the benefit of the readers and to acknowledge the complexities the Hmong language lends to the situation of the Hmong in the US. Additionally, dialectical differences of language serve as a point of social demarcation that the reader should be aware of. As Yang notes, there are two groups of Hmong, the Hmong *Leng* and Hmong *Der*, which translate as the Blue Mong and the White Mong. Other divisions of Hmong, such as the Black and Striped Hmong, are classifications derived from the color and

patterning of their clothing but are actually within the White and Blue Hmong groups (Yang 2008: 219). In the Denver community, both White and Blue Hmong are found. However, the Blue Hmong, the Hmong *Leng*, are referred to as the Green Hmong and members of this group identify themselves as being Green Hmong. The community is roughly split equally between the two groups. The White Hmong dialect is shared between both groups while the Green dialect is primarily found to be spoken only among the Green Hmong. While the structures are the same and there are numerous terms that are interchangeable between the White and Green dialects, the Green dialect often involves pronounced differences in inflection, tones, terminology, and phrasing. In the Denver community, the different spoken dialects can bring with them marks of social divisions that become particularly evident during social events and in the different churches. To add to this, many of the older Hmong are fluent in different dialects of Thai and Lao. Most incorporate Thai and Lao terms into their everyday conversations and these terms too are rooted in their own dialectical traditions. That said, the terms used throughout this thesis are presented as they were explained, spelled, and defined by native White Hmong speakers who are also familiar with Thai and Lao terminology unless otherwise noted.

The Hmong did not have a written language until it was romanized in the 1950s by French and American missionaries. The work of Doris Whitelock (1982) during the 1960s created a means for non-native speakers to learn to speak and write the Hmong language. As Hmong is a tonal language, various syllables are used to demarcate the tone to be used, versus a system such as Pinyin for Mandarin Chinese which uses accent marks to indicate the tone to be used. As an example, the general greeting of “welcome” is written as *nyob zoob*, with ‘*ob*’ and ‘*oob*’ serving as the tonal indicators. Yet when spoken, the pronunciation comes across as “*Neeyah Zhong*”.

As we will see, there is a wide range of literacy among the Hmong in Denver. The older generation, those born and raised in Laos and Thailand, are fluent in Hmong and many of the older men are able to read and write Hmong fluently. For most of the older Hmong women, obtaining an education was not emphasised or encouraged and so many are limited to speaking Hmong with varying degrees of

English speaking capabilities. What can be termed the middle generation are those where were children when they left Laos and the camps of Thailand and those who were immediately born after the Hmong's arrival in the US. Often times, members of this generation possess a great deal of knowledge regarding the Hmong language and the majority of them are able to speak Hmong fluently or at a respectable level where they are able to communicate effectively with their elders. The younger generations who have only known life in the US, with few exceptions, generally struggle with the Hmong language. The majority of younger Hmong are fully acculturated to life in the US and speak English at home with their parents. While the older generations have begun to hold Hmong language and history courses through community workshops, Hmong associations, and church groups, in an effort to encourage the younger generations to learn the language of their elders and to embrace their heritage, the effort has been received with mixed results. The inability of the younger generation to understand and communicate effectively with elders in the community and those in their own families has generated pronounced tensions across generational lines. Apart from daily interaction, the inability to communicate effectively with one another has challenged and hindered the conveyance of traditional knowledge and practices, including attitudes towards and expectations of gender, education, family, as well as spirituality and religion. These contentious views are marked by frustration across generational lives, and have resulted in different understandings of what constitutes and guides the future of being Hmong.

In addition to the groupings and dialectical differences, the Hmong organize themselves through an exogamous clan structure that is comprised of 18 clans and which emphasizes and relies on the patriarchal extended family as the focal point of Hmong relational life (Dunnigan 1982, Koltyk 1998, Tapp 2002). Clan affiliation is often designated through a person's surname. Common surnames found in Denver include Vue, Vang, Moua, Her, Xiong, Lee, Cha, Yang, Thao, and Lor. At times a general assumption can be made from the clan name as to whether or not a person is either a White or Green Hmong but some names, such as Vang, can be either, and the family's history must be known to understand their correct association. In the past, different symbols and colors used in traditional skirts, vests, and headwear provided further indicators of clan affiliation and whether a people were White,

Green, or Black. This traditional system has been largely discarded but elements of it remain in traditional garments that are usually worn at key community or family events that occur throughout the year, such as at the Hmong New Year. And as one informant explained, in Laos White and Green Hmong would have remained in their respective villages with little interaction. However in the US, the two groups have been forced to mix with one another through their experiences in the Thai refugee camps, their relocation as a cohesive ethnic group, and because of the perceived limited availability of marriage partners.

While the clan structures are an integral part of Hmong life and are readily observable in the Denver community, the clan structures extend well beyond the boundaries of Denver and can easily reach into the different Hmong communities found around the world. As noted in the previous section, many of the Hmong relocated along family lines during the second migration and so it is not uncommon to find the bulk of an extended family within one area. However, as people have married or were unable to relocate for various reasons, the clan network has adapted and expanded to maintain lines of communication and involvement over massive distances. As an example, nearly all of my informants in Denver have relatives in both Fresno, CA and in St. Paul, MN. These two cities represent the largest concentrations of Hmong in the US. However for a few of the clans, several of the critical heads of family and elders reside in Denver and so decisions made in Denver can affect the lives of those living in other cities. During my fieldwork I also observed the reverse being true where decisions were made in St. Paul that had direct and immediate ramifications on families in Denver.

The clan system provides the Hmong with a system of social order. Within the clans extended families maintain a network whereby social, familial, economic, and religious arrangements and disputes may be addressed internally and away from the wider community as a whole. As we will see in Chapter 2, a form of mediation and family court termed *hais plaub*, or “speaking about problems”, is in place to address the internal and external concerns of families and clans. By policing themselves and attending to their own matters, the Hmong communities are at once situated in different cosmopolitan US environments while retaining a hermetic social quality. This hermetic quality is further developed through the older generation’s use of

language, multi-generational reliance on the clan and social systems in place, and through approaches to marriage practices and the making of family.

Issues of Politics, Community, and Health

As mentioned above, the Hmong often marshal their own community and family interests. This can be seen specifically through *hais plaub*. As a practice, *hais plaub* has meaningful impact and far reaching effects in the community and the maintenance of family and community. While the Hmong social systems that are in place have been drawn from past social strategies and social organisation which addresses concerns within the community and how the community is perceived by others, the Hmong are also concerned with international issues, as well as the state of national politics and government in the US. Since the Hmong population of Denver is small, as a distinct ethnic community they do not constitute a significant voting block on the state or national level. However, recently one individual has chosen to run for local offices as city treasurer and has campaigned to gain Hmong votes from those living in the small city in north Denver. In contrast, the larger community of Hmong in Minnesota are substantially more involved with local and state politics and a few individuals in Minnesota and Wisconsin who have sought public positions at a federal level.

The majority of those in Denver tended to discuss politics in terms that were in line with that of the Democratic Party. In particular, Hmong men and women were all concerned with the state of the national economy, equal opportunity employment, education and health care. Regarding the younger generation of Hmong eligible to vote, for those interested in politics, sentiments tend to follow those of their parents and lean towards the liberal ideals of the national Democratic Party. From their initial experiences in transitioning to life in the US, much of the older generation is familiar with drawing on government supported assistance and so they often favour government sponsored social programs which are reflected in their voting choices. However, there is also a degree of scepticism and distrust, most notably in the older generations, of big government and at times there are feelings of resentment towards the US government for many of the hardships they faced in their transition to life in the US. This becomes particularly evident when discussing Hmong experiences in

the Thai refugee camps and the slow process of US immigration which led to feelings of abandonment, particularly through their first few years of learning to live in the US while facing the confines and stresses of their initial resettlement in an alien social, political, and economic environment.

Overall, through their experiences there is a love for life in the US and the opportunities they envision in the US, and a deeply seated respect for what they see as democratic values and ideals. Even so, the older generation are also inclined to express their concerns of a governmental leviathan which they perceive as being able to pry into their community and their lives. In addition to these views, the older generation of Hmong are generally in support of a strong US military where the younger generation often favoured a reduction in military spending and military involvement. Much of this support for the military by older Hmong stems from their own experiences with the US military in Laos during the Vietnam War and how they interpreted the motivations of the US government to bring democracy and what they saw as liberation to the region. Even so, there were many discussions over the course of my fieldwork that criticised the deployment of US troops and how the US government has handled the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. To add to this, many of the older members of the community would often rebuke the Democratic line of acceptance and equality when discussing foreigners they perceived to be enemies of the US, particularly African and Arabic groups targeted by current Republican party rhetoric. Within the older generation there is a history of this critical view extending to other Asian refugee populations, most notably towards Vietnamese and Chinese refugees. When asked to explain their points of view, I was told that not all of the Vietnamese that had come after the war had been on the side of the US and that they could not be trusted. After speaking with older Hmong men further I learned that there had been strained relationships with Vietnamese communities before the war and that the Hmong received prejudicial treatment in their dealings with these communities.

In regards to Chinese refugees, the majority of those I spoke with who had been born in Laos or Thailand, or who were born in the US immediately after their parents arrived, held deep seated mistrust and dislike for the Chinese community. When I asked Paul about this, he told me that the history of the Hmong revealed the

mistreatment of the Hmong at the hands of the Chinese reaching back to antiquity. Additionally, the Chinese immigrants he knew had continued to refer to the Hmong as Miao, a pejorative term which continues to irritate many Hmong. Finally, Chinese immigrants arriving in the US since the 1990s are thought to be taking advantage and abusing the US social systems that are in place and that many Chinese immigrants have attempted to short cut the immigration process to citizenship by marrying US nationals. While these were specific, personal views offered by Paul, there does exist a degree of anger towards Chinese immigrants and other Asian refugee groups that arrived in the US after the 1980s in that these groups did not experience the violent upheaval and life threatening experiences such as that of the Hmong, many Lao, some Vietnamese, and Cambodians fleeing the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. Rather it is thought that these other groups arrived under much easier and less stressful conditions and it is believed that they have had a much easier time adapting to life in the US. In stark contrast to the contradictory attitudes of the older generation, younger Hmong, particularly those old enough to attend university, have little to no opinion of other Asian refugee groups. It was common for them to only express concern and anxiousness at the prospect of having to explain to the older members of their family and their community their choice to involve themselves with, date, or marry someone from these other groups.

As a result of these complex relationships, views, and opinions, there are clear political and social contradictions and misconceptions. And while there are indeed critical views of others using social programs, this does not preclude current use or misuse of these programs by the Hmong. Regarding state assistance, nearly all of the elder Hmong I spoke with could remember receiving food stamps and state sponsored welfare and many of those who have retired continue to receive Social Security. At the time of this writing, I knew of only a handful of families still relying on welfare programs as a primary means of sustenance. With that said, Medicare and Medicaid are also forms of state assistance that are still widely in use and thus the politics and experiences of social medicine are of importance.

While the state sponsored health programs Medicare and Medicaid are largely open to the older population of Hmong, the younger generation have had to serve as interpreters for their elders during clinical visits and often explain diagnoses and

treatment regimens. In doing so, the younger generation have been drawn into the system and have developed their own critical opinions concerning the Medicare program. Many of the younger Hmong acknowledged that some private clinics and a very few number of public clinics, particularly those in Boulder, Colorado, were sympathetic to their views, however a lot of their frustration with the state program and clinics stemmed from the feeling that the larger public health system was designed to cut corners wherever possible and deliver the bare minimum of service. Additionally, in regards to any effort by the larger clinical system to demonstrate multi-cultural awareness, they felt that the clinic only seemed interested in marginally appealing to larger ethnic groups, such as African American or Hispanic groups. By doing this, they perceived the health program and the clinic itself as an uncaring place that had little thought for how they engaged with Asian minority groups and as a result there exists a pronounced lack of political dialogue between these groups, healthcare programs, and the clinic.

While this provides us with a very basic understanding of Hmong perceptions of the socially sponsored clinic, the clinic's view of the Hmong is an entirely different matter. While I acknowledge that the medical offices in Boulder were sympathetic to the Hmong and aware of the community to some degree, these offices were all private general practice facilities and not concerned with the specifics of reproductive health and family planning. In recognition of this, I specifically limited my interaction with the clinic to those that specialised in reproductive health issues. As there are few clinics such as these that individuals in the Hmong community use, when addressing the clinic I chose to speak with those that specifically concern themselves with reproductive health and fertility, which included a private fertility clinic that specifically caters to the Denver Asian community, Planned Parenthood, and a family planning office.

During my visits to the clinics I was able to observe many of the concerns that my informants had expressed about state run facilities, which further reinforced their position on healthcare. In general, I found that these clinics were largely unaware of the Hmong community in Denver and that they had not sought to address any cultural matters specifically for the Hmong. While they could contact translators for Hmong patients if needed, there were no dedicated Hmong translators, literature, or

programs in place. When pressed for further answers concerning cultural awareness or experiences with the Hmong, I found that the clinics were either reluctant to discuss the matter further or could offer nothing further than what they had already told me. As a result, I left the clinics feeling that the prevailing attitude was that cultural awareness and accommodation was more or less an annoyance or inconvenience to the operation of the clinic and that language, cultural views, and practices were obstacles keeping people from fully understanding or embracing the Western form of healthcare the clinic offered. When discussing the matter, many of those who were old enough to have families of their own felt that their fluency in English and their experiences in the US educational system helped them better navigate the intricacies of the health care systems and processes of the clinic. However, through specific personal instances at different points in their lives, and in their experiences helping older Hmong, many of those I spoke with acknowledged that in addition to matters of reproductive health and fertility, common clinical interactions within the larger, extended healthcare system, still present significant problems and points of frustration and misunderstanding for older Hmong and those who struggle with language.

While the Hmong in Denver are largely aware of these issues, they have been reluctant to openly engage in a political dialogue with the clinic and have generally accepted the perceived naivety of the clinic as an inconvenience and a matter of course. The subject nonetheless affected and informed their understanding of the rhetoric concerning public healthcare put forth by the US political establishment and political candidates. This awareness over social health programs was particularly apparent when discussing The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) signed into law in 2010. Overall the program was well received by those I spoke with and it was seen as an effort by the Democratic political establishment to ensure equal access to health care in the US. Given that a large portion of the community work for hourly wages, many overwhelmingly supported a law that required employers to offer benefits to their employees. In the past, hourly labour had meant that the workers had to largely rely on obtaining insurance through external insurance companies and brokers, or on other family members who had access to corporate supported healthcare. For those I spoke with, the passing of the PPACA

was seen as a new way to securely acquire and provide healthcare for themselves and for their families, ultimately giving them a sense of empowerment as they felt they had a much wider range of options and a greater degree of control over their healthcare choices.

To add to this point in relation to healthcare, there is concern over the condition of the wider US economy and the perceived security of employment. As pointed out in the economic overview of the community that follows, there is a significant range of employment in various fields across multiple generations. Because of this, the Denver Hmong can be vulnerable to economic shifts that affect different employment sectors. While the PPACA was a very welcomed form of legislation, there was concern over the effects the bill would have on different industries as they worked to restructure their financial obligations to their employee's healthcare in order to meet the demands of the new law. This was of particular concern for many of the older Hmong who were employed as hourly workers in the manufacturing and technology sectors that rely on government subsidies and contracts. In contrast, many of the younger generation felt more secure in their jobs as salaried employees in private corporations where healthcare benefits were available before the passing of the PPACA. Finally, the overall US economy was of concern for some of the adults who owned homes or who were considering purchasing homes, and those involved in financial industries, as it related to banking and loans.

In sum, while they do not constitute a significant body of voters or become particularly involved with political processes, overall the Denver Hmong are generally aware of political issues they feel affect them and the country as a whole. Drawing from their experiences with social programs, their values are largely in line with those of the liberal perspectives of the Democratic Party. And while they support an agenda of equal access to employment, education, and healthcare, there are at times contradictory attitudes towards these issues and those such as militarism and the plights of other ethnic refugee groups. As a means to further refine an image of the Denver Hmong community and to supplement an understanding of their perspectives, such as the ones outlined above, the following section addresses the visibility of the Hmong community in Denver and matters of employment, housing,

and the changing nature of affluence.

Community Presence, Economics, and Housing

At first glance the Hmong community in Denver is nearly invisible. Speaking with non-Asian residents in the area, they were often surprised to learn that there was a Hmong community in Denver and there were some who were not familiar with the Hmong at all. They were often mistaken for being Vietnamese and occasionally Lao or Chinese. When I asked my informant Kaub about the community's presence, he remarked that the transition had been very difficult and that they had faced many social challenges. In particular he remembered living in Texas in the early 1980s and receiving phone calls late in the night. The callers would shout profane, derogatory terms and threaten his life and those of his wife and children. He recalled that he had tried to report them to the police but they did nothing and that this experience was not unique to himself. Others had similar experiences of harassment and in some cases physical violence, such as a home invasion that occurred in the 1980s which had hospitalised and nearly killed a couple living in California.

Along with the threats, Kaub also remembered the living conditions in Texas and how the property owner had little regard for the community and often ignored requests to repair critical things, such as the plumbing, unless ordered to do so through legal channels. To this point he remarked that he had felt that there was a broad resentment towards refugees in the US because of the Vietnam War and that all Indochinese refugees were forced to confront misunderstanding and bigotry on a regular basis from the general populace as well as from institutions such as law enforcement. Kaub went on to explain to me that the Hmong experience of persecution in Laos, their treatment in Thailand, and experiences of racism in the US contributed greatly to limiting the community's visibility in the general public sphere.

By the 1990s gang violence had become a problem and had attracted the attention of local governments, but beyond this, the community as a whole had attempted to maintain a low profile. Some of those I interviewed had been involved with gangs in the 1990s and early 2000s in Denver. However, today there is very little overt Hmong gang activity and over the course of my fieldwork I did not

witness any gang or organised violence by or against the Hmong community.

Even with these issues defining part of their early American experiences, the Hmong community in Denver has continued to limit its exposure to other Asian and non-Asian communities. However, the community has also found itself engaged in numerous economic activities in and out of the Hmong community. These endeavours include Hmong owned businesses and cottage industries. As noted previously, initially many of the families arrived in the US through sponsorship from a church or religious organisation. In many cases, as part of this sponsorship, Hmong refugees were provided with basic English language lessons and help finding employment. This often included manual labour, such as construction, landscaping, and gardening, welding, auto mechanics, and skilled manufacturing labour for soldering and assembly work in technical industries. Many of those in the community aged forty and over are still employed in blue collar labour and assembly.

There have been efforts to open shops that cater to the Hmong community in North Denver. The largest of the shops, a Hmong grocery store, closed in the early 2000s. Currently there is a very small Hmong market that is part of a larger Lao owned market and an older, simple grocery corner store situated in an area of Westminster where much of the Hmong community had lived in the 1980s. The older corner shop shares space with a Hmong movie vendor and the grocery store is often stocked with a small selection of fresh vegetables, cooking utensils, rice cookers and bamboo steamers, as well as some medicinal herbs, roots, and tonics. As well as daily goods, the grocery store occasionally sells spiritual paraphernalia such as the bright coloured sheets of spirit money or split horns used in shamanic divination.

In addition to these types of shops, some in the Hmong community have also begun to reach into service industries. In 2013 a Hmong family opened a tailoring shop in a local mall and has enjoyed significant success. Several others have opened up restaurants in North Denver that tend to serve the Indochinese communities in the area by focusing on Vietnamese, Thai, and Lao dishes. In general, these types of service enterprises are family owned and run with labour being drawn from immediate and extended family networks.

As these types of service enterprises are open to anyone who walks through their doors, those who engage in cottage industry production tend to offer their wares only to the Hmong community. Their efforts are often specialised and include the production of hand woven stools and small tables made from thin plastic strips that replace the need for rattan, sewing and embroidery work including traditionally styled clothes and story cloths that display typical Hmong geometric patterns and themes. Cottage industries also produce gardening tools that were commonly found in Laos and are often made by those who are experienced and retired metal workers and welders.

With that said, since the 1990s the older generations have emphasised education as a way forward for the younger generation so that they move beyond the confines of the blue collar economic sector and reliance on cottage industries. This emphasis on higher education has largely been directed towards young men. As we will see in Chapter 2, there has been a shift in attitudes towards the education of young Hmong women but it remains substantially behind that of young men. As a result of this shift in attitudes towards education, several of my informants, men and women, between the ages of 24 and 35 were employed in medical fields, computer programming and related fields, technical service positions, corporate and small business marketing and consulting, banking and financial services, and legal services. The majority of the adults who I had contact with and who had completed high school or a four year degree earned between \$18,000 USD and \$50,000 USD as their annual income, with four households that I knew of being exceptions with each household earning a combined income of greater than \$100,000 USD. In regards to the higher income households, these households tended to represent multiple generations of workers through immediate and extended family members, thereby increasing the number of eligible workers. In many cases, the incomes of younger adults were similar to their parents, however their parents had achieved these salaries and wages after working twenty-five or more years and achieving different promotions and raises throughout their careers while their children were earning these salaries and wages at either entry level, early career, or mid-level positions.

Within this adoption of what the Hmong saw an American way to success, they also altered their concept of what constitutes success. The older generation often

spoke to me of commerce in Laos as a means to avoid poverty and better the family but the notion of social mobility was something absent in their recollections. They imparted an image of gaining monetary success in order to increase access to food, land, and other commodities but seemed resigned to their social status. However, in contrast they felt that in the US money not only offered a means of sustenance and maintenance but also an opportunity to increase their social affluence in and out of the Hmong community. As a result families have seized upon this idea of social mobility and increased affluence as an additional component to success with an expectation that younger generations will use their increased affluence and financial resources to care for themselves and their families while also caring for the older generation as younger generations had done in the past. Even with these shifts in expectations and opportunities, not all young Hmong have chosen to pursue higher education or white collar jobs. Some of those I spoke with had followed their parent's example and had developed their careers as their parents had done. Nearly every young adult who works in a white collar industry knows or is related to someone who is employed as blue collar workers in the trades or in skilled assembly work, or as labourers.

As mentioned, many of the families that came to Denver had found themselves living together in cramped housing, particularly in the Ruby Hill area. In Laos, the Hmong had often housed several generations of immediate and extended family in one household. If not in one house, then immediate and extended family members were to be found within a village. In current terms, the Hmong of Denver still tend to live in multigenerational houses but there are also those who have chosen to live in homes that contain only immediate family, mirroring an image of the American nuclear family.

Having left the Ruby Hill area in the 1990s, the Hmong community are now largely found in the suburbs of Northern Denver. This transition from the immediate areas of Denver to the Denver suburbs can be tied to the shifting notion of success noted above. As part of this shift, housing and other material goods have retained their importance as essential elements for the function and maintenance of individual and family lifestyles, but they have also taken on an increased importance in regards to the social display of wealth and status. When asked about this display, it was

explained that it was about obtaining what they felt the dream had been when they came to the US, that they would be able to provide for their families and lead what they felt was a comfortable life. As part of this, people would often talk about the homes of others and how the conditions of the homes reflected the well being of the family in regards to how they cared about things and taking care of themselves. At times the critiques could be quite scathing and that homes that were perceived to be in disrepair reflected families who did not care for their families or their elders, or that they simply had not made the effort to adapt to life in the US. In this there exists a desire to present what they felt was a proper way of living in the eyes of the community, but the homes also offered a means to show their integration into US life. As one younger informant remarked to me, the houses were a means to impress non-Hmong friends and colleagues and to show that they had truly become American and that they were accomplished.

Most of the recent and newer home purchases by Hmong families in Denver tend to exceed three hundred thousand dollars and are usually paid for from a pooling of multi-generational family financial resources. In one instance, a mother and father had put up over \$60,000 USD that they had saved since coming to the US in the 1970s as a down payment on a home with the understanding that their eldest son would live with them and pay the bulk of the mortgage payment. After the purchase the son married and he, his wife, and his parents all contributed to paying the mortgage in an effort to pay the loan off as quickly as possible. For many of my informants living in extended family households, this was a generally accepted practice. Notably, this pooling of financial resources extends to other significant financial investments for things such as cars, weddings, or for higher education.

In addition to moving to the suburbs and purchasing houses, some families have purchased farms in the countryside. The few farms are mostly found between thirty and fifty miles from Denver in northern areas such as Firestone and around the Longmont area. The farms provide a huge degree of privacy for family functions while also displaying to the community through land ownership a family's affluence and success. As we will see in Chapter 4, farms provide a space in which large numbers of people can be accommodated and certain tasks not commonly seen outside of the community, such as the butchering of animals or loud spiritual

practices, can take place in relative seclusion. Additionally, for many Hmong farms represent a connection to remembrances of life in Laos and for some a connection to an imagined and romanticised image of a Hmong rustic past.

In general, the farms in Denver do not serve as a primary source of financial income for the families that own them. In the case of the farm seen in Chapter 4, the owner's primary means of income was from computer programming and accounting. The farm was largely symbolic in nature and had been bought for many of the reasons mentioned above. Even so, the farm did manage to produce a small yield of asparagus every year and the family maintained a very small herd of cows which the younger generation saw as a huge annoyance as they often broke fences and wandered into neighbouring pastures. As a result, in addition to their daily work schedules in offices and attending school, the younger generation were often responsible for the maintenance of the farm. With this additional time investment, they felt that they saw little in the way of financial gain for themselves or the family. When talking about their farm, the younger family members would often compare it to other farms in Minnesota or California. These other farms had primarily focused on growing berries or fruit orchards and had been subsidised by the US government. However, they also noted that these farms were also not the means of primary income for the families but that unlike their farm, these others still yielded some financial assistance for the families. As in their case, they noted that these other farms offered a space for community and family to come together.

Furthermore, houses, and by extension farms, play an important role in maintaining connections between families within the community and to those in other communities. As we will see in the following section addressing Hmong marriage and inheritance, patrilocal marriage practices not only joins two people together, but two families also become entwined. Here, multi-generational dwellings operate as an additional symbolic and economic means to tie family, extended family, and local and distant communities together. Additionally, something such as a house or land can be calculated into inheritance.

In this overview of economic life and housing I have sought to point out that there has been a shift in economic endeavours and that within this, ideas of what constitutes success has changed and that it varies across generations. In addition to

this, the bulk of the Hmong in Denver have continued to rely on multi-generational housing as a socio-economic strategy that further supports the construction and maintenance of community and family as was done in the past. These topics will be explored further as a key topic in Chapters 1 and 2, and in doing so we will be able to better understand the contested and flexible approaches to matters family, community, and being Hmong.

Hmong Marriage and Inheritance

In the past, the Hmong practiced patrilocal polygamy and it was not uncommon to hear about a Grandfather in the Denver community who had two to three wives while living in Laos. Traditionally in Laos, each family could have nine or more children, although family size has greatly diminished in the US. While there are some men who still have several wives, they are of the oldest generation and the practice has been replaced with monogamous marriages. There continues to be a strong aversion to any perceived form of incest. In this case, the definition of incest extends beyond inappropriate relationships between close relatives and includes any two involved people sharing the same last name. Those who share the same last name but are not biologically related were often referred to by my informants as being a, “riverside relation”, or simply as, “riverside”. This meant that they recognized the clan identity of the person but that the person held no familial relation and simply lived in the territory of the clan, or further down the river. In terms of traditional views on marriage, this is generally deemed to be unacceptable and immoral. Many couples who choose to maintain this type of marriage become estranged or ostracized from their families and the community.

When addressing the matter with an informant from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), they explained that they were petitioning the Hmong council in St. Paul to address the matter and to take a more accepting attitude towards the practice. Their reasoning was that their children had grown up together and were suited to marry one another as the families were well known and agreeable to one another. Given that there were limited options for their children to find other Hmong partners, to hold on to the traditional taboo of marriage was to restrict the expansion of their families and their community. When asking other Hmong how

they felt about the matter, the common reply reverted back to the traditional perspective of incest and that the matter should not be up for debate.

Most of those I spoke with who were born in the US married in their early twenties. It was common in Laos for young girls to marry around the age of fourteen or fifteen. This practice has diminished as families have placed greater emphasis on young women pursuing their educations. However the practice still occurs to some degree (Ngo 2002). Many of the mothers and grandmothers I interviewed had early marriages and several of them had been kidnapped brides. With kidnapped brides, often a girl's object, a necklace or piece of clothing, was taken by a suitor, with or without the girl's knowledge, and then presented to the girl's family by the suitor and his family. This was in effect saying that they had their daughter and that he intended to marry her with the support and acceptance of his family. Negotiations would then be arranged and the marriage process would begin. In some extreme cases, the suitor would physically kidnap the girl and then notify her family that she was being for marriage. Within their stories, the sudden taking of a bride, physically or materially, often elicited a heated exchange between the men of both families. In the US the practice is rarely seen but does occur. When it does occur, it is usually a symbolic gesture and the match has prior approval from both families.

The exogamous clan structure produces Hmong marriages that are the union of not only a husband and wife, but a union of two families as well. As Thao notes, Hmong men are born into a clan and retain membership in the clan throughout their life. However women become a member of their husband's clan after they marry. While they are treated as a new daughter, they lose all of the familial rights they held within the clan of their birth (2008:36). As marriages involve the exchange of a daughter to her new husband's family and her dowry, the husband's family exchanges material wealth in the form of bride price. As part of the dowry, the bride is traditionally presented with traditional garments and jewelry given by her mother, and can include household goods such as everyday clothes, blankets, and cooking instruments. In a traditional sense, these are items with which the young couple can create a household of their own. During the finalization of the wedding ceremony, the items received by the groom and his family and those for the bride are read aloud to everyone in attendance. This is to acknowledge the generosity of those who

contributed and to make everyone aware exactly what materials are changing hands. The itemized lists can constitute several pages and the reading of the list and acknowledgement of contributions can be short or last for over an hour. These mutual investments of time, effort, and material serve to tie the families together and as a result of this, divorces can become complicated affairs as individuals and their respective families seek to divest themselves from the other. That said, there are few divorces among those who follow these traditional guidelines and matters are discussed and negotiated thoroughly prior to marriage by the families to help avert the possibility of divorce.

As much as Hmong marriages are concerned with social unions, the distribution and accumulation of wealth by families and individuals are also of interest to matters of inheritance. As a subject, matters of inheritance are well represented in anthropological literature and have been addressed by several scholars exploring kinship studies and the dynamics of inheritance, dowry, family, relatedness, wealth retention, legacy and continuity (see Craig 1979, Schweitzer 2000, Basu 2005, Hann 2008, Williams and Smith 2010, and Zhang and Zhao 2014). As the Hmong clan and family system is patriarchal, inherited assets are passed down through the oldest male in the immediate family and so the material wealth brought by a bride to the marriage becomes locked to her new family and serves to strengthen their holdings. In the past it was uncommon for women to inherit the wealth of their family. In the US, many of the families have continued to follow the traditional practices of passing wealth and assets to the eldest son but there have been some women who have been entrusted with the wealth of their family's inheritance. When discussing these situations, I was told that it was becoming more common to follow an American style of inheritance distribution where all of the children would receive something from their parent's estate.

Matters concerning the marriage, wedding, dowry, and bride price are discussed through family negotiations overseen by a neutral moderator both sides have agreed upon. While the men of the family are the ones to negotiate and finalize matters, the bride's mother plays a critical role in determining the bride price. The bride price paid by the husband's family serves as an insurance policy for the bride should the marriage dissolve. It also shows the commitment of the husband's family

to the marriage and their willingness to accept and care for the bride. Often the bride price reflects the status of the family and their daughter, with some bride prices reaching \$10,000 USD or more. However, in some cases I observed, when the bride's mother was unsure of the match or she simply did not like the match, she would often increase the demanded bride price in order to test the husband's resolve and to express her own dissatisfaction with the match.

Several individual and family stories told to me about the flight from Laos and immigration to the US revealed that much of the traditional gold and silver jewelry and ingots that had made the journey with them from their flight from Laos, had been confiscated in the camps or by officials in the US. When Grandma Va had discussed her garden and shown me some of her traditional jewelry pieces, she explained that much of what she had was sewn into her clothes when she immigrated. She was particularly happy that some of her medicinal plants had made the journey as seeds that had been delicately sewn into the hem of her traditional skirts. As a result of losing these items, traditional wedding dowries and objects of inheritance, such as the jewelry, elaborate neck rings and intricate head wear, were gone and have been replaced with cash, land, and new jewelry that the Hmong acquired through established networks of family and pooled resources. Additionally, while there is very little older material culture left from the old country, new found wealth in the US has permitted some people to travel back to Laos and Thailand and bring with them new versions of what was lost. In one case, a woman went to visit relatives living in Thailand. While she was there she purchased new skirts and necklaces for her daughters from local Hmong craftsmen. She also purchased additional pieces that she then sold to others in the community, some of which was included in wedding dowries, when she returned to the US.

Through the preceding sections I have addressed the history of the Hmong, their diaspora, and the establishment of Hmong communities in the US, while highlighting their struggles, triumphs, and determination to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity and a Hmong continuity through their new lives. Additionally, these sections serve to provide a base understanding of Hmong sociality and structure while also acknowledging elements of difference that emerge through the reproduction and maintenance of traditional clan and family structures, the dynamic

nature of the language, and traditional perspectives of marriage and associated practices. These are important factors which have guided the development of this thesis and which lend a profound depth of complexity to the cultural situations and theoretical issues that will be explored. In the following section I will address the significant bodies of literature that surround, inform, contest, and broaden concepts of reproduction and which will further support and illuminate the marked entanglement of Hmong life in the chapters to come.

Literature Review

The scholarly works surrounding the Hmong within my introductory overview have primarily focused on the history concerning the Hmong, their diaspora, and the struggle to establish Hmong communities in North America. While these works are incredibly important when accounting for the experiences of the Hmong diaspora and the transitions of the Hmong to life in the US, matters regarding a wider Hmong reproduction, and the contributory social, spiritual and symbolic, and biological elements contained within, speak to academic works situated within three separate and distinct, relevant subjects of interest.

I will begin by addressing medical anthropological approaches concerning the Hmong followed by medical anthropological perspectives of reproduction. To do this I will provide an overview of key scholarly works involving the Hmong and their experiences with the clinic. These works highlight the medical pluralistic views of the Hmong, which serve to further frame Western clinical perceptions of Hmong attitudes towards medicine and medical practices. From this foundational point, I will then provide an overview of anthropological approaches to reproduction and the clinic in order to examine central debates surrounding reproduction and the broadening of what constitutes reproduction. Here I will be considering feminist perspectives of the clinic and reproductive technologies as they relate to matters beyond essentialist biological arguments. These matters are followed by an overview of the intersection of health and religion as a means to provide an additional anthropological perspective relevant to Hmong understandings of health and healing.

In addition to medical anthropological literature, this literature review will also

consider the importance of the anthropology of religion and Hmong approaches to traditional spirituality. This portion includes an overview of foundational texts and works directed towards current development of the anthropology of ethics and morality and the anthropology of Christianity, as well as identifying works involving animism and ontological perspectives.

Finally I will be addressing contemporary literature on the Hmong that addresses current social issues and generational changes regarding family and gender. Here, an overview of current literature on kinship and relatedness provides a base from which to address the changing structures and attitudes of Hmong family life and changes which inform generational perspectives of life in the US. This is further supplemented by a review of key texts that have informed my approach to gender. These bodies of literature provide fertile grounds for analysis and insight into the experiences of the Hmong. And while each of the subjects and their accompanying theoretical views can stand alone, taken together they permit the intertwined and entangled synthesis of factors that constitute Hmong reproduction to emerge.

The Hmong, Anthropology, Medicine, and Feminist Perspectives of Reproduction

Anne Fadiman's work, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997), continues to stand as a foundational and critical work focused on the difficulties and tragedies of Hmong life in the US as a Hmong family struggles to understand and treat their daughter's epilepsy. Her work has brought to light the issues associated with illness, disease, treatment and different forms of knowledge surrounding medicine while also noting the convoluted and nuanced contours of family and the subsequent interconnections of community, religion, and medicine. Moreover, Fadiman's work marks a turning point for scholarly interest in Hmong affairs throughout the 1990s and it has continued to inform many contemporary views of Hmong medical approaches, experiences, and the cultural competence of medical institutions (Taylor 2001). This has furthered medical pluralist perspectives and arguments of medical pragmatism involving the Hmong and their conflicts with Western bio-medicine.

Works, such as that of O'Connor's Healing traditions: Alternative medicine and the health professions (1995), have focused on the difficulties of the treatment process. In this case, O'Connor discusses the difficulties between the process by which Western doctors have diagnosed a liver disorder and the way that the Hmong family makes decisions for treatment. While the doctors viewed the decision to proceed with treatment to rest with the patient, the patient deferred to a family council and consultation with a shaman. This difference in diagnosis and process resulted in a significant delay in treatment which further complicated medical matters. Additional struggles and difficulties within the edited volume, Healing by Heart (Culhane-Pera ed. 2003), reinforce an image of pluralism, misunderstanding, and the conflicting natures of traditional Hmong medicine and Western bio-medicine through numerous medical cases collected throughout the 1990s. While these cases raise critical issues that effect lives, they do so in a manner which reflects Edward Said's (1978) critique of Western Institutional portrayal of a disconnected 'other'. In this sense, being cast as a medical 'other' has positioned the Hmong as a marginal cultural and ethnic group that appears to be forever stuck in an historical ethnographic tense further marked by a perceived unwillingness to adapt, accept, and overcome the challenges and barriers of transition and acculturation; thereby fitting them neatly into past and contemporary essentialist and pluralist arguments that further perpetuate the image of the disparate and tragic refugee struggling in the American landscape.

In pursuit of a cultural exegesis of Hmong attitudes towards Western bio-medicine, Lisa Capps work, "Change and Continuity in the Medical Culture of the Hmong in Kansas City" (1994), presents another pluralistic argument. However Capps begins by examining Hmong attitudes towards bio-medicine, and the sources of those attitudes, as opposed to curtailing and silencing the breadth of Hmong medical experience from the vantage point of the clinic. The community Capps worked with in Kansas City was largely Protestant. That being the case, engagement with traditional health practices and with the shamans was relegated to the prescription of herbal remedies. Since many found the traditional approaches to not meet their expectations, they turned to Western medicine. The shamans and their knowledge came to be seen as a vestige of traditional ways of healing (1994: 166-

167). A similar means of inquiry can be found in an earlier work by Hufford (1982) and work by Adler (1995), both being concerned with Hmong understandings of Sudden Nocturnal Death Syndrome which was occurring in Hmong adult males, primarily during the turbulent resettlement of the Hmong in the 1980s. While Western medicine was unable to find a direct cause for the occurrence, it was speculated that the extreme amounts of stress from the difficulties of transition were the root cause of people dying in their sleep. Viewing the matter from the perspective of the Hmong, Hufford and Adler explain that the Hmong saw this event occurring because of angered spirits or demons, the *daub tsaug*, who were unhappy because the Hmong had left Laos and Thailand. The spirit then attacked and strangled them while they slept in retaliation. Following the spirit of the approaches put forth by Hufford, Capps, and Adler, Cha (2003) has explored the historical, social, and spiritual foundations of traditional Hmong medicine and how these factors inform and direct Hmong attitudes towards health and healing. Cha's examination also accounts for a differentiation of healers and specialization and how categories of illness and disease are understood and diagnosed within a wider social and cultural context.

Three works stand out as dealing with Hmong reproductive practices. Symonds (2004) work has approached the subject of soul calling, or *hu plig*, for newborn children in a Hmong village in Northern Thailand and explores the principles and logic behind the practice. Her approach permits a detailed view of the complexities of Hmong ontological perspectives and spiritual practices and Hmong understandings of birth, gender, and the Hmong life cycle. The second work pertaining to reproduction is that of Liamputtong (2009). Liamputtong examines the postpartum practices of the Hmong in Thailand and provides a detailed overview of postpartum care, diet, restrictions, and taboos. Within the article, Hmong attitudes towards postpartum also illuminates attitudes and perspectives of Hmong women, spiritual matters, the animated Hmong world, and ideas of health and what is needed to ensure a proper recovery. Morrow's 1986 article, "Transcultural Midwifery: Adapting to Hmong Birthing Customs in California", considers the importance of traditional Hmong views of birth for nurses and midwives dealing with the Hmong community (see also Jambunathan and Stewart 1995).

While these works speak to matters of reproduction and account for different social elements surrounding reproduction, they do so from very different vantage points; Symonds from the point of birth, becoming, and the Hmong life cycle, and Liamputtong being specifically concerned with matters of postpartum care. The scope of both works seek to account for Hmong attitudes and practices through a social lens that is beyond the gaze of the clinic. From Morrow's view, her exploration of Hmong reproductive attitudes attempts to provide a means of assistance for clinical workers yet deeply considers the importance of spiritual and social matters of the Hmong.

Between Hufford, Adler, Symonds, Morrow and Liamputtong, the shifts of perspective away from the clinic and the attention given to wider social factors that can enhance the clinical experience fall in line with the work of numerous feminist scholars and medical anthropologists. The literature surrounding reproduction calls for a much wider net to be cast over the subject of reproduction and account for associated and contributing factors of reproduction that are beyond the body and biological processes. This further accounts for social factors, such as family and the meanings of relatedness, as well as political and economic factors, all while exploring the relationships and scrutiny that continues to exist between women, women's health, reproduction, reproductive technologies, and the clinic (Franklin and Ragon 1998, see also Strathern's edited volume 1992, Carsten 2000, and Inhorn 2006). With this in mind, the literature which informs critical debates in medical anthropology surrounding matters of reproduction can now be addressed.

Since the 1970s, numerous anthropologist and feminist scholars and social scientists have explored the clinic and have sought to contest essentialist pluralist views, while understanding the connections and discourse of power and knowledge, ethics, bio-politics, the body, and the far reaching social, economic, spiritual, and political strands of attachment that relate, affect, and contribute to matters of reproduction (Strathern 1992, Franklin and Ragone 1998, Reiter 1999, Rapp 2001, Taylor 2001, see also Morgan 1992 and Hart 2006). In Rapp's article, "Gender, Body, Biomedicine: How Some Feminist Concerns Dragged Reproduction to the Center of Social Theory" (2001), she notes that these collective efforts have risen to challenge the clinical ideas of "reductive foundationalism" surrounding reproduction

and the stratification of normality and abnormality, as well as elements of inclusion and exclusion, related to motherhood. In so doing, scholars have sought to bring to light the, “formerly ‘invisible centrality’ of reproduction to social life” (2001: 469).

Emily Martin’s foundational text, The Woman In the Body, provides an excellent starting point from which to examine the development of feminist and anthropological critiques of medicine, the clinic, reproduction, and the body. She states that, “many elements of modern medical science have been held to contribute to a fragmentation of the unity of the person. When science treats the person as a machine and assumes the body can be fixed by mechanical manipulations, it ignores, and it encourages us to ignore, the other aspects of our selves, such as our emotions or our relations with other people” (1987: 19). Martin further adds that there is a fragmentation and alienation of the female body in the eyes of the clinic that is different from that of male bodies. This rests with the fact that women are largely excluded from the science which defines their bodies and their body’s mechanics (1987: 21, 54-57).

In her discussion of the process of birth, Martin explains that if birth is truly mechanical, and the female body is truly a faulty machine in need of assistance, then the birth of a child should be managed. However, it has been argued that if birth is a natural part of life, the process should be experienced by the family or personally and without interference from the clinic or institution (Graham and Oakley 1981:52-55, Martin 1987: 158). To this point, Martin clearly suggests that the involvement of the clinic is an act of disruption. Bledsoe and Scherrer have followed by arguing that obstetrics is viewed with mistrust and that the practice of obstetrics is a disruption of what should be the most natural of processes. Ultimately, obstetrics is lent its legitimacy as, “Institutionalization also involves professionalization: training specialists and assigning them licensed authority to practice by demonstrating competence in the principles and standards of their specialties” (Bledsoe and Scherrer 2007:48). This legitimization challenges the natural process and those with knowledge of the process and in so doing, the process of childbirth becomes normalized through the institution and thus, the concept of a “natural” birth is one that has simply moved away from the disruptive practices of obstetrics (Bledsoe and Scherrer 2007: 48-49, 58-62).

These views plainly offer a critique of the institutionalization of medical practice wherein men and women have become the subject of medical scrutiny which seeks to contain the body and perfect human frailties (Marieskind 1978, Foucault 1994, Lock 2007, see also Heriot 1996, and Whyte 2009). More specifically, the different approaches and critiques addressed thus far speak to the ideas put forth by Foucault, namely the medical gaze and the condition of the docile body. These concepts are derived from the epistemological production of specialized knowledge and the subsequent categorization and normalization of the body which further produces and legitimizes a medical authority and explanation of the body and its condition. In turn, this supports the development of an authoritative institutional hegemony of how the body is to be seen, categorized, and understood, as well as permitting the emergence of bio-political issues surrounding the use of the body (Foucault 1994, 1995, Foucault et al. 2000, 2008).

Up to this point, the critiques and views presented above have been concerned with the individual, the clinic, and challenging conceptions of reproduction. In addition to this, institutional forms of knowledge and hegemony can extend to involve the administration of the state in affairs concerning the use of the body, and by extension, issues of fertility, reproduction, and family planning. This can be discussed in terms of what Ferguson and Gupta would term state spatialisation and a top-down approach to governance through the state's vertical encompassment (2005). Within this particular approach, institutions operating within the governmentalized hierarchy reinforce and legitimize government position and policy, particularly those concerning docile bodies. Through this interaction, what Foucault termed as governmentality emerges (Foucault et al. 2008). At the same time, localized, or grassroots, understandings of behavior, the body, and its use exist within the bottom portion of the spatialised state (see Gramsci 1971). It is through the interfacing of state and grassroots levels within the cultural, political, economic, and social milieu that result in a structuring and reinforcement of habitus and practice. As Binkley further elaborates, "Governmentality, or the 'conduct of conduct', ties together the technologies of self with the imperatives of institutional action, linking reflective self-regard with specific rationalities of behavior oriented to goals established by institutions" (2009:95).

As an example of this dynamic relationship, in the 1960s the US congress formed the Office of Population Affairs as well as the offices of Planned Parenthood-World Population (PP-WP) in 1962. While these offices were under direct control of the federal government, in 1967 Congress enacted legislation requiring states to provide family planning services within their public health programs. As these programs continued to develop at state and federal levels, access to family planning programs and reproductive health services have transitioned from being options to being approached as a right which further ensures the health and welfare of women and men. While these programs receive private funding and generate income through some of their services, in many cases they also face internal and external pressure to accept federal funding (Sharpe 1978: 67-71). The federal funds that are available are contingent on the institution's adherence to established policy, further reinforcing the views of the state and the normalization of behavior.

The relationship between institutions, such as Planned Parenthood, and funding provided by the government has continued. In the 2010 Planned parenthood Annual report, it notes that 46% of Planned Parenthood's revenue was derived from Government Health Services Grants and reimbursements (Planned Parenthood 2012). While federal funding has directly contributed to the operation and maintenance of institutions and clinics, the government has also chosen to fund educational initiatives in other venues inside and outside of the US. As McFarlane points out,

“Federal funding for abstinence-only education has increased dramatically, while there has been little growth in funding for family planning services. Once again, the US has cutoff funding to the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) for alleged activities related to abortion. On both the domestic and international fronts, the Administration has denigrated the efficacy of condoms” and that, “Annual increases in federal funding for family planning services have not kept pace with those for abstinence-only education” (2006: 406, 409).

Furthermore, Grammich, DaVanzo, and Stewart (2004) note that while there are still disagreements surrounding issues, such as abortion, within various political and social sectors, the US public's attitudes towards the government's stance on reproductive health policy and funding has remained largely unchanged with the

majority favoring the government's decisions. This support and approval by the US public would further indicate that there is a degree of legitimization of US government policy concerning family planning, reproduction, and reproductive health emanating from the social collective consciousness.

While a US governmentality is concerned with domestic affairs involving reproduction and family planning, the projection of its views on to international agencies has far reaching effects. Kalpana Ram's (2001) work shows that Western bio-medicine has attempted to reduce the role of the midwife to that of a subaltern figure. It has done this by casting the image of women's bodies as poorly constructed machines that are prone to dangers and issues during pregnancy and the birthing process. This has effectively marginalized women as birthers and their own knowledge of the subject in favor of the male dominated, bio-medical view of the birth process (Johnson 2002: 64-65). In the case of Indian midwives, Ram indicates that there are two competing modernities at play with two very different forms of knowledge and that the positions between midwives and the medical institutions is ultimately one of a colonial order in that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the western bio-medical approaches of hospitals in India have discounted the locally held understandings of birthing practices of midwives that are based on spiritual, cosmological, and traditional medical knowledge (Iltis 2002). Chawla notes that there are times where women are seeking out midwives because of this spiritual connection and knowledge as they are perceived as being able to mediate between the two worlds during their pregnancy and delivery (2002). It can be seen that through the dynamic relationships of the state and the public, a critical domestic and international governmentality forms. Moreover, the issues here further reinforce the critiques of feminist scholars regarding the clinic, the body, and reproduction as traditional notions of reproductive health and healing, reproductive practices, and family planning are marginalized.

An additional point which has been raised concerning reproduction, the clinic, and the state is that of New Reproductive Technologies (NRTs), such as In vitro fertilization (IVF), which have been designed to specifically address situations of infertility. As Margarete Sandelowski has pointed out, IVF treatments provide a means through which science can challenge and in some cases overcome nature in

the quest for couples to conceive a child (Sandelowski 1991, see also Taylor 2001). However, NRTs have at times raised suspicions, which Ginsburg and Rapp note, “Some have argued that the NRT’s are the latest and most powerful instance in which male doctors and “pharmacrats” use biotechnology to usurp female reproductivity; others point out that infertile women are being used as guinea pigs for drug and technology testing” (1991: 315). While NRTs offer a potential fix for some reproductive issues and infertility, they also introduce new degrees of stress for the patient and for the couple. These stresses emanate from the idea of hope; that science will be able to fix what was broken in nature. Sandelowski (1991), Franklin (1998), and Ryan (2001) note that the predominant form of pressure can be self inflicted as women and couples confront being outside of the realm of normality in regards to reproduction. Most importantly, NRTs have given way to numerous studies that consider the profound effects of NRTs on traditional approaches to reproduction and the reproduction of culture and society, matters of family and relatedness, family planning, fertility, infertility, and women’s health issues, economics, and the effects of state involvement in assisted reproduction, thereby further broadening the scope of what constitutes reproduction (Strathern 1992, Ginsburg and Reiter 1995, Shah and Cleland 1993, Franklin 1997, Modell 1998, Obermeyer 2000, Cornwall 2001, White 2001, Simpson 2004, Unnithan-Kumar 2004, Lee and Liang 2006).

In addition to the theoretical and ethnographic views of medical anthropologists, it is also critical that we consider the intersection and synthesis of medicine and religion. As we saw with Ka Gua, her spiritual health and physical health were called into question and were to be addressed in order to prepare her body for fertility treatments and conception. The relationship of spiritual health and physical health among the Hmong has been explored by Parker and Neng (1999), Cha (2003), and by Hickman (2007) and further highlight the interdependent nature of the subject. While the intersection of medicine and religion is represented as a prominent factor in numerous Hmong ethnographic works, the subject has also been of interest to medical anthropologists. Potter’s 1993 review of medical journals revealed that while there was some interest in religion and medicine, the subject was largely discounted and marginalized. However, anthropological bodies of literature

include the works of Vanderpool (1980), Stoner (1986), and Vanderpool and Levin (1990) which address the interplay of religious views on matters of health, healing, and medicine (see also Keenan 1996). Studies over the past two decades by Van Ness (1999), Waldram (2000), Seybold (2001), Goldberg (2007), King and Roeser (2009), Gaydos et al. (2010) , and Frenk, Foy, and Meadow (2011) have continued to explore the intricate nature of the issue within cultural systems of medical knowledge, the clinic, and in public health. Additional studies have addressed associated issues of pragmatism that emerges through the incorporation of spiritual practice into medical situations while others have examined the ways in which people find comfort and strength through their respective spiritual traditions and some are able to arrive at an understanding of efficacious enhancement. Additionally, several of these studies have presented means by which traditional approaches to medicine and healing have challenged and subverted the efforts of pluralist arguments, as well as efforts by the clinic and the state to project an institutionalized view of health and healing (Janes 2001, Laderman 2001, Zhan 2001, Vellenga 2008, Sugishita 2009, Street 2010, and Klassen 2011).

Through these different perspectives of reproduction, feminist arguments have sought to expand the concept of reproduction outside the realm of the biological and the confines of the clinic. In doing so, these debates have worked to account for and explain the desire to reproduce, what constitutes a valid approach to women's health, the introduction of technology, the social meanings of reproduction through differing notions of family, meanings of social and biological relatedness and belonging, and the reproduction of culture and society. In contrast, clinical and governing institutions have projected an image of reproduction that is in keeping with clinical Western biomedical traditions, thereby marginalizing, and at times attempting to nullify, alternative perspectives and practices. In the case of the Hmong, traditional views of these matters fall within the domain of marginalized practice. In consideration of these points, the work presented in this thesis is intended to represent the validity of Hmong ideas and practices of reproduction within their own conceptual frameworks which move beyond pluralist essentialism, while accounting for the extensive and encompassing nature of reproduction feminist scholars have collectively produced.

The Hmong and the Anthropology of Religion

Following the intersection of medicine and religion, I now wish to briefly address the anthropology of religion. Hmong approaches to spirituality and religion have been well documented through the works of Mottin (1984), Fadiman (1997), Kong (2000), Vang (2000), Tapp (2001), Hang and Sumrongthong (2004), Symonds (2004), Her (2005), and Yang (2006). Traditional spiritual views are structured around an animated world view and a cyclical cosmological model. The 2001 documentary of Siegel, McSilver, et al, The Split Horn, documents the critical roles shamans and shamanic practice play in an American Hmong community and reveals the complex connections of the spiritual and the physical. Within the traditional ontological perspective a person can possess numerous souls. As we saw with Ka Gua, a person's souls are an integral part to their overall health and being. Hmong diagnoses of illness are often explained through soul loss, or bang plig, which further speaks to the importance of spiritual matters and maintaining the self. In contrast, Hmong Christian ontological perspectives insist that a person has one soul thereby offering a dualistic view of the self. Even so, the majority of Hmong Christians continue to emphasise the importance of spiritual health as a means to ensure proper physical health. Additionally, these two spiritual and religious traditions shape the contours by which ideas of family are constructed, and how people associate with one another and identify themselves within the Hmong community.

Literary works within the anthropology of religion provide a means to explore Hmong religious life and approaches to understanding reproduction, continuity, medicine, and the self. The anthropology of religion has a rich history beginning with the seminal work of Tylor's Primitive Culture and Durkheim's publication, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (2001, first published in 1915), which frame spirituality and religion as a foundation of social order and as a means for understanding the world and how people are situated within the world. Additionally, Max Weber's The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1992, first published in 1905) has continued to stand as an outstanding example of the effects of religion on the connections and development of secular social domains.

Asad (2002) has remarked that the symbolic expressions and the development of religious meaning and perspectives in societies have situated religion

as an anthropological subject of interest. Continuing from this vantage point, examinations of religious and secular life have brought into question the construction of morality and ethics within the individual and society. Regarding this point, Foucault has addressed the construction of an inner moral dialogue that guides the desires and actions of an individual (Foucault 1983, 1992, Foucault et al 2014). James Laidlaw's works (2002, 2014) have also thoroughly explored the subject within the Kantian tradition of morality and ethics. Laidlaw's perspectives play a pivotal role in Robbins' article, "Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical Cultural Change" (2007b), which compares the Kantian position, which posits that the production of moral and ethical foundations are found within the will and decisions of the individual, and the assertions of Durkheim which suggests that the moral and ethical constitution of an individual is a product of social reproduction.

Research over the past fifteen years has provided a platform for current debates surrounding Anthropology of Christianity and a specialization of the subject. This has led to greater consideration for the effects of a Christian world view on social, economic, and political matters (Scott 2005, Cannell 2006, Keane 2007, Robbins 2004a). Joel Robbins' has written extensively on the Anthropology of Christianity and has critiqued anthropological approaches to the subject. His work with the Urapmin in New Guinea has offered a perspective of conversion and world making that have challenged what he identifies as the discipline's image of the oppressed and suffering subject. Additionally, Robbins' critique has addressed Anthropology's reluctance to fully examine the subject because of its own ethical foundations that have been derived from Western social and religious moral codes. Robbins has also examined the process of world breaking and world making in which those who convert to Christianity struggle to release themselves from the continuity of the past while developing a different world view (Robbins 2004a, 2004b, 2006- why it is awkward, 2007a, 2011a, 2013). The spark that Robbins' work has provided has led to several in depth examinations of conversion, representation, and experiences and expressions of self and community in Christian societies (see Bialecki 2008, 2011 and Bielo 2011, 2012, Read and Eagle 2011, Chua 2012, Klassen 2013).

Returning to Tylor and Durkheim, both acknowledge animism as a primordial form of religious view and practice. Beginning with these works, animistic world views and accompanying shamanic praxis have a long history of study in anthropology. The nature of animism has been a highly debated subject that has focused extensively on ontological perspectives and experimental anecdotes which attempt to explain human relations and interactions with the world within animistic societies (Ingold 1993, Bird-David 1999, Pedersen 2001, 2011, Willerslev 2007, Descola 2012). In addition to this, examinations of ontological constructions, inclusive of cosmological and social perspectives, have provided a counterpoint to Western ethnocentric perspectives of the world. In doing so, increasingly detailed examinations of the ontological other have presented deeper explanations of cultural and social differences, including views of the self that are beyond previously imposed notions of dualism, which have further legitimized marginalized forms of knowledge (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, Holbraad 2009, and Vivieros de Castro 2009).

For the Hmong, spirituality and religious matters are situated at the core of Hmong life and reach into matters of gender, family, community, politics, economics, health, medicine, as well as affecting the realms of the epistemological, the phenomenological, and the ontological. The works presented here have informed my understanding of traditional and Christian Hmong spirituality and offer a theoretical framework from which to examine the diverse relationships within Hmong spiritual and religious practices and beliefs that inform notions of self, community, family, reproduction, and continuity.

Approaches to Kinship, Gender, and Social Issues

At the outset of this literature review, I noted that many of the studies involving the Hmong have centered on medical pluralist perspectives that highlight the difficulties and degrees of misunderstanding surrounding engagement with Western biomedicine. While these issues are of importance and stand out within the corpus of literature involving the Hmong, other areas have also been explored. Pfeifer's (2014) review of the state of Hmong studies reveals that matters of family, community, gender, education, and generational experience have been examined in

numerous postgraduate and professional publications. The majority of these studies are focused on American Hmong experiences and other communities in the Hmong diaspora. However, contemporary studies of the Hmong in South East Asia also provide valuable insight into the structures and experiences of Hmong life. Most notably, works by Tapp (1998, 2001, 2002, and 2010) and Symonds (2004) offer critical evaluations of Hmong attitudes and experiences, which are largely transferable to Hmong communities in diaspora.

With the resettlement of the Hmong, several studies focused on the transition of the Hmong from the refugee camps in Thailand to various communities in the US and their subsequent experiences. More specifically, these studies have focused on challenges posed to the solidarity and continuance of traditional forms of Hmong life in the wake of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement, particularly how the Hmong have confronted and negotiated the stressed and shifting foundations of community, family, and gender that are imperative components to the structure and flow of Hmong life (see Dunnigan 1982, Scott 1982a and 1982b, Hendricks, Downing, et al 1986, Chan 1994, Faderman and Xiong 1998, Koltyk 1998, Yang 2008, Vang 2010, and Cha 2013).

While these works are concerned with social issues involving those who experienced life in Laos and the shock of resettlement, more recent works have focused on experiences of the Hmong beyond the camps and matters of resettlement. Over the past 35 to 40 years, generations of Hmong have made a life for themselves in the United States that continues to see an acknowledgement of their past lives, their experiences of transition and adaptation, and a multitude of current and future visions which progress how the Hmong understand and envision themselves as Hmong men, as Hmong women, and as part of a larger collective Hmong American experience. In recognition of this, numerous scholars have produced interesting and engaging works over the past fifteen years that are concerned with experiences and overtures that contrast traditional and contemporary notions of social, religious, economic, and educational issues.

Additionally, through generational accounts and points of view, these studies have begun to discuss potent generational shifts and points of contention. As I noted in the overview of the Hmong, the extended family traditionally rests at the center of

Hmong life. Moreover, this critical emphasis on family is at the heart of a traditional Hmong habitus. Seen through Bourdieu's work, this emphasis as habitus is the 'structure of structure' (1977). With that said, the very premise of social order and cohesion is under increasing pressure to change as generational tensions and shifts of perspective and practice challenge the traditional notions of a Hmong habitus. As a result of these pressures, a new habitus has continued to develop which speaks to the changing nature of Hmong life and theoretical matters of family, gender, and identity.

To further detail the sources of these tensions, Yang (2008) has noted that the social and family values of the older generations do not coincide with those of the younger generation. Yang has gone on to examine the problem from the perspective of parents are not able to discipline their children in accordance with a stricter traditional upbringing. Fear and ignorance of the legal system in the US has left parents with little option in controlling their child's behavioral development. Yang also observes that as children become more Americanized they increasingly abandon traditional family responsibilities and expectations while displaying lessened degrees of respect to their parents and elders. Additionally, children blame their parents for the loss of the Hmong language. Many parents have not taken the time to teach their children the language and have further encouraged their children to only speak English (Yang 2008: 220-223). Ng (2008) also notes the loss of the Hmong language within the younger generations. Many younger Hmong have cobbled together both dialects or have combined elements of the Hmong and English languages and as a result, their ability to communicate effectively with their elders is hindered.

Additional tensions are observed in matters of financial literacy as parents with a traditional, conservative view of money pressure their children to save in order to have a better life. However, through increased Americanization, Hmong children tend to spend more than their parents in an effort to keep up with their American peers (Solheim and Yang 2010). Exposure to the US educational system has also resulted in increased generational tensions as parents place increasing pressure on their children to succeed academically (Ngo and Lor 2013, see also McNall, Dunnigan, and Mortimer 1994). From an institutional standpoint, this exposure offers children future educational and economic opportunities for young boys and

girls that are beyond traditional views, expectations, and boundedness of gender.

These matters have also affected marriage patterns of young Hmong women. While some continue to choose an early marriage while finishing their mandatory schooling, others are delaying marriage for the sake of their education. This has also affected marriage patterns of young Hmong women. While some continue to choose an early marriage, there are pressures to finish their mandatory schooling (Ngo 2002). Others are delaying marriage for the sake of pursuing higher education. As a result, these women tend to have fewer children than those who chose an early marriage due to their age and personal aspirations, thus challenging traditional opinions of women's roles and duties.

Perceptions of gender among the Hmong can be understood through Engels' (1940) treatise on the sexual divisions of labor. From a traditional view, there are clear expectations and responsibilities that are given to men and women and the two sexes operate within their respective domains in the home and in society. Women are largely responsible for maintaining the home, preparing food, producing children for the benefit of the family, and tending to the children and common illnesses in the family. Men are expected to provide for the family, make decisions for the family and to represent the family in times of mourning, during discussions of extended family matters, and at social events. The two sexes eat separately at social or larger family gatherings, and tend to maintain this division at larger social events. With the opportunities for advancement through educational institutions and acculturation, Hmong women have begun to find different means of liberation from the restrictive nature of traditional Hmong views.

As an anthropological subject, gender is represented by an extensive body of literature that is well beyond the purpose of this review. Gender has been subjected to theoretical ideas of social construction and while being seen as something to be deconstructed, cross-cultural and alternative ideas of gender have undergone comparative analysis, and has provided alternative views and deeper examinations of social experiences (see Morris 1995, Mills 1997, Butler 1999, Deutsch 2007, Johnson 2008, and Harris 2009).

To better understand matters of gender that can be applied to the Hmong, we can turn to Judith Butler's foundational text, Gender Trouble (1999), which

challenges biological foundations of gender as a concept and places the subject within cultural and social domains. Through Butler's view, notions of gender can be understood as not being an inherent human condition but rather gendered values are ascribed values emanating from cultural perspectives. Additionally, gender can be approached through the works of Kapchan (1995) and Morris (1995), which associate expressions of gender as cultural constructs that are then performed. Through performance, gender reflects established social norms of behavior and presentation of the self relative to the perspective of others and the whole of society.

From these perspectives, an inability to speak across generations, the continued Americanization of the younger generations, the reluctance of some parents to pass on a traditional understanding of Hmong life and practice, and the changing character of Hmong approaches to gender, coming to terms with traditional views and expectations of Hmong life has greatly diminished. As a result, new ways of understanding the Hmong experience and traditional values and emphasis of family, community, and gender are emerging and formulating a new Hmong identity.

In past studies approaches to Hmong kinship have been informed by older anthropological theoretical perspectives that have focused on structure and function born out of social evolutionary perspectives (see Lubbock 1872, Lévi-Strauss 1969, Schneider 1968, 1972, and 1984, Goody 1977, Dunnigan 1982 and Tapp 2001). By the 1980s, efforts were made to reassess kinship as a subject of anthropological interest and incorporate the feminist critiques that had emerged out of the 1970s, such as those addressed above concerning the broadening of reproduction. These critiques began to challenge past approaches to kinship and pushed to address theoretical approaches to kinship as well as alternative versions of kinship, concepts of relatedness, connectedness, the creation and meaning of a household, the construction of family and kin networks, women and children within these networks, fictive kin, matters of adoption, and the importance of biological substance (Yanagisako 1977 and 1979, Carsten 1997, 2000, and 2004, Johnson 2000, Franklin and McKinnon 2001, Jones 2000, Hutchinson 2000, Lambert 2000, Martin 2001, Levine 2008, Bonaccorso 2009, Howell 2009, Kramer 2011, Sahlins 2012, Nelson 2013, Warren-Adamson and Stroud 2013).

Out of these approaches, the works of Carsten and Sahlins offer engaging

perspectives applicable to the Hmong. Carsten's (1997) work reveals kinship to be a matter of process wherein relationships develop with deeper threads of meaning. In later works, Carsten (2000 and 2004) examines the constructions of kin through concepts of relatedness derived from conceptualised fictive kin while recognizing the depth of biological attachment and connectedness that emerges through substance. Recent work by Sahlins (2012) has suggested that kinship may be understood as a "mutuality of being" that is further developed through cultural constructions that are removed from biological attachments. While Sahlins suggests understanding kinship through culture, in doing so there is the danger of limiting the flexible qualities of kinship as identities become based on culturally generated categorical definitions and understanding. Between these two approaches, the fluid and flexible nature of kinship can be observed as a process which develops structure, status, and identity through one's relation to the other. In regards to the Hmong, these approaches offer a path through which to explore and develop the emergence and experience of family amid the foundational shifts of generational difference.

Summarising the Literature

The purpose of reviewing these bodies of literature has been to situate the Hmong within key anthropological debates and to identify the evolution of these debates in order to explore issues of reproduction, the broadening of what constitutes reproduction, and the nature of community, family, and matters of relatedness. Furthermore, by utilizing the frameworks and perspectives presented here, a broader and richer view of Hmong reproduction is allowed to unfold in a manner which moves past the image of the Hmong as struggling to adapt to Western medicine, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of pluralistic biological essentialism, and instead account for a synthesis of practice and perspective inclusive of biology, but which also involves the reproduction of key social and spiritual elements within the shifting contexts of the Denver Hmong community.

As a final point of consideration, it is important to note that much of the literature on the Hmong presented here embraces the notion put forth by Fadiman that, "Medicine was religion. Religion was society. Society was medicine. Even economics was mixed up in there" (1997: 60). However in doing so, many scholars

have skirted, or outright avoided, the complex inter-dependent relationships and entanglements within Hmong life and have not fully engaged with the inquisitive spirit of Tylor's (1903) symbiotic, connective, and overlapping nature and synthesis of the cultural complex whole.

With the exception of perhaps Symonds (2004), Siegel and McSilver (2001), and Tapp (2001 and 2010), the majority of these works tend to portray ideal perspectives of traditional and contemporary Hmong life which do not fully account for the wider variations of experience and degrees of flexibility within these communities and families. And while these works retain rich ethnographic material and valuable insight into the Hmong community, within them often lies an assumption of homogeneity and uniformity which neglects the diversity of practice and understanding within and between communities. This restraint in engaging with the overlapping, contributing, and connected areas of interest denies the full exploration and explanation of the readily observable and incredibly complex entanglements that comprise not only the Denver Hmong experience, but the Hmong American experience as well.

Methodology

My doctoral fieldwork with the Denver Hmong community was conducted over the course of 13 months beginning in June of 2012 and ending in July of 2013. This duration permitted me an opportunity to observe Hmong life through an annual cycle. During my fieldwork I conducted formal and informal interviews with established informants who were kind enough to introduce me to other key figures in the community. I also established relationships with individuals through social events and gatherings, as well as through Hmong community organizations and Hmong churches. The ethnographic evidence presented here has been primarily drawn from twenty-eight key formal interviews, over one hundred informal interviews with eighty-three informants, and hundreds of hours spent with over fifty key informants from two extended families in their homes, at social and family gatherings, and community events where we discussed the history of the Hmong, their experiences and memories, views of traditional and contemporary spiritual and religious practices, medicine and health, and matters of family and community. My

informant base was comprised of individuals who identified themselves as Hmong and who were members of the community, shamans, Christian leaders and practitioners, university students, mothers, fathers, grandparents, married couples, non-married individuals, adolescents and young adults, and administrative staff at different institutions and organizations. Interviews with adolescents were informal and were conducted at the suggestion of their parents and were overseen by their parents at all times.

As a critical note, I attempted to incorporate other views of family and reproduction to contrast heteronormative practices. However, homosexual relationships, activities, and issues of alternative sexualities and gender are extremely delicate topics in the Hmong community. During my fieldwork I did not encounter any openly gay men or women who could address the topics of my research. Families were often reluctant to acknowledge any relation to these individuals and the topic of alternative sexualities and relationships was generally avoided. A year after my fieldwork I became aware of a Hmong LGBT association based in St. Paul, MN known as Shade of Yellow (SOY). Given my position at the time, I was not able to contact the association to discuss alternative views of family and reproduction. As a result, what is presented in this thesis represents a strictly heteronormative view of Hmong life.

For formal interviews I relied on a semi-structured interview format in order to permit my informants the ability to shape the topic of conversation as they saw fit. Additionally, this identified additional topics of interest and permitted informants an opportunity to emphasize what they felt were important and relevant to the topic being discussed. During informal interviews I relied on my experience while developing the semi-structured format for formal interviews to guide the conversation. Additionally I consulted privately held family records when available, and I consulted institutional and archival materials including story cloths, clothing, jewelry, shamanic paraphernalia, and historical institutional documents of church organizations.

My observations in the community accounted for daily life and experiences as well as key life events. These key life events included two funerals, three soul callings and blessings for newborns, and one wedding other than my own. These

events were held in private homes, funeral homes, churches, and event venues. Key social events included the Hmong New Year at the Adams County Fair grounds as well as New Year celebrations held at the Hmong Baptist church and the Hmong C&MA church. Additional observations were also drawn from church services and church held bake sales and social events.

While the Hmong community occupied the majority of my time, I also contacted the offices of Planned Parenthood and was able to interview the director of public relations. Additionally I had wanted to discuss the medical experiences of the Hmong with healthcare workers. To address this I contacted and interviewed the marketing manager of a fertility clinic in South Denver that deals extensively with Asian assisted reproduction. I also attempted to contact officials at one public hospital and to include two private doctors offices that have had experience with the Hmong. These offices declined to participate in my study. Here, I had been unable to gather what I felt were sufficient materials to properly address the perceptions and attitudes of the clinics. As a result, images and understandings of the clinic were drawn from the personal experiences of Hmong informants.

With my fieldwork complete, I returned to the UK late in the summer of 2013. My wife's family and several of my key informants kept me apprised of important events and changes in the community through email, Skype, and phone calls. Through these communications I was able to clarify problematic details of what I had collected and strengthen my analysis. After returning to the US in December of 2014, I have continued to stay in contact with many of my informants which have helped shape my approach to the writing process.

To analyze the data that I had collected, I drew on a qualitative approach which focused on a pattern analysis of interviews, observations, field notes, photographic evidence, audio recordings, and written materials. This analysis set out to account for patterns in cultural, religious, and medical practices seen in my collected materials and observations. As a supplementary measure to my analysis, I have also referenced interviews, observations, and printed materials collected from previous interactions with the community beginning in 2008. These supplementary elements included relevant personal and community oral histories, and explanations of traditional Hmong spiritual and medical practices. These analytics were then

compared to the discourse of established literary works concerning the Hmong in order to establish points of agreement and divergence.

I selected to present my ethnographic evidence in a layered manner which is intended to display the complex nature of Hmong life and the experiences of those in the community. This approach has been drawn from the ethnographic styles of Geertz's (1973) development of ethnographic thick description and the incredibly detailed ethnographic work of Marjory Shostak (1981). In the interest of protecting my informants, only Grandma Va is represented by her real identity. While most informants represented within this work are individuals, some key informants are composite characters to ensure their anonymity while addressing sensitive topics. I have taken measures to ensure that the composite nature of the character is reflective of the issues being discussed and, through comparisons of data, that what is presented is in agreement with, and in the spirit of, my observations and the histories and experiences that were conveyed to me.

Finally, the work that I have presented here represents my own understanding of what was conveyed to me, a reflection of my own observations, and the arguments are constructed through my own analysis. I have tried to relate the views and experiences of those in the Denver Hmong community as accurately as possible. While some individuals may feel that what I have presented does not represent an ideal, copacetic or favorable view of the subjects I have addressed, what is represented is the actual lived, and at times contentious, experience of the Hmong over the course of my involvement with the community and how the dynamics of Hmong life are understood and conducted within the community.

Ethical Considerations

My research has followed the ethical standards of research conduct as outlined by the university and was assigned the appropriate level of approval by the University's research ethics review board prior to my fieldwork. I made all of my informants fully aware of the scope of my research and invited them to participate of their own free will. I also explained to them that they could choose to end their participation at any time. Informant consent and participation forms which contained a full disclosure of my research aims was provided to all those

participating in formal and informal interviews. Those who were unable to speak or read English, a native Hmong speaker was available to translate the document and verify their consent. For those that signed the consent form, I provided them a copy which also stated contact information for the Social Anthropology department, my advisor's contact information, and my personal contact information. When going over the consent form I assured my informants that the data I collected would be presented anonymously in order to protect their interests and livelihoods. I also explained that the information provided would be held by me in an encrypted computer file, and that physical materials would be stored in a lockbox. I also made them aware that I would be the only one with access to these secured materials and they would not be shared apart from my doctoral thesis and future publications that I produce.

For those that chose not to sign the form, their participation was included only after discussing my research and they had verbally agreed to participate in the study. As an additional measure I discussed how the collected materials and results of my study would be presented in my thesis and potential uses of my thesis. Finally, I obtained verbal consent for all photos and audio recordings I collected during my fieldwork.

The majority of my informants were 18 years old or older and included men and women. Those under 18 were only interviewed after their parents suggested I speak to them and after I verified that they found the topics I wanted to address suitable. These discussions were held in view of several members of the community and the parents of the person being interviewed stood directly beside us with clear and unrestricted access to our conversation.

During the summer of 2012 I married a member of the Denver Hmong community. While some members of my wife's family have assisted me in the past with introducing me to different people, I made efforts to limit their involvement with my current research. Despite my efforts, several members of my wife's family insisted on representing their stories and experiences and explaining different events and perspectives. I spoke with each individual about their involvement and potential representation in my research and only agreed to include their contributions after extensive discussion.

While the Hmong community in Denver, Colorado is a marginalized community it is not a vulnerable community. The mental and physical wellbeing of my informants remained a primary concern for me over the course of my fieldwork. When addressing sensitive or emotional topics, I made sure to constantly check on my informants' emotional condition and reminded them that they were not obligated to continue if they found the recollection of past events and situations too traumatic, stressful or difficult. I also made efforts to put my informants at ease with the topics being discussed and attempted to avoid approaches to my inquiries which would have caused any degree of embarrassment or place them in a situation which may compromise their beliefs or practices.

Within this introductory chapter I have identified the key questions that have guided the construction of this thesis. I have also provided a foundational understanding of the Hmong community which serves to inform the reader of underlying structures and perspectives found within the chapters and their discussions. Additionally, the literature review provides a base of theoretical perspectives that have guided my work and shaped the content and discussions of the situations and observations throughout this thesis. Finally, an overview of my methodological approach to this research and ethical considerations provide further context as to how I have chosen to present and analyze the different subjects in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 1

Recreating Zomia in Diaspora: An Ethos of Continuity

At the outset of this thesis I briefly touched on the history of the Hmong diaspora and their journey which took them from the highlands of Laos, to the refugee camps of Thailand, and ultimately, to various industrial countries. Many of the Hmong of Denver also trace their own journeys through these corridors and often recount the difficulties of their travels and of their arrival in the United States. One of the pervasive tropes surrounds the constant desire to maintain connection and contact with family and community during the difficulties of transition. For many of them, these issues were troublesome and resolved only once they had settled and re-organised themselves. These struggles of life, being pulled apart and reshuffled, are echoed in Vang's (2010) examination of Hmong communities in the US. As Vang observes, "Migrating across the globe requires flexibility and a willingness to confront inevitable disruption to existing social structures." (2010: 68).

For my informants, many of their stories begin with life in their villages in Laos and their stories called to mind works that focus on life in various hilltop villages of upland Southeast Asia, (see Leach 1965, Symonds 2004, and Tapp 2001), wherein a distinct image of the day to day in small hill top communities emerges where people are connected through a shared language, a shared culture, through economic and political relationships, and by blood and marriage. In our conversations they would describe the wooden walls of their houses, the hearths, the altars, the dirt floors, and the day to day tedium of collecting water, cooking, working the fields, and trying to scratch out a living through selling excess rice or opium. Most significantly, they would recall memories of family and how members of the community worked with, and occasionally against, one another. Additionally, they described a way of life that has a history of residing on the margins of the state while experiencing a degree of subjectivity to differing national agendas through periods of war, involvement with US military forces, regional governmental transitions, and persecution.

To further this point, the works of Vang (2010), Ng (2008), and Thao (2008), have provided us with a means to understand that through the Hmong

diaspora, the Hmong faced numerous difficulties in their transition to life in the US and that ultimately, they prevailed. However, while these works are of use in understanding the Hmong experience in broad strokes, they forego a particular examination of how the different strategies for success and means of coping actually operate within a Hmong community. There is an underlying assumption that they simply did adapt and the concerns of the authors are founded on understanding the dynamics of the contemporary whole of the Hmong aggregate as connected to the history of transition, but not necessarily how or why.

For the purpose of my research I have chosen to refer to the whole of the Hmong in the US as the Hmong aggregate rather than referring to the Hmong as a nation. While there are ethnic organisations that may represent or advocate for Hmong interests, there are no formal political parties or elected public officials for the Hmong. To this point, the idea of a Hmong collective is substantiated through the interconnection of Hmong communities throughout the US with leaders established through the clan networks. It is important to note that, as Vang points out, upon arrival many Hmong initially identified with other immigrant groups, such as the Lao and in some cases for the Hmong in Denver, with the Vietnamese, and utilised existing ethnic refugee support networks and organisations (2010: 71). For my informants, they recalled the fear of being in a strange land, unable to speak, being confronted with the difficulty finding work, struggling to keep their family together, and coming to terms with being viewed as a refugee, and furthermore, a minority Southeast Asian refugee so soon after the closure of the conflicts in Vietnam. Because of these shared experiences and the bonds of kinship and mutual dependency, the Denver community is an extremely close knit group. With few exceptions, Hmong marry Hmong and the members of the community tend to keep to themselves, concern themselves with internal interests, and seldom concern themselves with any outside matters. This is not to say they are completely hermetic but they are selective in their interactions and associations and that there is a significant degree of reliance on one another.

In what follows, I intend to argue that the reason the Hmong were successful in adapting to life in the US is to be found within strategies of social structure among the Hmong, their inter-dependency on one another, and, most importantly, through an

ethos of continuity that encourages the maintenance, interconnection, perpetuation, and regeneration of family, community, and belonging; all of which finds its origins in Hmong experiences in Laos and Thailand and which have since been replicated in life in the US. While my examinations of religious and spiritual life in chapters 3 and 4 will mark the development of ethical and moral foundations within the community, the ethos of continuity I wish to establish here provides a point from which, in following chapters, we can better understand how people arrive at decisions regarding the reproduction of Hmong society and issues surrounding fertility and reproduction.

As we will continue to see in the following chapters, the Hmong community is diverse and there are different ways of approaching the subject of being Hmong and understanding the self. While the different approaches to spiritual life represent a significant portion of community diversity, a persistent underlying theme is one of togetherness and family. In consideration of the points above and the stories of my informants, I have chosen to focus on networks of family, community, and the dynamics of relationships, within what I understand to be a revitalisation of village life, as a means to better understand the concept of the village as a critical component to the perpetuation of the Denver Hmong community and to notions of belonging.

Approaching Kinship

Before examining the history and mechanics of Hmong society, I first want to touch on the issue of kinship. Anthropology has a rich history of addressing matters of kinship and relatedness as seen in early works from the late 19th century, such as that from Lubbock (1872), which rely almost entirely on kinship and matters of relatedness to address larger social issues, particularly in reference to social evolution. Kinship remained a focus of anthropological inquiry through the early half of the 20th century, particularly in functionalist and structural-functionalist works, and remained a critical perspective, as seen in Lévi-Strauss' The Elementary Structures of Kinship (1969), first published in 1949, which continued to provide a focus on interpreting structure and social function. As Levine explains, "The classic kinship studies displayed impeccable detail; they were closely argued and highly

abstract and demanded technical knowledge of abstruse theory. Their concerns were systems and structures, integration and stability, and groups and the relationships between groups, conceptualized in terms of paradigms of descent and alliance”, and that the 1950s introduced heavy critiques of the subject and previous anthropological approaches (2008: 376). Most notably Schneider’s 1972 work, What Is Kinship All About?, offers a view of kinship that is removed from structuralist hands and seeks to understand kinship through a lens of “symbols and meanings” which led him to argue that anthropology should, “close down the cultural study of kinship” (Sahlins 2011: 7, 2011a: 239; and Levine 2008). Sahlins’ critique acknowledges Schneider’s departure from held theory but notes that he had failed to fully account for an ontological awareness when attempting to understand kinship as part of culture. Sahlins article suggests that the root of kinship is to be found within a mutuality of being, “a manifold of intersubjective participations”, which is established through a network of mutual recognition and awareness of one another (2012: 20, 2011a, 2011b). From this, he is drawn back to the work of Vivieros de Castro (2009), in which he examines an animistic ontology, which emphasises a native exegesis of kinship (Sahlins 2011a: 239).

Carsten’s (1997) work in Malaysia also serves as a flexible platform from which to approach kinship. While biological relatedness remains an important means of understanding kinship, approaching kinship as a process, through which relationships are formed through experience and interaction with one another, reveals the fluidic and flexible nature of kinship networks as they adapt to changing social environments. Carsten’s subsequent works have continued to develop these points through the frameworks of a natural, or biological, construction and category of kinship, and from the point of view of a social construction of kinship. Here, examinations of the meanings of biological substance and relatedness, and the formation and meaning of relatedness beyond the biological, again highlight the pronounced flexibility and adaptability of conceptual kinship networks. Additionally, these works have considered approaches and effects of technology to matters of reproduction and relatedness (2000 and 2004). Throughout, Carsten explores the meanings and construction of family, and the meanings of individuals associated with houses and the home, further addressing matters of gender and social

concepts of motherhood and fatherhood.

With that said, efforts to examine Hmong kinship have largely followed traditional means of anthropological analysis. As an example, Nicholas Tapp notes, the Hmong practice “strict exogamy maintained between members of different patrilineal surnames” and where “local descent groups are formed by members of the same surname” (2002:86). Tapp also explains that the patrilineal practices of the Hmong are generally assumed to be taken from the name and clan systems of the Chinese patrilineal descent system (2002:89). These traditional means of kinship structures centred around large, extended families throughout the village networks which enabled them to organize their labour and manage their assets. As the Hmong traditionally practiced polygyny, the family units tended to have several children which greatly increased their labour force in their agricultural pursuits.

Through this chapter and following chapters, we will see that the dispersion of the kin networks throughout the US placed a great deal of strain on the maintenance of kinship ties and on maintaining family duties and personal responsibilities within the kinship structure. To further detail the operations of the kinship system, Dunnigan explains that, “The Hmong are divided into agnatic descent categories at the clan and lineage levels. Common descent implies certain obligations whether or not the linked individuals regularly associate as members of a kinship based social group” (Dunnigan 1982:127). He also suggests that the system that has emerged now has provided a greater emphasis on the role of the nuclear family as the basic and most important unit at the local level. For Dunnigan, this reversal of focus from the larger kinship networks and clans to the nuclear family has made it so that the male leaders of the households are the key points through which the kinship networks survive as the men work to maintain close agnatic relationships. It is also through the continued practice of exogamous marriage that these kinship structures are able to continually build ties as new wives are brought into the families. This is of importance since the Hmong have largely stopped the practice of polygamy and thus the introduction of new family members from outside of the clan are critical in continuing their way of life. As Thao has pointed out, the households and extended families remain organised and directed through a strict adherence to patriarchal wishes (2008: 35).

While these views offer a very rigid description of Hmong kinship structure, the strength of the structure is through its systematic patriarchal hierarchy and interconnection of clans and extended families, which allows for the cultivation and regeneration of new family and clan leaders that are bound together through the different means of relation. Should a clan leader or family leader be unable to attend to their duties, replacements from the extended family or community with authority close or equal to what is required can be found. I have also seen this extend to women in families where one of the older women may assign and monitor women's tasks, particularly during feast preparation, and should she not be available the next female authority will assume her duties, whether they be within the nuclear family or the extended family, or a mixture of extended families. This feature of redundancy results in the flexibility that Vang (2010: 68-71) spoke of and provides a means for examining village life in what follows. And while the nuclear family has become a prominent feature in Hmong life and one which I will explore in the following chapter, the networks of families and extended families, are still present and are still very much an integral part of the Hmong aggregate and continue to provide conduits of connection between and within Hmong communities. With the classical approaches to kinship already established, I have chosen to move beyond understanding Hmong kinship as a means of structure with implied obedience through patriarchal control. Rather, I suggest that the structure of Hmong society has refined itself and has continued to employ a strategy of continuity that relies on family, relatedness, and mutual dependency between families and clans. By using the term relatedness I mean to explore kinship, in this chapter and those that follow, through a lens derived from Sahlins' (2012) notion of a mutuality of being, and through Carsten's (1997, 2000, 2004) understanding of kinship as process and which accounts for the meaning of kinship while demonstrating the flexibility of kinship beyond matters of substance and biology. With that said, a strategy of continuity and all that it contains resides at the centre of a shared idea of Hmong culture, ideas of belonging, notions of family, and the maintenance and governance of Hmong life. As such, my approach is found within an intersection of functional communal survival strategies and meaning established through a Hmong exegesis of experience and interconnection.

Zomia and the Continuity of Hmong Social Structure

In order to address the points I have touched on thus far, particularly the matter of strategy, I want to first turn to the idea of recreating Zomia in diaspora. While many of the Hmong of Denver identify their original homes as being in the Highlands of Laos, this particular region is part of what can be described as a stateless region. In James Scott's work, The Art of Not Being Governed (2009), this region of the Highlands of Southeast Asia, known previously as the Southeast Asian *massif*, and now Zomia, is generally understood to cover the northern sections of Southeast Asia, including parts of: Vietnam, Laos, China, Myanmar, and India. In his historical examination, the area is portrayed as a geographical zone beyond the reach of the emerging states of the region and as a collection of people intent on avoiding incorporation into the state. Moreover, the people inhabiting the region have a history of existing on the margins of state making and state unmaking, leaving them to establish strategies of avoidance and autonomy. The desire of the regional states is to draw the hilltop peoples into its folds, or as he states, "Seen from the state centre, this enclosure movement is, in part, an effort to integrate and monetize the people, lands, and resources of the periphery so that they become, to use the French term, *rentable* - auditable contributors to the gross national product and to foreign exchange." (2009: 4) However, the states experienced limited success in the matter as the mountains in the north provided a zone of refuge in that people could use the existing terrain to avoid the machinations of the state and effectively decreased, or in some cases nullified, dependency on wage based labour and economy.

Drawing on historical works, ethnography, and theoretical works, such as those of Gramsci, and Deleuze and Guattari, Scott suggests that the situation reveals an historical image of an oppressive, hegemonic state in search of subaltern labour and resources, such as grain, where the people of upland Southeast Asia are clearly set against becoming entwined with the state.¹ Within this historical framework, the geographic and political separation of peoples resulted in a core and periphery in which the state perpetuated a self realised image of development, while those outside of its incorporation were set apart to distinctly reside on the margins of the civilised, seen as being backwards (2009: 13-14, 22-26, 29, see also Karlsson 2013: 329, and

Gramsci 2005: 90-93). Here, in reference to the subaltern, Scott additionally argues that, “The economic, political, and cultural organization of such people is, in large part, a strategic adaptation to avoid incorporation in state structures.” (2009: 39). Part of this strategic adaptation rests within the social structure which is characterised by a high degree of flexibility and fluidity. As he notes, the basic units of social organisation may be comprised of, “nuclear families to segmentary lineages, bilateral kindreds, hamlets, larger villages, towns and their immediate hinterlands, and confederations of such towns” (Scott 2009: 36). All of which, when compared to the state, provided an easy means of mobility in response to pressures from the state and resultant displacement (Scott 2009: 32-39). As an additional strategy, those living in the Highlands were able to repel the state through economic means. By relying on shifting agriculture and subsistence farming, it proved too costly for the state to harvest while shepherding man and material between the core and the marginal, mountainous region. For forces other than the state, the shifting and dispersed agrarian offerings of the Highlands provided little in return for the efforts of those bent on war or invasion, while the state provided a larger, static prize (Scott 2009: 178-182, 190).

This particular historical view of the region provides an empowering take on life in the Southeast Asian Highlands. Looking at his discussion, there is an intentionality lying within the Highland peoples’ strategy of avoidance and resistance. He suggests throughout his work that the strategy was not necessarily a formalised means of resistance but is nevertheless ingrained in efforts to survive apart from the state’s purview and is present within numerous ethnic identities with different lingual groups who incorporate various evasion and subsistence strategies. As Karlsson notes, “Here Scott takes up an argument with Gramsci, or rather with Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, pointing out that the slave is indeed aware of his or her exploitation, but to discover such awareness one needs to look beyond the public domain and explore what Scott calls the, ‘hidden transcript’” (Karlsson 2013: 325). This point draws into question how aware people may actually be to a strategy of flexibility and evasion. In the case of the Hmong, I argue that there was little desire to formally join or involve themselves with the state, but a cohesive formalised collective understanding or agreement of avoidance was absent and remains absent

today.²

However, the idea of social flexibility among the inhabitants of Zomia in opposition to the rigidity of the state put forth by Scott can be seen in Karlsson's (2013) examination of the Naga of Northeast India. Here, the fluid nature of social structure has assisted in the survival of the Naga by enabling them to react to the encroachment and demands of the formalised Indian state. In Scott's work, Zomia is cast as an intentionally stateless region through the efforts of its inhabitants. To this point, Karlsson's work with the Naga suggest that the Naga possess a desire for their own modernised state (2013: 328). Turning to the Hmong, the longing for a state of their own has been discussed over many generations. Many of my informants were aware of General Vang Pao, the recognised leader of the Hmong in Laos, and his desire to create a self ruled Hmong state. The hope of an independent Hmong state had contributed greatly to the Hmong wanting to assist the CIA against the communists during the CIA Secret War. As we have previously established, the fall of the US forces and the Hmong never allowed for an independent state to be realised and those Hmong who fled Laos have felt that they are unable to return due to the communist forces controlling the region. My informants recalled that while in the US during the early 2000s, General Vang Pao, who had significant influence over the community but held no office, had attempted to secure armaments and enlist the help of Hmong in the US with the intention of returning to Laos and fighting for a state of their own. He was arrested for the possession of firearms in 2007 but passed away in 2011 awaiting trial (Weiner 2008, Martin 2011). This desire for the establishment of an independent Hmong state stands in contrast to Scott's argument for a directed strategy of state avoidance. Rather, it suggests that the dynamic of the core and periphery is comprised of issues of dominance and resistance in the hopes that the establishment of a formal state will effectively balance power and lend legitimacy and sovereignty to the newly established state. This desire for a Hmong state further suggests that a collective understanding of state avoidance, at least in a modern sense, was indeed not formalised, but is instead an underlying and deeply integrated strategy taken on to avoid an oppressive state while in the pursuit of self rule.

Furthermore, the issue of being stateless draws into question the attachment

of people to the land and ideas of belonging. In James Leach's ethnographic examination of the people of the Rai coast of Papua New Guinea, *Creative Land*, he remarks that, "the incorporation of land and places into a history of social relations is where life exists." (Leach 2004: 29). For Leach, an understanding of kinship and relation is not necessarily traced through genealogy but, "is an outcome of the relations between land and people." (Leach 2004: 29). Within this understanding, he proposes that his ethnographic model of kinship centres around the idea of production and the people being effectively tied to, and developing with, the land and not merely residing on it. As we will see, what the Hmong experience reveals lies in opposition to Leach's argument in that there is a transient relationship with the landscape, yet what remains firm and consistent are the matters of social relation and belonging. Therefore, with the loss of a possible Hmong state, I posit that this integrated strategy of social flexibility and avoidance, marked by a flexible association with the land, has been carried over to the US and has permitted the Hmong aggregate and its social components to recreate much of what granted them success in Highland Laos, or Laotian Zomia, all of which is sustained through a shared experience and ethos of continuity that is readily observable within what we can consider as the contemporary Hmong village in the US.

The Makings of A Village: Spatial Transition, Mutual Reliance, and Relatedness

Drawing on what I have discussed thus far, I now want to turn my attention to what makes a village. Here, I wish to establish a unit beyond the household that is an integral part of a Hmong community where we may explore the flexible strategies of mutual reliance, shifting attitudes towards land, and the obligations to a continuity of Hmong life that lies at the centre of family, village life, and the community.

When I first arrived in Denver I kept hearing reference to a part of town known as Ruby Hill. I asked some of the younger people I had met if they knew about the place. Some weren't familiar with it but a few remembered it from when they had been children in the 80s. During the summer they would often have to go to a family picnic at Ruby Hill park and they had fond memories of seeing their cousins and playing in the nearby woods and the small creek at the base of the hill.

After speaking with Father Purfield at the All Saints Catholic Church, I learned that Ruby Hill was actually where the first Hmong to arrive in Denver had been settled. Father Purfield had come to the parish in 1985 and had worked with a nun from the church. The nun, whose name Father Purfield or my informants could not recall, had led early efforts to work with community leaders and help them find work for themselves and many of the refugees, and to settle into their new lives. This included organising English lessons, continued efforts to sponsor families abroad for immigration, and helping the Hmong understand their civil rights as new immigrants. Father Purfield recalled that at first, the church was assisting only a few families but as more families found sponsorship through the church, the Hmong community of Ruby Hill became the significant living area and point of entry for the Hmong in Denver. By the 1980s some families had converted to different faiths, as in the case of the C&MA church, and others had left the Catholic Church in favour of traditional practices. Several families also moved away from the area and purchased homes in northern Denver in the Westminster area, an area roughly fifteen miles North of Ruby Hill, and others had moved even further out and had purchased farms or had chosen to live in some of the smaller towns in the countryside, such as Firestone, approximately fifty miles north of Ruby Hill.

With families settled in different parts of the country, the network of familial ties provided a means to determine the best areas for relocating the bulk of the family, which could consist of an additional nuclear family of 2 to 10 individuals, or through extension as many as 10 to 40 or more additional individuals. The larger communities in Fresno and in St. Paul served to attract many families. Returning to Kaub's situation, his family was first settled in Texas and after a few years, he made the decision to move the family to Oklahoma. In the 1990s, it was decided that Denver would offer opportunities that Oklahoma could not. Being a respected head of his household, he convinced other family members in Oklahoma and California to then move to Denver and they became part of the growing Hmong community. One of his brothers chose to stay in Oklahoma and another chose to stay in Fresno. However, they have remained involved in each others' lives and decisions have continued to be made that affect the entirety of the family over huge distances. Kaub's decision to convert to Christianity had a significant impact on his familial

relationships but the entirety of the family has adapted to this change and still hold a deep respect and a high degree of obedience in regards to his decisions and input into family and community matters.

One afternoon I found Kaub at his house drinking his customary cup of hot water and I asked him about growing up in the villages in Laos. Specifically, I asked him what makes, or constitutes, a Hmong village. He thought for a moment and then replied, “A village is important. Village life is hard you know. But you have family there. That is good. Maybe 30 or 40 families in a village and everyone knows everyone. Maybe everyone will help each other.” He went on to explain that an extended family may live under one roof and that the conditions were often cramped and at times very dirty. The village Kaub described was bound together through marriage and blood connection and that the heads of households answered to village elders, who in turn answered to clan elders and masters of the province. He explained that through this hierarchical system of responsibility, they were able to better watch over their own affairs and interests. He also remarked that a village usually was made up of either White Hmong or of Green Hmong. It was very uncommon for them to mix and they generally stayed away from one another and that it was very rare that a White would marry a Green. Discussing this somewhat further he said, “Today, here, there is little choice and so more and more White marry Green because that is what is here. In Laos, there is no way this would have been like this.” Within these statements, Kaub felt that family and a sense of connection by blood or marriage is what comprised a village. Sometimes he would talk about the activities and events in his village, such as farming, opium harvesting, food and feasts, births and deaths, but what made the village and what made it work was a matter of kinship, a matter of continuity and relatedness.³ Kaub had also remarked on numerous occasions that he and several of his brothers had spent several years in cities like Vientiane, going to school and trying to seek a way of life beyond that of the traditional offerings of the village. These years, primarily in the early 1970s, were marked with times of transition and travel as they would go back and forth between the central urban areas of the region and the remote villages they had grown up in. To go back to the village was to go back to the family, and their efforts in the urban centres were to provide income for their families in the village. What Kaub

had touched on was the element that binds a village and the Hmong aggregate together. It was a matter of patrilocal marriage practices and blood relations that kept everyone involved with one another and which perpetuated a sense of belonging within the immediacy of family and the village. There were also matters of a shared identity, a shared language, and connections, through blood or marriage, to larger frameworks of Hmong socio-political structures beyond the village.

In the memories of his youth, Kaub recalled how the land was used. He explained that when a plot was used up, they simply moved their efforts to the next available piece of land. Most of the land had been passed down through the family and that there were always new land acquisitions to be had through the different marriages of people in the village and between people from different villages. He recalled that when a man took a second, or even third, wife, he would usually have to provide a plot of land for her so that she had possession of something of value in addition to the bride wealth being paid to her family. Moreover, with the encroachment of military forces in the area in the 1960s and 1970s, villages would relocate to avoid conflict. In some instances, people would simply move into abandoned structures in new areas, or salvage pieces of other structures to add to their own as they developed or re-established their villages. Through this an understanding of attachment to the region emerges but the specifics of place were contested, transformed, and reified to meet the social and economic needs and pressures of family and community. Given that the Hmong have never possessed a state of their own, this attitude towards regional attachment and land usage is a significant point that highlights the flexibility and adaptation of the Hmong. In consideration of this point, the pieces of Hmong life that survived these processes of contestation and adaptation were the influence and organisational capabilities of the clan system and the importance of family and family connections that maintained a semblance of continuity.

Recollections concerning the transition of the Hmong from Laos to the US provide a means to further expand on the importance of family and social structure. As I have stated previously, the fall of the US forces in 1975 marks a dramatic shift in the region. Everyone who had not gotten out on the airlift from the airbase at Long Cheng had to flee from the villages of the Highlands and make their way as

best as possible to the Laos-Thailand border in the south, cross the Mekong river, and seek asylum in the camps of Thailand. During this critical time, the networks of family and relation were in chaos. Many of my informants had experienced this time but would often tell their stories up to the moment of their departure and then immediately pick their story back up again once they began their life in the camps, leaving a gap concerning their flight. I understood it to be a time too difficult to speak about as everyone who lived through that time had lost relatives and entire families. The only story that touched on this time concerned Grandma Va and her story touches on the importance of the social structure within the village.

I had heard the story from several people, with minor differences in recollection. Within the village, Grandma Va was not only a shaman and healer, she was also the one who looked after the children too young to work as the parents would go off to tend to their fields. After Long Cheng, everyone was in a panicked state and running to gather their belongings and organise themselves in order to evacuate. This being the case, Grandma Va, as the older female care giver, had been left in the village with the majority of the children. Some were babies, some were toddlers, and some were as old as seven or eight, with one girl being around 11. I tried many times to understand the full extent of the matter but the exact number of children was difficult to determine. Even she could not remember exactly how many there were and would only say, "There were a lot. They all cried." The stories from others placed the range from 10-15 children. Apart from her being the elder caregiver, people in the village had left the children with her because they felt the children would simply slow them down and in their frightened state, most thought only of themselves. Grandma Va recalled that she gathered the children and a few supplies with her, and it took her several days to get through the thick jungle with the children. There was the constant worry that the children crying from the situation and from not having enough food would draw the attention of the encroaching communist Pathet Lao soldiers. In addition to the threat of the soldiers, she would also talk of an incredible demon that had chased her and the children from the village. For days it followed them through the forest, always right behind them and always pushing them forward. She had tried to confront it one night but decided it was best to keep running and so she remembered always being pursued all the way to

the banks of the Mekong. The young girl who was the oldest of the bunch had helped her shepherd the children through the forest and they were all then able to cross into Thailand, and ultimately into a Thai refugee camp where she was met by some family that had left days before. All of the children that she had taken from the village survived the ordeal and some of them are now adults in the Denver community.

Memories involving the refugee camps often centre around finding family and trying to put their lives together as best as possible. The networks of family and the clan structures provided a means by which people were able to locate and reunite with one another. For the children brought in by Grandma Va, many were able to locate their parents as they arrived to the camp. Those who had lost their parents during their flight were adopted by couples without children or taken in by families in the camp who could watch over them. The difficulties of camp life have been described in the work of Koltyk (1998), and that of Faderman and Xiong (1998). As Koltyk noted, the refugee camps were liminal places that were essentially betwixt and between; a place where the occupants experience a suspension of their identity and of their lifeways (1998: 25). During this period of transition, the camps serve as an extremely bounded space for the Hmong. Their economic endeavours were certainly curtailed by the limitations of resources and restricted access to arable land. As I pointed out, in Laos the Hmong had maintained a regional connection in terms of attachment to space and place. However, within the confines of the camp and being subject to national authorities and interests, any notion of attachment was removed and what was left were matters of simply surviving by relying on social organisation and family. In Kaub's recollections, this suspension of life was very true but he also felt that the elders and heads of households took up their responsibilities and helped reorganise everyone as best as possible within the cramped conditions. Without the community leaders and family, he felt that survival in the camps would have been untenable. Kaub explained to me that some of his family had been able to leave with the airlift and were able to get to the US as early as 1976 while he and the bulk of the extended family lived in the camps for a little over five years. During this time, within the bounds of the camp, life carried on. He recalled that many people married and new families were formed. Extended families

grew and were brought together. The strong connections that had sustained village life reformed as best as possible. Finally, during this reorganisation the flexibility of family and social life that Vang (2010: 68) noted was effective in providing an opportunity for new leaders to emerge and for the maintaining the continuity of Hmong life.

To comment further on how people relied on each other and the closeness of everyone in the camps, I am drawn back to conversations with different women in the community. Many of the women were aware of my research and on one occasion I found myself sitting in Kaub's kitchen with several women preparing a feast. They would often talk about things that had happened in the camps and about their experiences with the children, most of which centred around a collective responsibility. They talked about a baby who constantly soiled himself and how it had been a huge burden on two of the women, Kaub's wife and sister. The women had to constantly clean the young boy and then walk a little over a mile to clean his diapers in the river. It was not uncommon for someone to mention his name in front of some of the women and someone would immediately laugh and comment that he was constantly soiled as a child and that it seemed not much had changed. While they laughed and joked about the matter, the boy, now a man, has fond memories of his two aunts taking care of him and of being watched by his grandmother. As the women continued to peel vegetables and grind peppers, the conversation turned towards memories of having to share life together and how close everyone was with one another during that time. A young woman walked into the kitchen and overhearing the conversation said that she didn't recall this collective approach to everything. The women looked at her and explained to her that she was simply too young to fully understand how it all had been. They then told her that she was only alive because of other people. The young woman seemed startled to hear this but the women went on to tell her that many of the new mothers in the camp were unable to produce milk for their newborns. With no formula to be had, other mothers who could still produce milk took up the task of feeding the babies for as long as they could. The young woman in the kitchen had been one of those babies and had survived on the generosity of others.

When I spoke to the young woman and to the boy from the story, now a man,

about the stories while alone, they both replied that they felt they had been raised by numerous people. Yes, they had their parents who would spend time with them but their parents were often drawn away while looking for work or having to work extreme hours for the family. Additionally, they were drawn away by family affairs and the children were often left with relatives, including their grandmother and their aunts. The young woman had distinct memories of once in the US, leaving school everyday and walking to her grandmother's house where she would be met by several of her cousins and uncles. Her grandmother would play with them, teach the girls to sew, show them movies, and often feed them dinner as the parents worked the night shifts in local factories. Occasionally there would be children from a very distant family who was in need of help. The young woman also remembered that when new families would arrive, related or not, her own family would go to meet them and help them make sure that they had everything that they needed and that they were settling in ok.⁴ These conditions of care and concern within the home and between households can still be seen in the homes of the Denver Hmong. And in the case of Grandma Va guiding the children and through life in the camps, there is an understanding that individuals and families within the Hmong community help and rely on one another.

What I have wanted to emphasise through these stories is the importance of the family and relationships between families within clan structures. Most importantly, there is a reliance on one another at the centre of an ethos of continuity. I also wish to emphasise the flexibility of attachment and detachment to space and place throughout this time of transition. If we examine these recollections of life, place provides context by which people are forced to live in particular ways. Life in Laos provided a greater degree of flexibility in regards to place, but attachment to place still remained transitory to a large degree. As Grandma Va's husband told me, the villages moved, they relocated, the houses fall apart, fields shifted and were used up, and there was the displacement of war. Within the camps they were confined. They were reduced to the bare basics of life and they were suspended in a liminal state unable to return to Laos and unsure of where they would go. While Kaub was in the camp with his family for a little more than five years, other informants had to wait in the camps until the mid 1980s; having spent over a decade struggling in a

temporary space, often having to wait for sponsorship from an organisation or relative in order to immigrate to the US, Australia, or France. Throughout the entirety of both experiences, the enduring feature of Hmong life is family and social structure, demonstrating the inherent flexibility of people highlighted in Scott's work that is critical to survival. The ability to retain that structure, organisation, and reliance on one another is what maintains the continuity of Hmong life and what it is to be Hmong. So in sum, a village can be composed of physical structures and its operations, attached to place. It can contain the means by which people may engage in economic and social activities, means by which they seek shelter and comfort, and as a locus of identity and being. But it is also much more, in that the health, livelihood, and very survival of a Hmong village is only sustained through the flexible networks of clan and familial relationships, bolstered through spousal integration from familial and clan intermarriage, the propagation of elders drawn from the heads of households as they age, and most importantly, through the birth of Hmong children, all of which constitute not only the village, but a renewal of the Hmong aggregate. As such, the village has the ability and potential to expand far beyond the matter of attachment to the physical accoutrement of life and boundedness of space and place, and can be further understood to exist as a matrix of relationships, a collection of interconnected and mutually cooperative families, that can withstand the stresses of mobility and transition.

Brigadoon: Life in the US and the Despatialised Village

In the preceding section, my purpose was to show that a village is comprised of much more than the space that it occupies. In what follows, it can be seen that the purpose of the village, and its makeup, has survived the moments of transition and exists in a despatialised form. By despatialised I mean to suggest that the idea and practice of the village continues to exist and operate as a network of support and as a means of continuity without the boundedness of a distinct space or place. While the members of the community may refer to the community or their extended families as "the village" in passing or in jest, here I suggest that the meaning is much deeper and always present in my own observations.

In Denver, there are few markers to identify the Hmong community's

presence or activities, and the community now extends far beyond the limits of Ruby Hill. As the different generations have gained access to educational and economic opportunities, they have relocated throughout the city; thus, the meaning of, and attachment to, space and place is no longer centralised and has instead become transient and flexible. The exceptions are to be found within different events, such as funerals, soccer tournaments and the Hmong New Year, and at specific points, such as churches. These spaces permit the villages an opportunity to coalesce into a visible form of coordination and cooperation where they then return to their despatialised state of being.

In Vincente Minnelli's 1954 film production of Alan Jay Lerner's musical, *Brigadoon*, two men from New York set out to hunt in the Highlands of Scotland. Tommy Albright, played by Gene Kelly, and Van Johnson, played by Jeff Douglas, pause their trip to discuss life and their whereabouts. Suddenly Tommy remarks, "Hey look at that!" Van responds, "What do you know, it looks like a village!" and Tommy replies, "Well it is." Below them in the mist they are able to see several buildings of a small village in the early morning. Van looks for a moment and says, "I thought you said there were no towns on the map around here." Tommy starts to get up and says, "There must be people down there, there must be food, that's what we're interested in. Funny it isn't on the map." Van says, somewhat under his breath, "Maybe they don't like publicity." As the story unfolds, it is revealed that the village of Brigadoon is lost to the mist, only to appear once every 100 years. While it is a love story set within a fairytale, the representation of Brigadoon is punctuated by the issue of boundedness. There is a boundedness of space and the people themselves are bound to one another in that there is a hermetic quality to the situation where no one can ever leave, and very few enter. To compound the matter further, should any villager choose to leave, the village will become lost forever. The village exists, but for those outside its borders, when it is out of sight, it is out of mind and becomes a subject of legend. Keeping this story, and the framework of what I have discussed thus far, in mind, I now want to revisit experiences from the community, and with the Hmong C&MA and Baptist churches, to further examine the ideas of continuity and boundedness of Hmong life in the US.

Late in 2013 there was another funeral and I was called again to help.

Grandma Va had suffered a sudden stroke and had passed. When she died, as the matriarch of her family, she had over 200 people that she called “son”. Her passing devastated much of the family and her funeral was like no other that I had seen, as people from all over the country arrived to pay their respects and remember her life. The day before preparations for the funeral were to begin, I had been at the house and three chickens had gotten out of their cardboard boxes and they had strutted around the garage, always at arms length and with watchful eyes. They would scatter underfoot as people rushed back and forth and occasionally an adolescent would chase them around trying to get them back into their boxes. When I arrived the next evening following the instructions given to me by Kaub, the same chickens had been dispatched and two women stood in the kitchen of the small house and were busy with the task of plucking and cleaning the limp bodies over a steaming sink.

Walking into the garage, a table had been set up along the length of the space and massive slabs of beef had been laid out with young men pulling and stripping the meat from the bone. From the long fluorescent light I could see that the room had been covered in plastic tarps with buckets for storing the meat and the saws with which they worked the carcass. The air was musty and layered with the smell of blood and raw meat. A long piece of the vertebral column was thrust into my face, and I was told by Kou to help prepare the meat as there was much left to do and they needed as much help as they could get. The vertebral column was fresh and steamed in the cold air of the garage. Where refrigerated joints are often stiff and fused, the freshness of the slaughtered animal allowed for the different vertebrae to swivel against one another and I found it hard to control as I sat down and began my tasks. I asked Kou who had killed the animal and he explained, “There are five boys in this family so there have to be five cows. We bought them last week and we just put them down today. I didn’t do it. I don’t like having that on my conscience. But some people like doing it.” I asked how they went about the task and he replied, “Just a gun, any gun. Someone in the family always has one, a .22, a rifle, a 9mm, something. Right in the head but sometimes people miss and the thing limps around. That’s the worst. Usually it just falls and its pretty unsettling.” Kou’s cousin overheard us, and looking at me he put his fingers to his head, dropped his thumb

and just said, “POP!”

The entire event involving the cattle had been a family matter. It turned out that the five sons had been to the farm to meet with the heads of other families and with community leaders, similar to what had happened with Niam Xoob’s funeral a year before. While the sons had bought the cattle, the sale was negotiated through a farmer who was close to the family. Given that beef is very expensive for these events, having purchased five cows was a considerable display of wealth by the sons and a public display of devotion to their mother. Just as the funeral before, this one had taken weeks of planning and organising through the family elders and heads of households. And just as before, these elders and the heads of households had gone about assigning work responsibilities and duties. The entire coordination of the event had brought with it clear lines of communication between central figures and the family and community had responded and agreed to meet at specific places and to provide specific foods and materials by the desired time. Just as in the case of the previous funeral, people sat in groups working out the details but given Grandma Va’s status, this was a massive undertaking. I remarked to Kou that I had not seen this much food and material in one space. He looked at me and said, “Well, the whole village is contributing.” And with that, Kou sat back to work. We worked until the early hours of the morning, right up until the first hours of the three days of the funeral. For the remainder of the three days I would return to the house off and on to help with whatever was needed. Kaub always took time to tell me what was going on, particularly when determining what cuts of meat needed to go to which person as an offering of thanks for helping out with the funeral.⁵

Kou’s remark about the village coming together and pooling their efforts had struck me. Taking notice of everyone who was involved in the funeral preparations, I could see that it was not merely a matter of immediate family. The help that was being offered reflected the bonds of community that had been present in Kaub’s stories of village life and of the numerous stories of surviving in the camps and during the troublesome transitions of relocation and adaptation. Men had busied themselves with the heavy labour, such as butchering the larger animals, while the women had seen to their expected tasks of dealing with chickens, vegetables, and the cooking of soups and at least 50 pounds of rice in their massive kettles. The children

that were too young to work had been ushered to the basement where they sat with several grandmothers and great-grandmothers. While the children watched an animated movie, the grandmothers chatted about who had gotten engaged and bragging about their latest jewellery purchases, all the while gossiping about affairs and how much time they had spent with their grandchildren. As quickly as I would see the “village” come together in a pattern of organised activity, just as Tommy saw Brigadoon emerging in the mist, the complete image would recede as people returned to their homes and went about their own affairs that they had put off while helping out.

In these situations, the funerals of Niam Xoob’s and Grandma Va, I had observed the veiled networks of a village coalesce into a visible, localised nest of activity. While these were particularly important occasions, reflecting on my weekly trips to the different church groups, the same characteristics had been present. The C&MA church was of particular interest. As we will see in chapter 3, the C&MA is, for the most part, an isolated community in that they hold strong opinions on what it means to be a Hmong Christian. In doing so, they tend to stay away from the traditional events in the community and there is always a degree of tension between them and other Hmong Christian groups. Over the course of the year, I came to know several people from the congregation and their families, and I would meet them almost every week. In the church, everyone seemed connected in some way, either through blood relation or marriage. When I began to ask about this, I found that this had not always been the case. Some did know others through the camps and even in Laos, but as a church, many members had joined the congregation once they had settled in Colorado. As the church had been founded through a group of Green Hmong, the Green dialect was dominant. This foundation had attracted other Green Hmong as well as a few White Hmong who were able to bond over their faith. The congregation had continued to grow through the marriage of its members and through a constant influx of children being born to member parents. In this manner, the core of the congregation appeared to contain around the aforementioned 350 active members, which in turn represents a network of roughly 40-50 families and some extended families. The majority of the young couples that I met there had met one another through church and through events hosted by the church. Often times

their families had known each other long before they were born and the couple may have known one another as children and grew up together. In these relationships, the families have histories with one another, as was evident when speaking with families such as the Vangs, the Mouas, or the Hers.

The Baptist church displayed the same characteristic, with the predominant dialect being White Hmong. The congregation is significantly smaller, again around 150 active members, and houses roughly 15-20 families and some extended families. While the two churches are aware of one another, they do have their differences of opinion, which at times strains their relationship. What is interesting to note is that the churches exhibit a relationship similar to what Kaub had described with the villages in Laos in that the White and the Green generally avoided one another if possible. It would seem that the same dynamic has returned between the two churches. With that said, the youth groups of the two churches occasionally intermingle but it is common for couples to emerge from the same church they share and where their families are closest. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, many members of the Baptist church are more lenient in their dealings with the traditional community and are therefore more inclusive of others who share a different understanding of spiritual life. In both situations, the church provides a means by which I was able to observe the despatialised village that I have described. The relationships and connections in each of the churches follow similar patterns and there is involvement, exchange, and communication beyond the spatial confines of the church. When attending service, the entirety of the village is revealed and the planned activity of the church, be it a Spring Cleaning, a bake sale, or a youth event, sets the village in motion in an imminently observable way. And with the final task completed and the church doors closed, the village returns to its ethereal state with the inhabitants' connections to one another wound tightly over various areas of the city.

Returning to the discussion of the foundations of an ethical and moral life within the Hmong Baptist and C&MA churches, the obligation to family and to community played a critical role in the development of a Hmong person's inner moral dialogue and understanding of self. In addition to responsibilities to the church and to the community, there is the reinforcement of continuity within the

moral obligations towards family. As people come of age, find one another and new families are formed, new heads of household emerge as well as new congregational members. Drawing on scripture, sermons, workshops, and bible study groups throughout the year encouraged young couples towards starting their own families with the understanding that it is God's will and part of their moral responsibility to God for them to follow the prescribed biblical duties of man and woman. With the C&MA, first and foremost they are concerned with the health, maintenance, and perpetuation of their own congregation and faith which follows the patterns and purpose of Hmong life that I have described thus far. However, this rhetoric is fuelled by an additional purpose which is set within their devotion to the continuance of their mission activities. With the continuation of life within the congregation, new missionaries can be brought forth to fulfil not only their duties to their families and to the congregation, but also the goals of their millenarianist mission.

Looking back at Robbins' notion of continuity viewed through world breaking and world making (2007a, 2011) that we will explore further in Chapter 3, he had proposed that upon conversion or acceptance of Christianity there is a complete separation from the past. In the cases of the two churches, both have continued to employ a network of relatedness that exhibits the flexibility and continuity of Hmong ways of living. The churches have been able to employ this flexibility to consolidate their congregations; their villages. Each church has different views on the incorporation or rejection of traditional practices but they have both retained the core focus on the family and extended family, and the resultant binding measures of codependency and mutual reliance within their respective networks of relations and between their congregations. In consideration of this, I suggest that while the networks of relation within the churches provide the means by which the despatialised village can emerge, the focus on family and the rhetoric pertaining to marriage and procreation fits seamlessly with traditional Hmong strategies of relatedness which I discussed in the preceding section, and which continues to mark the central ethos of Hmong continuity.

By looking at different congregations and networks of traditional practitioners through the idea of the despatialised village, there are roughly between eight and ten intertwined villages which constitute the whole of the Denver Hmong

community. As we have seen, there are connections between people over distances ranging from the same street, or in the case of Kaub, over states and countries. The Denver Hmong community remains connected through the networks of family and relation to the other Hmong communities in the US. Many of my informants have relatives in Minnesota, Georgia, California, and Alaska. While the distances are great, decisions made for the whole of the extended family have effect beyond those in the immediate vicinity. Decisions made in Denver or in Fresno may affect how weddings are arranged, where someone will ultimately live, particularly in the case of the elderly, or how family or clan resources will be distributed. Taken as a whole, these connections comprise the US Hmong aggregate and the interactions between the different communities, villages within the communities, and the families themselves further reveal the dependency and reliance on one another which maintains a continuity of Hmong life and identity. In the section that follows, I will examine one of the primary means by which the community internally maintains and marshals itself.

Additional Strategies: The Role of *Hais Plaub*, Belonging, and Exclusion

In my discussion of James Scott's (2009) work at the beginning of this chapter, we saw that Scott argued that the people of Zomia were intent on avoiding incorporation into the state. In addition to the flexibility of social structures and their response to the shifting landscape, I suggest that the strategy of avoidance is further supported through the means by which the communities govern themselves. In the case of the Hmong, this can be readily observed in the major decisions handed down by the village or clan elders in Laos, Thailand, and in the US that affected how people moved or accessed resources. However, there is an additional component to the matter that I wish to discuss here, and that is the function of *hais plaub*, which translates as "speaking about problems", and is referred to as Family Court by many of my informants. Decisions made through *hais plaub* can have far reaching effects within the Hmong community and can dictate the nature of internal and external family relationships. While I address an overview of the function of *hais plaub* here, Chapter 2 will examine the matter further in order to better understand its role in

Hmong society and its effects on family and individuals.

For the most part, the Hmong of Denver are extremely hesitant to involve outside judicial courts, police forces, or attorneys to settle family or communal disputes and prefer to address matters themselves. If there are disagreements between people, be it over money, property, or insult, within the structure of the family, the village, the clan, or between clans that cannot be resolved amicably, the matters can be resolved through *hais plaub*. If this is to be the case, the elders of both parties will meet to represent their respective interests. If their elders are not available, substitutes will be selected from the family or extended family who can best represent the person's interests. This way of addressing issues was called upon by traditional practitioners and Christian Hmong alike. And because the *hais plaub* can take up significant time, it is not something that is taken up lightly. Often people will have to travel and they will have to spend significant amounts of time speaking to everyone on the matter and then have both parties meet to resolve the situation.

Many of the meetings of Family Court that I heard about over the course of my fieldwork involved divorce requests. As I suggested within the overview of Hmong life in the introduction, and as we will see in the following chapter, marriage is not necessarily simply a matter of one person marrying another but rather it is one family marrying another family. The interests of the families become entwined and there is usually a significant monetary or material value to the arrangement. The requests for divorce often involved accusations of infidelity as justification and in one situation, an accusation of failing to produce a son. In these matters the husband will be represented by the older paternal male heads of household in his family, and the wife will be represented by the older paternal male heads of household. In my understanding of divorce proceedings, a divorce is seldom granted except in the case of clear physical abuse. These situations, usually dependent on severity, present an exception where it is possible that the family or the person being abused may ask the police, public services, or courts to become involved. Even in this situation I know of one divorce which was declined and the wife was forced to return to her husband with the understanding that the physical abuse would stop.

In Laos, if a situation of infertility arose where no children had been produced, a husband may request a *hais plaub*, to gain approval for a divorce or to

take an additional wife. Within a contemporary setting, the husband will generally request a divorce so that he may find another wife to bear children. In many cases, since polygamy is no longer condoned, men have avoided the *hais plaub* by taking mistresses in an attempt to justify their desire for producing children. In almost all situations such as this, the woman is to blame for any issues surrounding the couple's infertility. In these types of situations, the Family Court is there for the purpose of re-establishing stability in the family, keeping families together, and resolving differences within and between the collection of families and clans in order to maintain a functional and healthy social structure. The system provides a means by which the families, villages, and community can retain a wide degree of autonomy outside of the structure of formalised systems of US law enforcement, or in a historical sense, the controlling armatures of the Laotian state. And while the Family Court has no legal standing outside of the community, failure to follow the decisions of the *hais plaub* in extreme situations can result in someone becoming ostracised, which in many ways can be more powerful than anything the legal courts can do. As we have seen there is such a shared connection in experience and mutual reliance that in general, the mere possibility of exclusion is enough of a threat to ensure compliance.

The issue of exclusion is a particularly difficult one to address as those who leave the family or community and do not come back, are generally not discussed and have little to no voice to represent their interests or experiences. Through the system of the despatialised village and its maintenance between members and the *hais plaub*, the whole of the community is able to address the majority of its own needs with little outside interference. Out of this there emerges an understanding of togetherness and belonging. As one informant said to me when talking about family, "You can't really even say you are Hmong without family". When I would ask other individuals, of all generations, how they felt about this comment, all of them would think for a minute and then completely agree to its premise. To expand this a bit further, the issues of language, culture, ethnicity, shared experience, and relatedness are bound together and are central to the idea of being Hmong. It is what comprises the somewhat hermetic border of the Hmong aggregate, marshaled within the structures of the interconnected village and family life. To be removed from this

milieu is to suffer a loss of collective identity and the loss of an intricate support network. I say somewhat hermetic because a degree of porosity does exist within the experiences of the younger generations. Many of them have gone to school out of state, or they work in jobs with people from a myriad of backgrounds, and there is a degree of flexibility in regards to their own autonomy, involvement, and reliance on traditional support networks. With that said, all of those I interviewed or spoke with still actively involved themselves with family matters and with matters affecting extended family and the clan, and many who had been away moved back to be with the bulk of their extended families. Furthermore, they often found themselves receiving and following instruction from their elders on what they should and should not do within their own lives and families, and in regards to their obligations to the continuity of the whole of the community.

In the situations I have discussed thus far, everyone has elected to stay within the contours and structure of Hmong life in the US. And, as I mentioned, I found it very difficult to ask about those who had left the community and not returned. The reasons for why these people choose to separate themselves from the community are varied. Some situations involve the marriage between two people with the same last name. While not related by blood there is a strict taboo on the matter and the couple usually find themselves on the margin of the whole of the community or completely excluded. In the stories that I heard surrounding this subject, many of the couples will try to survive on their own and will move to other Hmong communities in an effort to distance themselves from the issues at home. When these means do not work, the marriage can dissolve due to social stress. In the case of the latter, the couple will often return to their home networks as best as possible, usually returning by re-establishing and bolstering connections with their immediate family, primarily through their mother.⁶ Other reasons for exclusion can centre around sexuality. Over my time with the Hmong in Denver, I did not meet any homosexual individuals or couples. Sexuality is seldom discussed and homosexuality is often a buried secret in the family. Any mention of individuals or couples would often include mention of them leaving their families and establishing a life away from the whole of the community. Finally, there are those who choose to live a life that is marked by complete separation from family, the village, and the community. In one case, a

Hmong woman had chosen to better herself by going to a university on the east coast and chose not to return. This decision resulted in several years of difficult relationships with her immediate and extended family, particularly so with her being a woman in a very traditional household with a dominating father. She eventually decided to have some contact with the family and she has started to come home to participate in key family events, such as funerals, weddings, and occasionally for Christmas.

Through the *hais plaub*, we can further see that there is a dependency on one another to govern Hmong life and in doing so, it perpetuates the Hmong understanding of how life should be maintained. Furthermore it is reflective of expectations of proper behaviour in individuals and families. This is particularly evident in how the *hais plaub* handles issues of marriage and divorce and its focus on preserving the family and strands of relation. It signifies a sense of belonging and investment in the community by individuals who adhere to the authority and wishes of the Family Court. The issues of belonging and exclusion also designate the boundaries of proper relations and the obligations and duties of individuals and to be excluded can create serious issues for individuals, couples, or groups of people who are then confronted with accepting the authority of the community, or choosing to go their own way and risk the loss of security and the means to rely on others. In conjunction with the strategies of interdependency and the flexibility of relation and authority, the *hais plaub* operates as an additional avenue of pressure that contributes to the maintenance of an ethos of continuity and the perpetuity of Hmong life.

Conclusions: Ethics and Morality, Responsibilities

Within this chapter I have discussed the important function of relation found within the Hmong aggregate and the Denver community that further speaks to defining the contours of Hmong life and notions of continuity. The flexibility of relationships and reliance on one another has continued to provide the Hmong of Denver with a means of security and a collective sense of mutual reliance. While the strategies and functions that I have discussed may extend back to their experiences in the Highlands of Laos, our examination of the village reveals that these matters have been reproduced and have continued to provide a strength to the community in its

times of transition, and in its maintenance of life in the US. Furthermore, I have tried to emphasise the importance of family and the connections of extended family that reside at the heart of Hmong life which provides a way of understanding Hmong sociality, broader meanings of relatedness and experience. While the structure of Hmong social life could be explored through a classical approach to kinship, the experiences and views of the Hmong presented here reveal what the Hmong feel constitutes kinship and degrees of relatedness. Moreover, the strategies employed by the Hmong reveal a robust and flexible means of social adaptation that has allowed the Hmong to overcome the challenges of transition and to weather outside pressures to assimilate.

While the matters of function can be seen as sustaining life and addressing contemporary issues, it also binds people to one another and fosters an environment of belonging and of dependency on one another. The reliance on family and relation creates an obligation in individuals to perpetuate life as the Hmong understand it. In so doing, foundational perspectives of Hmong society are being retained and reproduced and through these actions, an ethos of continuity is to be found.

As we will see in the following chapter and those after, this ethos of continuity has continued to present and perpetuate itself in Hmong society, beginning with matters of family. However, how this ethos is being reproduced and understood is facing challenges. In Chapter 2, I will be examining Hmong concepts of family with a particular focus on generational tensions, gender dynamics and expectations, while accounting for the pressures that surround individuals to marry and reproduce in order to begin families of their own. Additionally, I will be examining the role of *hais plaub* as a means to marshal the borders of family and belonging. In doing so, I will return to the issues that I have discussed in this chapter in order to further explore how these structures and perspectives lend themselves to notions of entanglement.

¹ The notion of the state can be seen to be drawn from the thoughts of Deleuze and Guattari in that, “One of the fundamental tasks of the State is to striate the space over which it reigns, or to utilize smooth spaces as a means of communication in the service of striated space” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 449). Scott’s points further echo Gramsci’s examination of the relationship between the urban and the rural and the differentiation of development in each; in particular the relationships of the hegemonic and subaltern (Gramsci 2005).

² State interaction through the recollections of my informants largely focused on the trade of opium

and engaged in business and trade with the French-Indochinese government within the city of Vientiane. Here they pursued numerous opportunities that revolved around cash based, or wage based, economies that were an intrinsic part of the state.

³ I found that this particular trope of relatedness and connection was repeated time and again through my conversations with others in the community. Stories from the villages were often times humorous. It was not uncommon to hear how lazy someone was, or how dirty they were while living in the village. And no matter who they were talking about, they would always explain the person's relationship to themselves, and ultimately that would explain a person's place within the village and what was expected of that person.

One story comes to mind that I heard several times over the course of the year. It was about a woman who was the second wife of a village elder. Every telling of the story by different people would begin with the storyteller identifying their relation to the elder and then stating that this was about his second wife. She would go to the opium fields everyday and she would disappear. Most people would see her set out towards the fields in the morning with her tools but then they would not see her for long stretches of time. The story always ends with the image of the wife resting in a ditch on the side of the field puffing on her opium pipe. The storytellers were often young but they had heard the stories from their parents and when the wife was a live, she had simply said that she had worked her whole life and she was entitled to rest. People would laugh at the woman being so lazy but the storyteller would also return to the web of relation that was outlined in the beginning of the story and acknowledge that it put the rest of the family in a position where they had to work harder.

⁴ It is important to note that while it is customary for elders in the community to be referred to as grandmother or grandfather, the relationships between the children and their older caregivers is much deeper. The grandparent in question may or may not be related by blood but is almost always tied to the family through marriage, as in one case the grandfather's youngest brother married the second cousin of Kaub. Even though the connection is spread apart quite a bit, the man was first called an uncle and with age, became grandfather. It is certainly not uncommon to hear people mention four or more sets of grandmothers and grandfathers in their memories.

⁵ This instruction would often entail laying out the quarters of one of the cows. Kaub would identify which pieces would be cut, where they should be cut, and why a certain person would be entitled to that piece. The cut piece would then be put into a black trash bag, labelled and put into the freezer for distribution later.

⁶ In other scenarios, such as when a Hmong person marries someone who is not Hmong, the same situation can occur but more often or not, the family of the Hmong spouse will make an effort to include the outsider as best as possible.

Chapter 2

The Hmong Family

During my discussions with my informants Kaub and Dave, I presented the straightforward question, “What is a family?” For both men, the question caused them to pause and think for a second. Dave quickly said, “Well its a husband and wife.... Children”. For Kaub, the answer was more extensive. “It is the husband, the wife, their children. It is my parents and my brothers. My sisters and their children. My wife’s brothers. They are my family.” The two are separated by nearly thirty years in age and their answers reflect the focus of what they feel family means. Moreover, the two perspectives draw distinction between what can be termed family and families. Of course Dave considers his parents, his siblings, and his sibling’s children to be his family, but his immediate thoughts were directed towards an image of the nuclear family and this structural identification is what defines the subject for him. According to Thao, “Family is the most important unit and the basic nurturing institution in Mong society. It consists of all the people living under the authority of the same household, often referred to as extended family. The Mong family is organized strictly as a patriarchy in a patrilineal system” (2008:35).

For Kaub, the initial concept of family is much broader and more encompassing in its formulation. This is by no means a stark division of accepting one view in exclusion of the other, but rather there is a graduated perspective regarding the subject of family. By beginning with a distinct focal point of what family is, opinions are punctuated and affected by generational views and tensions stemming from the transition, experience, and adaptation of the Hmong. As we saw in the introduction previous chapter, the Hmong have experienced traumatic transitions from their life in Laos to the United States and they have continued to employ strategies that create a sense of cohesion and continuity in the Hmong community. This is derived from the networks of mutual reliance and relatedness that operate across networks within what we saw as the despatialised village. Within these networks family remains situated as a robust and central thread of Hmong life.

While the perspectives of both men are very valuable in establishing different generational views on family, both thoughts are purely descriptive. Through our

conversations and their descriptions these men were able to describe the entangled inclusive and exclusive relations of extended families, the complex connections of marriage, and the binding ties of blood. In my own observations, these perspectives provided a significant starting point from which to begin to understand organizational and functional aspects of Hmong family life, but it failed to provide a satisfactory answer as to the meaning of family. Beyond this starting point, my own observations and conversations emphasised moments of interaction, conflict and resolution, and most importantly, a sense of personal and shared experience on the part of my informants in their daily lives. Through action and involvement, varying intensities of meaning and effect emerge to shape, strengthen, and at times challenge, the contours of family. Building upon the previous chapter, this chapter will be exploring the idea of the emergent and entangled family, what family should ideally be, generational and gendered tensions, and the reproduction of family.

In Sucheng Chan's work, *Hmong Means Free* (1994), the collection of Hmong life stories reveals the struggles and difficulties of different families as they left Laos and settled in the US. The stories draw into focus the importance of family as they rely on each other to overcome economic, political, and cultural obstacles over the course of their relocation. Many of the recollections centre on surviving the transition, beginning with the shattering and re-organisation of immediate and extended families and working towards a concerted effort on the part of everyone to carve out a new life in the US together. Schein (1987) has approached the subject of acculturation as a process of interaction between a host and settlers where the settlers attempt to manage their exposure and dependence on the host. Schein further develops this point by stating, "The Hmong respond as they do not because they are Hmong but because they are coping with and American society which presents them with certain possibilities." (1987: 89)

In many of my conversations with informants about their transitions to life in the US, they often recalled that within the first few months of arrival in the US they were overwhelmed with trying to understand where they were, what they needed to be doing, and trying to find out who was with them in the relocation settlement. For my informants, this time period offered numerous possibilities as to what life would be or could be after the resettlement process. They had time to reflect on the past and

think of the future. And while their stories offered an image of a prosperous life, there were also fears about how they would integrate or cope with life in America. In Vang's examination of these early experiences he notes that, "For the first Hmong refugee arrivals, their ethnicity served as an organizing force." and as more refugees arrived, the organisational capabilities within the settlement began to increasingly rely on traditional clan and family connections and allegiances (2010:68). The re-establishment of the family and clan networks reintroduced and strengthened familiar feelings of organisation and cooperation in the wake of mass upheaval.

As they continued to integrate, the Hmong were expected by the sponsoring churches to seek employment, study English, and participate in the church. Many of my informants had been farmers while living in Laos and very few possessed any trade skills prior to their immigration. The shift to an industrial economy created strains for many of them as they struggled to keep their families together. The difficulties of economic shifts have been examined in ethno-historical works by Hareven and by Frykman and Löfgren. Hareven's (1982) examination notes that a shift in the economy in America to a wage based system in the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, forced families to organise themselves and their activities around the needs of their employers. This resulted in a reorganisation of family life and a diminished focus on family, which had a profound effect on how members of families interacted with one another. Through their examination and critique of Swedish life, Frykman and Löfgren (1987) have also identified shifts in production and labour as a root cause for the restructuring of family. With the introduction of industrial production and time keeping, how people organised and interacted with their families altered to suit the needs of industry and wage based labour.

In many cases, the church encouraged newly arrived Hmong to seek employment in manufacturing and assembly work, which many continue to do today. As Chan's (1994) stories reveal, families found themselves in new places having to perform new tasks with new demands and so the families responded as best they could. When speaking with Grandma Va, she recalled that after arriving in the US younger men and women followed the church's instructions and began to learn new skills in factories and assembly plants. With everyone working further and longer hours

away from home, Grandma Va once again found herself caring for everyone's younger children who were not in school, many having to stay overnight on a regular basis. This represents a significant departure from what the Hmong had experienced in Thailand and Laos where younger children could generally be kept with the family in the home or taken to the fields when farming.

Grandma Va's experience reflects the importance of extended family networks during the years of transition in the US. However, as discussed earlier, the work of Dunnigan recognises a shift from in focus from the extended family to that of the nuclear family (1982: 127). From the 1980s through today different generations of Hmong have encountered various elements and institutions in American life that have informed their opinions and attitudes towards family. As a result of this Americanisation of younger Hmong there are generational contentions of family as represented in the remarks of Kaub and Dave. In what follows, matters of family and relatedness are situated in a manner that demonstrate an emergence and entanglement that are integral to an experience of family.

“The Enmeshed Family”

Over the winter of 2012, I spent a lot of time visiting Kaub at his home. One evening I walked into Kaub's living room and a family meeting was underway. The men of the family had gathered to discuss current events in the community and to catch up on some recent occurrences in Minneapolis. I was invited to join them as they sat around the square coffee table on overstuffed sofas sipping tea, coffee, and hot water. For my sake, they switched to speaking English with only occasionally slipping into Hmong when they struggled to express a complex idea or suggestion. The conversation ran from political topics in the nation to politics within the whole of the Hmong community.

As their conversation progressed and they continued to drink together, they began to recall recent weddings, traditional and Christian with the latter being of particular interest to them. Kaub and another man were Baptist, Uncle Xyoob had continued to follow traditional practices, and another, related to Uncle Xyoob, held Christian leanings but occasionally returned to traditional spiritual viewpoints and practices. They remarked upon what they felt was proper behaviour by some of the

newly weds and how the different events fared in terms of respect and deference to the older generation and their faiths. Some of the details of the events, such as the quality and selection of foods, they saw as being improper or not up to the standard expected. The men had known many of the newly weds as children and had been present at key moments in their lives. They had seen Christmas seasons, birthdays, graduations, and the transitions to adulthood. Most of the newlyweds had been born in the US but a few had been babies in the camps and so recollections ranged from the person's achievements, the fulfilment of their potential, and their struggles. The marriages had all been between Hmong men and Hmong women and had been negotiated between their respective families. Kaub sipped at his water and continued to comment on the buffet at the wedding he had recently attended in La Crosse, Wisconsin. "They had a lot of food, you could have almost anything you could have wanted. Good fish and chicken. They showed they were very happy for having us there."

Since two of the men, Kaub included, had presided over the weddings and offered the principle blessings, they were also familiar with the familial attitudes and the dynamics of the relationships between families. In one particular situation, a young man had gotten a young woman pregnant and had been forced by both families to marry. As the men talked it became apparent that the young man was certainly in love with the woman but he was uncertain about his future and how he would feel about his marriage as time went on. The conversation paused for a second and Kaub looked right at me and said, "You see, this is what a man has to do if he does this to a woman. He has to be responsible. He did the right thing. Kids today, they think they can do what they like, but the family knows better."

After a pause in the conversation, Uncle Xyoob decided to retire for the evening and made his way to the door. Kaub saw him off and wished him well. As the door closed, I asked Kaub about the young man who had been forced to marry. I thought, Surely the man and the woman, particularly being only 19 and 18, would have a say in their future. Kaub explained to me that they had made their choice when the woman had become pregnant. The young man knew he would be responsible and that he had been brought up to take responsibility. Kaub had found it uncharacteristic of the young man to display such hesitance. While the young man's

family had been upset at the situation, the young woman's family had been incensed at the idea that their daughter's virtue had been tarnished, and by extension, the whole of the family. They had insisted that the only way to make it right was for the young man to marry their daughter and the young man's family had been forced to concede. As it turns out, the process of negotiation had left the young man open to the retribution of his mother in law to be. He had been forced to perform his marital request in an almost grovelling manner, repeatedly having to bow to the bride's mother while asking for her permission and blessing several times. He had also been struck with a significant bride price, well beyond what he would have had to pay had the situation not been forced. With the marriage situated as a certainty, the young man was in a position whereby he was duty bound to fulfil the requests of the bride's family and simply had to bear the humiliations. The punitive measures had alleviated some of the animosity and concerns between the families, but it had also raised new issues in regards to what people felt had been fair in the process and what had been excessive.

In the latter part of negotiations, where the bride's dowry had been discussed, the bride's family had fully met the expectations of the young man's family. It was agreed that the young woman would marry with her full, traditional dowry that included her jewellery of gold and silver, gold and silver bars of varying baht, her traditional clothing, and other family heirlooms. This not only displayed the bride's family's concern for her wellbeing, it also reflects on the properness of the family in that they met their obligations, fully, despite the difficult situation of the young couple. All through this, Kaub had been there to try and help alleviate some of the issues and to restore trust and promote good will between the families.

He explained that several people in the young man's family had put pressure on the young man to do everything he was told for the sake of upholding his responsibility, his Christian duty as a man, and for also preserving the good standing of the whole of the family and for protecting the family's interests. As the bride's family had come around to honour their obligations, so the young man would need to fulfil his so that his family could then fulfil theirs by acknowledging the young woman as a daughter where they could then bring her into the fold of the family. By doing this, the groom's family is taking responsibility for her and effectively saying

that the bride, with her dowry, has been taken care of by her family up until the point of the wedding, and now we, the groom's family, will care for and protect her.

Apart from the wedding negotiations, both of the families had taken a keen interest in planning the wedding. The families had wanted to show everyone that they were ok with the match and they planned a fairly large event with over three hundred guests. Kaub remarked to me that the families had to show that everything was acceptable and that nothing inappropriate had taken place. Kaub predicted that many of the issues between the families would fade when the baby came. While the families were now intertwined through the complex exchanges and agreements of marriage, the baby would further bond them by blood and that was something that could not be dissolved¹.

When I asked him to tell me more about the different weddings, in particular the blessings, he explained that the priest would always wish the couple well and that they find a life within God's grace. I knew from experience that others at the weddings would also offer their blessings to the new couples. We talked about these blessings and generally speaking, every blessing at a Hmong wedding contains at least one reference to wishing the couple many children, suggesting that a happy marriage and life together is to be found in the production of a family. Kaub laughed and said in a stern but excited tone, "Of course! You can't have a family without children! Its what is right."

Later that week I returned to Kaub's house and his wife called for us to sit around the table. She placed fragrant, steaming bowls of pho in front of us and our conversation on matters of family continued over dinner. Recently a woman in the community had tried to divorce her husband and the matter had continued to escalate. Kaub explained that the woman had accused her husband of having multiple affairs over the past two years and the situation was completely intolerable. The husband was insistent that he had not had any affairs and that he was not at fault for the problems in their marriage. When initial discussions had failed to reach any agreeable conclusions, the situation had resulted in the two families calling for *hais plaub* in order to resolve the matter.

While family members from both sides travelled and organised themselves for the discussions, the woman had once again asked for a divorce but the husband

demanded that the situation be discussed with the families. In front of the gathered families, the woman explained her situation and presented what she felt was evidence of her husband's infidelity. Her position relied heavily on what others had said over the years, suspicious phone records, and she cited difficulties, namely physical abuse, in their home life as further evidence. She felt that she was entitled to a divorce and to a compensation of money and a portion of shared assets that they had accumulated as a couple over their marriage. In addition to what she had contributed from her employment, she also felt that compensation was due for the time she had spent raising their eleven children.

The husband responded that he had been faithful to his wife and family and that she had been the source of trouble in their marriage. Over two days the families then discussed the matter and first decided if there had been any wrongdoing on the part of either party and if so they then needed to decide on how best to indemnify the wronged party. Kaub went on to explain that before the families could reach a conclusion, the man gave his wife an option. If she would admit that all of their troubles had been her doing, he would grant her a divorce without any compensation. She would need to leave the family and she would no longer be tied to him. However, if she refused this offer, he had no intention of dropping the matter and would demand a resolution from the families. With the presentation of this option, the families finished their discussion and agreed with the husband. If she would admit to being the primary cause of unrest, she would have her divorce but she would not receive any supplemental support or compensation. The families had arrived at this conclusion because the majority of her proof had been what other people had heard or claimed to have seen. The phone records had not been enough to sway either family and so she was presented with this new ultimatum. In the end she would not agree to his terms and the families determined that the matter was then closed and that she would have to return to their home, remaining husband and wife. However, it was stressed that the physical abuse would stop and if it did not, the families agreed to reconsider her request for a divorce and compensation.

Kaub remarked that his own experiences with *hais plaub* left him exhausted and he knew that this situation had to have been taxing on everyone. With that he slurped the last of his noodles and broth and the conversation turned to planning the

next fishing season.

The Emergent and Entangled Family

In the situations above, there are several key points that reveal Hmong concepts of family and how family is experienced. Most importantly, these situations are a means by which to observe the emergent nature of family. By emergent I mean to say that the interactions between related individuals continually unfold to define, negotiate, and contest what family is and how matters of relatedness are understood and experienced through gendered and generational lenses. This perspective speaks to Carsten's (1997) assertion that kinship can be understood as a process, while also drawing on Sahlins' (2012) portrayal of kinship as a mutuality of being. From both standpoints, family and relatedness come about through recognition of social norms and categories, and through the mutual understanding of one another born through experience and engagement. While Sahlins has relied heavily on the social constructions of relatedness, Carsten (1997, 2000, 2004) has acknowledged the ties of biological relatedness through shared substance and the inherent affinities of relatedness that are then socially reinforced.

By bringing into question individual and family histories, responsibilities, and obligations, individuals generate an understanding of their own position and status relative to others. In addition, the intensity of experiencing family is fluid; the pressing and at times stressful nature of family waxes and wanes from interaction to interaction. Drawing from the despatialised village in Chapter 1, the concept behind the model may be applied to the emergent family in a similar manner. In regards to the village, the village exists as an offhand expression occasionally mentioned or referred to by my informants. However, on closer examination of the gathering and interactions of its members, the village emerges as an observable thing through action with clear effect on its constituents and how they relate with one another. And so with this in mind, so too does the family transition from a thing described to a subject of meaningful substance, entrenched in moments of action, interaction, and mutually experienced relatedness. Moreover, it is through the moments of continual action and interaction that the very idea of family becomes something lived and experienced in a manner that challenges or reinforces notions of relatedness and

belonging.

Through Kaub's recollection of the marriage, the young man is placed in a situation whereby he must recognise his own status and position when confronted by his own family. This occurs again when confronted by the young girl's family, and yet again when understanding himself in relation to his wife to be. It is through these interactions that he can take on a meaning of family as events unfold as he negotiates himself relative to others. In keeping with his family's wishes he has chosen to conduct himself in a way that reflects well on the family. He has taken responsibility for his actions and in so doing he further supports his family's good standing in the community in the eyes of others. As Kaub mentioned, the young woman's family was not pleased with the situation having occurred but the young man's efforts to follow through with his commitment to their daughter turned their opinions and so new relationships were established. Moreover, both families were confronted with a situation where they were forced to understand and relate to each other in a different manner stemming from the joining of their children. From this point, the children will also possess a new status, not only between their respective families, but also, having gone through the traditional marriage practices, they are presented and positioned as a legitimate married couple within the community.

Returning to the situation of divorce and *hais plaub*, here, the woman is contesting her marriage and her status becomes an eminent subject in the view of both families. Just as in the case of the marriage, the woman's position and the position of everyone involved becomes clear to one another. Where the young man had been called upon to fulfil what were seen as his masculine duties, the woman seeking divorce is contesting her husband's role as a family man. In turn the husband is directly challenging her role as a wife. In this instant, the interaction between the two develops into a pronounced relationship with clear consequences of behaviour on the part of both parties.

As I discussed in the preceding chapter, the *hais plaub* provides decisions through family mediation that are generally binding for the people who are in conflict. Continuing from my overview in Chapter 1, the process of family mediation, or *hais plaub*, can be extremely involved. The subject of Hmong family mediation has been rarely mentioned in literature concerning the Hmong and when

done so, it is represented only as a passing detail. While there are no works that specifically address *hais plaub*, mediation systems such as this have been explored elsewhere. In Michael Peletz's (2002) exploration of religious courts in Malaysia, he notes the cultural influence and spiritual perspectives that shape the moral codes of the courts and how the ethical foundations of Malay society inform judgement and decision making processes. Through court cases, he reveals how the perceptions of proper and moral conduct define the nature of the offense, such as spousal or child abandonment, relative to the perceptions of the injured party, and the judgement of the court. Additionally, the courts serve as the last point of dispute resolution. Peletz goes on to note that often times matters are resolved at a local level, and that which cannot be resolved is escalated through cultural approaches to dispute resolution before arriving on a court docket (2002: 65-74). In matters of *hais plaub*, the social underpinnings of connectedness and the moral foundations of the parties involved, and those of the mediator, are brought to bear in a similar manner.

For the Hmong, the two parties who are experiencing difficulties will try to work matters out between themselves. If they are unable to do so, each party will then consult with the oldest male of their household. If they still cannot reach an amicable conclusion, the older males will intervene and discuss the matter with the conflicting parties. If no result is forthcoming, additional elders in each family become involved and after much discussion, if no resolution has been reached either of the offended parties may request that an impartial person be asked to moderate the discussion and arrive at a conclusion, thereby calling for *hais plaub*.

As I noted before, *hais plaub* is generally handled within the community by the parties involved without the need for legal intervention. In Denver, *hais plaub* can come about through the means outlined above. An impartial party from the community who is familiar with the situation and the parties involved is chosen to mediate the discussions. Both of the disputing parties will agree on the selection and if any concern arises, another party will be picked to mediate. The proceedings are generally carried out within the home of another neutral party and can take days or weeks to come to an agreement. For the Christian community, a mediator can be obtained through many of the churches and services are provided that cater to this specific phenomenon. Often times the mediator is familiar with the situation because

of those from the conflicting parties who are members of the congregation.

In St. Paul, Hmong family mediation is recognised as an alternative dispute resolution process by the Minnesota state legislative body and provisions have been made within Minnesota law to acknowledge the process and outcomes of *hais plaub*. Additionally, services are provided through a non-profit organisation, Hmong American Mediation Center (HAMC) to facilitate the proceedings (Yang 2015).

In the case of the woman and her divorce, the resulting ultimatum presented her with a very difficult decision. Should she accept the divorce, she would in effect be left with nothing. She would no longer be able to call upon her husband's family for help and there would be repercussions in her own family as well. By accepting the divorce she would be admitting to having caused the problems leading to the divorce. In doing so, she would be saying to her own family and to all those aware of the situation that she had in effect been a negligent wife.

Recalling matters of marriage in the introductory chapter, when a woman marries she becomes part of the husband's family. Once the bride wealth has been paid and the husband's wife has accepted responsibility for her, her ability to rely on her own family for financial support and resources can become limited. In my own observations this largely depends on the woman's family and how well the marriage was perceived. In one situation a woman had married a man against her family's wishes and she had been almost completely cut off. When she had requested help she was told by the head of her family to go back to her husband's family as it was their concern and their problem. In other situations, a divorce can mean that the woman's family may help with some matters but will usually encourage her to find a new husband to care for her. In consideration of this, the woman Kaub described would potentially be faced with a strained relationship with her own family for having been married and belonging to her husband's family and also for being the cause of her marriage's failure.

This situation speaks to the situation many Hmong women face regarding their status in Hmong society and the expectations that are placed on behaviour and responsibility. In this case, the woman faces potentially being labelled an unfit mother or wife if she accepts the divorce and takes the blame. This effectively calls into question Hmong notions of motherhood and what being a wife means, which

reflects the moral and ethical foundations of the Islamic courts Peletz describes. Furthermore, it casts clear lines of traditional expectations of gendered behaviour in that women are to know their place in the family and to serve their husbands, while men are given a much wider degree of latitude in their actions.

While the line of what is right and what is wrong can be wide and blurry, in and between families, from a perspective of moral and gendered expectations of behaviour, it can be seen that in this particular case there is clearly a mechanism of leverage and the threat of social reprisal. It is through the process and experience of family, interaction, and relatedness, the emergent bonds of family create pathways that cultivate and strengthen acceptable behaviours. Moreover these points of leverage generate an individual's adherence to the wishes of the families and elders through *hais plaub*.

An additional point that both of these situations reveal is one of entanglement. In both views, there is a clear emphasis on social bonds and involvement. Looking back at the situation with the young man being forced to marry the young woman, it is not simply a marriage between two people, rather it is a marriage between two families. In the wedding negotiations, the bride price is an amount of money that is given to the mother of the bride and is, in theory, set aside should the marriage not work out and the bride is then forced to return to her family. Often the money is given back to the new couple after several months or it is used for the wedding celebrations. When the matter of bride price has been settled and everyone is satisfied with the arrangement, the couple are married and the bride's dowry is given. When the dowry is being handed over, the contents of the dowry are publicly read so that everyone in attendance from both families are aware of what is being exchanged. In regards to traditional ideas of marriage and bride price, Chan notes that Christianity has had a profound effect on the Hmong. She states that,

“... Hmong involvement with the church has changed general opinions, “the various denominations involved with the Hmong do not approve of polygamy” and that “payment by a groom's family of a bride price to the bride's parents, arranged marriage, bride kidnapping, and the tradition of girls marrying within a year or two of reaching puberty are all frowned upon by the church.” (1994: 55)

However, through my discussions with Christian and non-Christian informants,

bride price and the occasional arranged marriage still occur. In one situation a young Christian woman, who was sixteen at the time, agreed to marry a man who was twenty-four and a traditional practitioner. The marriage was agreed upon by the couple and was discussed and supported by both families with the condition that the formal marriage would not take place until she was eighteen. In regards to bride wealth, it is a clear exchange of material wealth that exhibits the bride's family's status. Often this includes traditional clothing and jewellery but it also includes raw wealth in the form of gold and silver bars of varying baht. While the bride's family is exchanging the material dowry, the groom's family promises to care for their new daughter and welcomes her into the family.

Furthermore, gifts from extended family members on both sides are read out. These are usually monetary gifts, which can be a significant sum. While a marriage punctuates the duties and obligations of two families to each other and the couple, there are also expectations that the new couple will fulfil specific obligations that benefit the unified families. Primarily, through their duty to family, they will care for the elderly and help support and provide for the collective whole. An example of this can be seen in the Hmong funeral we will examine in Chapter 4. During the funeral it is expected that the different households of the extended family will provide cash donations and labour to assist the grieving immediate family of the deceased and to help with the cost and running of the funeral. Obligations such as these are impressed upon new couples, particularly through the monetary gifts from extended family, and it is blatantly expressed that your family has helped you and will continue to help you, and so in turn you are expected to help your family.

Through these exchanges and interactions each of the families has committed themselves to the other. In this way, marriage becomes an investment on the part of the immediate and extended families. This means that should a problem arise between a husband and wife and there is a possibility that the marriage will dissolve, the material investment and matters of social and biological relatedness of both families can become threatened or compromised, and so there remains a vested interest on the part of the families to encourage and support the couple and each other.

And as mentioned before, there are situations where the family sees the union as

unfavourable and further complications can arise. Even so, there are expectations that each family will meet the bare minimum of their responsibilities, such as the bride being accepted by the groom's family as a daughter after an agreement and exchange of bride price, and that she will possess some form of dowry, however small. The couple will still be expected to contribute to situations, such as funerals and caring for the elderly, which further supports an entanglement of families despite conflicting or hurtful opinions.

To compound matters of entanglement further, contemporary views of marriage are between one man and one woman, whereas historically the Hmong have been polygamous. This practice was usually reserved for those men who could show that they could support multiple wives through either their land holdings or material wealth. Some of the men of the older generation came to the US with multiple wives but this has largely slipped out of practice. Occasionally younger men will discuss polygamy in a joking sense, which often draws piercing gazes of anger from the young women. If we consider the points above about the entanglement of family, polygamy provides a much deeper and more complex form of entanglement across numerous families. Bearing this in mind, there can be powerful histories of involvement and entanglement between families from previous generations. These can stem from any number of events, such as marriages, disputes or feuds from the old country, and matters of political and social status, which can affect matters such as bride price, bride wealth, and the value of contributions from the family. As such, historical precedents can set the tone of the proceedings, which can introduce further complications and create deep impressions upon newly emergent and fragile familial ties.

As Kaub pointed out, the introduction of children into the matter further strengthens the entanglement between families. Because of the biological connection, it can be nearly impossible for the two families to divorce from one another should issues with the couple dissolve their marriage. Should a man claim a child from an extramarital affair or from a previous marriage, the situation is again compounded as in the case of polygamous marriages, thereby drawing additional families and their interests into the fold. In the case of divorce, children are also left in their mother's care. However, this can create additional problems as the family of

the children's father seek access to the children.

In the case of the woman seeking the divorce, the couple's children had all married and had children of their own. This being the case, the children had offered their opinions to their parents but the matter was to be formally addressed by the couple's family elders through *hais plaub*. As the marriage had sought to bring two families together, the divorce proceedings threatened to disentangle their respective families. As we have seen, there are deeply threaded interests not only between the couple, but between the families as well. This being the case, the divorce of the couple compromises the two family's relatedness and years of effort and investment. When asking about other couples seeking divorces in this way, I was often told that the relationship between the families was a critical factor in the outcome of *hais plaub*. As one informant pointed out, one could not always assume that the families liked each other and again, family histories could affect how cordial and accommodating people are to one another. So while there may be a pressing matter requiring the attention of the families, *hais plaub* can also open the floor to ulterior issues and motives being brought to bear on the situation.

These points of familial entanglement and the actions of generating and acting upon the threads of entanglement now returns us to the notion of the emergent family. On the part of those involved, these moments of union and conflict draw into sharp focus and experience of family that defines how people understand themselves and each other. While the matters I have examined represent significant events in people's lives, they permit the reiteration of what family means while offering a chance to create new degrees of relatedness, for better or worse. In sum, the meaning of family is something that is ever evolving to meet the needs of those who belong, whether old or young, or bound by the ties of social relation or blood.

Struggling With the Ideal: Perceptions and Complications of Family

In the preceding section I discussed family as a subject of emergence and entanglement through two very distinct situations that demonstrate the complexities of familial relatedness and experience. While these are situations that present strong cases for entanglement and potential disentanglement, they also subject to variations in behaviours and attitudes stemming from numerous current and historical factors.

Thus, while families may share characteristics, no two families are exactly the same. However, when I asked Kaub and Dave what they thought a family is, they provided very specific answers that reflect their generational perspective on what makes for an ideal and somewhat simple image of family rather than the contentious and complex reality.

I had carried my memories of my conversations with Kaub and my first brief chats with Dave with me for several weeks when I found myself visiting with Dave at the C&MA church on a weekday afternoon for a more lengthy discussion. Dave was originally from Georgia and he had attended a Bible College in North Georgia where he had become a pastor. He was younger than the other pastors in the C&MA Denver church community and he was always very excited to talk about his views and experiences. He had focused his professional attentions towards family and he often helped young couples who were planning to marry, and those who had been married for some time, understand what was expected of them from the view of the church as they made a life together. As we sat in his small office, the bookshelves had warped from the copious amount of books on family that had been ordered horizontally and stacked vertically. Papers stuck out from nearly all crevices and nooks and it seemed that nearly everything I could catch a glimpse of contained the word family. The picture on the cover of a book on a nearby stack portrayed an image wherein the family was dominated by the taller, protective father, a demure image of an obedient and responsible mother, and the happy rosy faced images of a son holding the hand of his young sister, as if guiding her somewhere. As I looked around at other books lying about, the spirit of the image seemed repeated, with occasional respite from a Caucasian family with a sweater vest clad father, albeit replaced with different ethnicities portraying the same conservative order of things.

Sitting among these works under fluorescent lights, I again asked him his thoughts on family. Immediately he said, "Family is everything." He went on to explain that he realised the importance of family at an early age. He shuffled through his papers and found another book that had been heavily marked with sticky notes and slips of paper. The book was similar to the others and he went on to explain that this was the book he was currently reading. It was written to help church counsellors work with young couples to find life balance and happiness

through their spiritual life together. Dave was very excited that the matters being discussed in the book were applicable to some of the couples he had recently started counselling.

Dave explained that while growing up, he had what he felt was a traditional Hmong upbringing. His parents had come from Laos and they had worked to rebuild their lives in the South. They were very involved with their extended families and they often interacted with others in the Hmong community around them. His parents had converted to Christianity in Laos but they had not emphasised Christianity or its teachings in their home. One of Dave's older brothers had decided to pursue religious studies and he had decided to follow suit. He explained that he felt that the focus on family in Christian life really was not very different than traditional Hmong attitudes towards family and that men and women had particular roles within what he saw as a healthy and supportive family. While he felt that these roles were similarly encouraged in a traditional Hmong family, they were not emphasised and defined as they were in the Bible. Finding guidance primarily in Genesis and in the Book of Matthew, Dave explained that the Bible clearly addressed the responsibilities of men and women to God, to each other, and to the family, and provided them a form of instruction on how to meet their obligations. Most critically, he emphasised the importance of God's command to go forth and multiply, and he reads this as undoubtedly meaning that a man and woman's duty to God is to produce children. For Dave and many others in the church, the role of woman is to be the nurturing, loving mother and that of man is to protect and provide for his family. I then asked him about the older members of the congregation who had converted to Christianity as adults and who still remembered village life in Laos about how they felt about these views of family. He explained that there was confusion at times and that some had struggled to understand the younger generation and what they perceived to be a focus on the nuclear family and a lack of commitment to the whole of the extended family. Yet, there was a huge degree of acceptance on the part of the older congregation and many had spoken with Dave in an effort to try and understand. After explaining this, Dave paused for a second and said, "It can be very difficult though...to explain. My Hmong is ok but I can't speak it as fluently as I would like." Dave had been studying the Hmong language for several years and he tried to

speaking it whenever he could. Some of the old men in the church had offered fairly severe critiques of his language abilities and so he found many of them intimidating. Because of this, he explained that he felt he was the young kid in the group who wasn't in touch with his roots and his inability to communicate as effectively as he wanted meant that the old men didn't take him or his views as seriously as they should. "But I keep trying!", he exclaimed as he threw his hands up and laughed.

Returning to his comments about what family is from our prior conversation, he reaffirmed his thoughts on the matter. His response again produced an image of the nuclear family as the ideal situation where the protective father cares and provides for his nurturing wife and children. When I asked about the number of children in today's families compared to traditional views on the subject, he acknowledged that given today's living constraints, there were limits to the expected size of a family. Cost and work were the two dominant factors in his view. He felt that current costs of raising children in the US and time constraints between work and home life created barriers that few couples were willing to negotiate. He explained that historically, Hmong families had tended to be extremely large by contemporary standards and that some families would have nine or more children. This was largely due to agricultural endeavours where larger families provided more hands on the farm. My conversations with others in the church and in the community had revealed similar opinions concerning family size. While many of those I had spoken with had come from large families, many were choosing to have fewer and fewer children. Dave had also noticed this with many of the couples that he had been counselling. He remarked that only a minority had more than four children whereas most had chosen to have only one or two children.

As an additional contributing factor to larger traditional families, there was an absence of family planning in the way it is understood in the US. The use of prophylactics was largely ignored and there was little consideration given to the potential expenditure of resources in raising additional children. In all of the interviews with older Hmong, the news of a pregnancy in a village was usually met with joy. In only one case was there a recollection of a woman in Laos expressing intense concern and negative emotion because she felt that her daughter's marriage had been a poor match. Her concern had been justified because her daughter had

been beaten regularly by her husband. She later fell ill and the husband failed to make any effort to seek out treatment for her. Only after several days was her family informed of her condition. As they made their way to their daughter's village, she died and the woman became responsible for the couple's child. On the whole, recollections of traditional family life in Laos hinted that there was hope that the increased number of children in a family would further promote the family's social status; In effect more children could result in stronger family ties as children were married off leading to greater acquisitions of land and resources through marriage, and an increased presence within the Hmong social-scape through their sheer numbers.

With the conversation turning back towards the constraints of time commitments, Dave reflected on his relationship with his wife, whom he had met while studying in Georgia. She was a Christian and they had two daughters together. He explained to me that he spent every minute he could with his girls. On his desk he kept photos of his wife and children and when he picked the frame up to show me his face relaxed and he smiled. He talked about their devotion to the church, to each other, and to God. He was raising his children to hold the same values of responsibility and obligation that he held. When I asked him if he felt he was including any traditional perspectives he remarked that he absolutely was. He stressed to his girls the importance of respecting their elders and encouraged them to spend time with their grandparents and their cousins. As his parents and brothers were spread around the country, this emphasis largely focused on his wife's family living nearby. He taught his daughters to rely on one another, to be obedient, and that they should find happiness and belonging in their family and in the church. While I never met his wife or his daughters directly, I would often see them at the end of Sunday services waiting for Dave to finish his church duties. Dave would stand at the door and thank everyone for coming, assist some of the elderly down the church steps, and speak with the older men and other church leaders. Only after everything had been seen to would he meet them and leave.

He was particularly interested in his daughters' education and how they would fair at school. As they were both very young, Dave and his wife were preparing themselves for how they would handle the girls' upcoming first days at school. He

wants his daughters to receive the best education they can and to be strong women. He feels that achieving a higher education is what is going to allow them to survive and thrive in the modern world. He also felt that an education will make them attractive to potential husbands and that she will meet with approval from the man's family. Additionally, he wants them to understand who they are as Hmong women. He and his wife plan on encouraging the girls to learn and speak Hmong and to explore their family and cultural histories.

When Dave and I had concluded our discussion, on my way out of the church offices I ran into May. May had helped me begin to understand the C&MA church and I had visited her at the C&MA central offices many times. I explained to her that I had just been speaking with Dave about family. We ended up sitting on one of the rear pews and she told me her thoughts on the matter. She is older than Dave by several years but she shares his views on the importance of family and the role each person is to play. She feels that its important for a woman to be a strong pillar in the family and that a woman should help financially if she can. However, a woman's true purpose was to bear and raise her children. She still regularly involves herself with her extended family and has feels that she has been a dutiful daughter to her own parents and to her husband's. Just as Dave, she too feels she has found a comfortable negotiation with the traditional Hmong focus on family life and the expectations of maintaining her immediate family according to her understanding of the Bible.

While talking about family, May stopped mid-sentence and told me that her daughter had just had a child. This is May's first grandchild and through joyful and vibrant expression she explained to me that she feels that this is one of the greatest blessings that God could have bestowed on her. When May would talk about her granddaughter, she projected a future focused on obtaining a higher education, developing her spiritual and mental strength, and that her granddaughter will possess all the qualities she felt made for a good girl. I asked her to further explain these qualities and she replied that she should be respectful of her parents and her grandparents, she should always work hard and study hard, she should marry and have a family, and she should above all, always be devoted to God. By following this path she would make her family proud and she would be a strong Hmong

woman.²

Just like Dave and May, Kaub felt that the Bible offered an outline of how men and women should behave with one another and how a family should be ordered. As was previously mentioned, Kaub's view of family centres around the idea that the nuclear family is merely a part of an extended family. Within the nuclear family Kaub has positioned himself as head of the household and his own family is something to be managed for the good of the whole extended family. Kaub often told me what he wanted for his children and his vision is similar to those of Dave and May. However, in his descriptions he sees his children being very involved with their elders, caring for their parents, and being active leaders in the extended family.

Following the scriptures, Kaub expects a degree of obedience from his wife and from his children. His opinions and commands guide his immediate family and exert influence within his extended family. This is not to say that his wife does not influence situations, rather her opinions are not always directly addressed and often times she subtly or overtly weaves in casual remarks or through her actions, particularly through her social duties and household tasks.³

Kaub insisted on devotion to God from his family and small things, such as prayers at meals, were a means to keep his family focused on their faith and remind them of their duties and obligations to God and to one another. When speaking to his children, they recalled attending Sunday Schools and Bible meetings every week, and being actively involved in the church. Kaub and his immediate family spent considerable time every week visiting relatives, checking in on elderly relatives, and attending to any family matters that arose. In regards to traditional and Christian viewpoints on family, Kaub did not see the two as mutually exclusive, rather the Christian view enhanced the traditional view he had grown up with. He still continued to emphasise the importance of the extended family and the social elements held within, but he found that Christianity offered a further justification for why the family, including its organisation and dynamics, was important when understood through a divine perspective.

While the ideas of family from Dave, May, and Kaub are derived from a Christian perspective, there are also those who have continued to maintain traditional ideas of family. When I spent time with Uncle Xyoob, his household was ordered in

much the same way as Kaub. However, there was a pronounced lack of focus on spiritual matters unless a specific occurrence, such as an injury, arose. Xyoob sat as the head of the household and his wife had fulfilled the same roles as Kaub's wife in taking care of the daily functions of the house. Xyoob's wife had a professional job and so many of the duties had fallen to her sons and to her daughter. Even so, the boys tended to handle the manual labour around the farm while her daughter attended to more domestic matters.

There was a clear and direct focus on the extended family and it was not uncommon to find relatives at the farm on a regular basis. Discussing the matter of family on the farm or asking why the family operated as it did often evoked the response, "Its just the way it is." However through observation, the reasons for family organisation and activity were readily apparent. The boys were often loaned out to help with the upkeep of elder relatives' residences and with events for the extended family, the close bonds of Uncle Xyoob with his brothers allowed them to take greater financial risks in new business endeavours and investments, and as we have seen, disputes could be settled by the extended family or through *hais plaub*.

Whether the family is Christian, traditional, or a mixture of the two, there is an expectation that people will adhere to their gendered role and that family will remain a core principle in Hmong life. However, the views expressed above describe a situation of family life and behaviour that is removed from lived experience. This was particularly evident when speaking with older women who scoffed at the idea of the men being the providers. Several of them recalled vivid memories of being bent over in a rice paddy planting in the hot sun while their husband fell asleep in a ditch or had left them on the farm with the children for days on end. And as we saw earlier, contemporary matters of marriage and divorce continue to challenge the idea and image of the ideal and harmonious family. Additionally, shifts in traditional ideas of gender and matters of generational difference are a fountainhead of contention and vehicles of change.

In their examination of generational Hmong financial literacy, Solheim and Yang (2010) observed that members of the older generation felt that the younger generations were no longer honouring or respecting their parents. Yet when speaking with younger Hmong, they readily identified family as a central value in their lives.

For my informants, the older generation perceived a loss of Hmong culture because the younger generation lacked a common understanding of respecting their elders and parents, and they had little to no discipline in the performance of their familial duties. In Ng's observations, the older generation felt that the youth were slowly shifting their focus from the maintenance of the home and family to more of their own, individual interests, evidenced by involvement with the internet, the commercialisation of the Hmong New Year, and by challenging traditional spiritual and marital practices (Ng 2008: 30-31). When confronted with the critiques of the older generation, the younger Hmong often remarked that it was an effort to keep them tied to the old ways and on numerous occasions I was told it was their intent to "hold them back". In their view, their elders would simply not let go of the old ways and fully embrace life in America. Even so, just as Solheim and Yang had found, my younger informants continued to maintain that family was a central presence in their lives and inseparable from being Hmong.

When asked to further clarify what they meant by being "held back", I was often told that this had to do with the development and progression of their own lives. They felt that the older generation wanted them to stay close to home and devote themselves to the family. For the young men that I spoke with, it was made plain and impressed upon them that when they became men, they would be expected to find a job, marry, and provide for their spouse and their children. The expectations for women were directed more towards establishing a home and making efforts to have children. In regards to focusing on education within the family, Ngo and Lor note that there is a collective effort at work, particularly on the part of the boys in a family. As before, boys were expected to be respectful towards their family and to fulfil their family duties and obligations. However there has been a pronounced effort to have boys fully and actively embrace their educational responsibilities, which has come to include helping their younger siblings with their schooling (Ngo and Lor 2013: 152-158). Additionally men and women should also marry early and finish school as quickly as possible so that they could then go to work and contribute to the whole of the family. Considering these points, there are clear expectations concerning marriage and education.

Traditionally, Hmong women may choose or be instructed by her parents to

marry in their early teens. With the exception of the one sixteen-year-old woman mentioned earlier, none of my younger informants had chosen to follow this practice. However, many of them married in their very early twenties as their parents had been expected them to do. The idea of early marriage is that couples will begin to work and have children earlier, which will then strengthen the family economically and through the prospective efforts of the future generations. While early marriage can be seen to interfere with the prospective futures of the younger generation, particularly those of young women, Ngo (2002) has suggested that early marriages can also be a form of independent assertion on the part of young women. By choosing to marry early they are challenging parental and familial authority that they view as restrictive, such as being forced to live at home under heavy scrutiny. Other factors include young women perceiving what they feel are gendered barriers and restrictions in the educational systems and in the work place and by marrying early they are seeking a form of support and security. While the practice would seem to promote low high school completion rates, Hutchinson and McNall (1994) found that the majority of those who married early and who had children early at least graduated from high school and some went on to higher education. They attributed this completion rate to the support networks found in the women's immediate and extended families.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, exposure to economic life in the US during the Hmong's transition led to marked effects on family life. In a similar manner, the US educational system and exposure to life outside of the Hmong community have had profound effect on the Americanisation of the younger generations of Hmong. In Gramsci's examination of education in Italy, he notes that the purpose of the state lead educational system was to challenge the folklore based education of its citizens (1971: 33-38). However, those who are teaching the curriculum often held understandings of the world rooted in an education derived from folklore and so the curriculum outlined by the state faces issues with dissemination. While this suggests a particular historical problem for the Italian government, a similar situation can be observed in the case of the Hmong. Within the educational system of the US, Hmong students are exposed to an educational curriculum that reflects a distinct American view of the world that relies on a

particular version of history, implied understandings of modernity and social liberty, and contemporary views on gender, economy, and governance that incorporate a clear expression of self-determination and egalitarianism, whether realised or not. In contrast, younger generations are exposed to a very different system of thought within the home and within their extended families. In light of this, a situation has been created that generates complications in regards to traditional ideas of family, particularly in matters of gender and through younger Hmong seeking an independence and self-expression beyond that of a family bound identity. As Chan notes, education and acculturation of the younger Hmong in public schools is creating distress for the family as what they are learning in school contradicts what is being taught at home (1994: 55-57).

In the past, there had been limited access to education in Laos and so many of my informants, particularly older women, have varying degrees of literacy. Cha goes on to explain that women traditionally received little to no formal education in Laos resulting in the aforementioned high rate of illiteracy. Educated women were seen as being too independent and were not considered to be desirable as wives. That said, overall, there has been a marked rise in the educational levels and completion of educational programs by the younger generations of Hmong in the US. In particular educational levels of Hmong women in the US have improved yet Hmong men remain dominant in educational endeavours (Cha 2013: 171-172, see also Thao 2008: 41-44). To provide an example of conflicting interests arising from the Americanisation of Hmong youth I now want to return to Ka Gua and her experiences with her family from the beginning of this thesis.

Near the end of my fieldwork Ka Gua completed a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) at a local university in Denver. She had been working for an accounting firm for several years and had earned a modest income that had helped her and Paul purchase a home in Northern Denver. With her MBA, she received a promotion within her firm and a salary commensurate with her experience and her education where she was now earning higher wages than those of her husband. While Hmong men traditionally have been the breadwinners of the family, particularly so in Laos, the new strains of economy have begun to require two or more incomes to support a family. And so women taking up the position of

breadwinner within the family has become a more common occurrence (Thao 2008: 43-44). When I spoke with her about her experiences, she told me that her parents were very proud of her and had supported her going back to school but there had been concerns. Her mother's primary concern was that the time Ka Gua spent going to school could have been spent building and strengthening her own family and involving herself with her extended family. Even so she still tried to support Ka Gua's efforts to better herself through words of encouragement and talking with Ka Gua about her experiences and plans. Ka Gua also explained that Paul was happy to have the additional income but on several conversations, she seemed to suggest that he was becoming more and more resentful of being displaced as the primary earner in the household. The matter had contributed to several disagreements and arguments with her husband and their respective families. Eventually the situation came to be accepted by all. Paul went on to receive a raise, which closely matched the earnings of Ka Gua, and which helped further ease any remaining tensions.

Ka Gua's efforts to create a better life for herself by pursuing an advanced degree represents a departure from the educational pursuits of her mother's generation. Her mother has worked in manufacturing and had spent the majority of her time raising her children. She was unable to complete a high school education in Laos and she feels this has limited her work opportunities in the US. She has always wanted her children to better themselves but has been reluctant for them to pursue advanced degrees because she feels that her children will not have the time to raise families of their own. Ka Gua explained that her mother still felt that a woman should work to maintain the house and that it was the role of the man in the relationship to be the principle provider for the household. While Ka Gua was not opposed to this traditional outlook, she felt that it was her responsibility and her choice to make the best life possible for herself, which she felt was available through educational opportunities. I heard variations of Ka Gua's story of self-betterment from other young Hmong women who had taken up professional careers. Out of the twenty four young women that I spoke with who worked in a professional role, only one did not have a university degree, and at least five held master's degrees, two of which were considering pursuing a doctorate. Only one woman held a doctorate at the time. Among the thirty-one men, only two held master's degrees, fourteen had completed a

university degree or were attending university, and the remainder had a high school education. For my informants, these numbers reveal a desire by many of the women to seek out higher degrees and the majority agreed that it was in the interest of self-betterment. They felt that if they received an education beyond high school they would bring more to a marriage and attract a better marriage partner who's parents would be more approving. This represents a significant shift from Cha's observations above regarding traditional views of educated women and marriage (Cha 2013: 171-172).

While men and women would agree that men and women should be equal and should share responsibilities, there is an uneasiness enacting this principle and gender equality in the family has been slow to improve (Yang 2008: 242). A conversation with Louis at the C&MA Spring Cleaning in the following chapter reveals this difficulty. He insisted that there was gender equality in Hmong life and in the church. As our conversation wore on, I could not help but notice that while the men performed the heavy labour, the women busily tended to the food and cleaned the interior of the church. And when it came time to eat, the women served the men and when all had been served, only then did they serve themselves and retire to eat by themselves away from the men. When I pointed this out to Louis, he simply said that, "its natural for men to do the harder work." He then looked back at his plate of food and continued to comment on how much better the church looked.

As in the situation with Louis above, lines of gendered division are clearly evident through the different ethnographic examples throughout this thesis. In the case of the funeral examined in Chapter 4, the men discussed and made decisions on how events at the funeral would be conducted, how things should be acquired and organised, and they were then responsible for organising and performing the heavier manual labour. At one point during the preparation of the funeral feast at the funeral home there were no men around and several women had gathered around a massive soup pot that had been transported in the back of a pickup. These kettles are quite large and hold around 25 gallons of fluid. They can be extremely heavy and five of the women were struggling with the pot when I arrived. Immediately I had fingers pointing and arms waving at me as I was told that it was my job to get the kettle inside. Had I not been there, they certainly would have sorted out moving the pot.

However, with my arrival, the work stopped and the women stared at me. Given that the kettle can weigh 200 pounds or more fully loaded, I tried to explain that I would need help moving the thing given that liquids sloshing around can be difficult to handle. The women continued to stare blankly at me and then at the pot and at that moment, another young man happened to turn the corner and was immediately pressed into helping me get the pot inside. The two of us hoisted the kettle and its hot contents and manoeuvred the steaming kettle into place on a kitchen counter. It was not that the women could not handle the pot, although it was extremely heavy, it was that this part of setting up was men's work. Asking about what had happened, this was exactly how it was explained to me; performing heavy tasks such as moving pots or coolers of food was my responsibility as a man. If the young man had not come around the corner, then I was expected to either figure out a way to get the pot moved on my own or to find and enlist the help of another man. The women had been quite annoyed that the pot had not been dealt with and that they had been left to sort the whole affair out on their own.

With my lesson learned, my duty as food mover was to be repeated several times over the rest of the year. The women's preparation of food was an on going process throughout my time in the field. With events almost every month, be it soccer tournaments, church events, clan and extended family barbecues, religious holidays, or ceremonies and blessings, there was a constant demand to feed everyone. One day may simply be for cataloguing ingredients and another spent on the preparation of the raw materials, well before the preparation of the final dish. And so, the preparation of food can begin days or weeks before an actual event and can span from sun up through the night for days on end. Men may carry the 50 pound rice bags in from the car or move large kettles of soup, but their involvement with food largely ends there until it is time to transport the food and set up serving stations which the women then fill. In only two situations did I observe men assisting with food preparation. In both cases the men had been called on to handle massive amounts of meat and fish. Once the heavy sacks of meat and fish had been moved and prepared for cooking, the remaining tasks fell to the women.

The matters addressed here speak to gendered divisions and expectations within a social sense. However, as we saw with Ka Gua in the introduction, her decision to

control her own body and reproduction through the use of contraceptives provides another dimension of contesting gender through the biological. In this case, established social expectations of Hmong women dictated that the woman's body is to be used for reproductive purposes to ensure the propagation of new Hmong families. By taking contraceptives, Ka Gua was exercising her own view of the body and her right to control her own biological processes. This is completely contrary to what was expected of her and when asked about it, she explained to me that she was Hmong and that she understood how others felt about contraceptives. She said that for many of the older women, the use of contraceptives indicated a degree of promiscuity and impropriety. However, Ka Gua saw her use of contraceptives as being responsible and controlling her life in a way that her mother wasn't able to. She felt that her life outside of the community had shaped her understanding of her right to dictate what she did with her body but that she also often struggled with this and traditional views. Rather than openly address the issue, she had decided to follow her own desires and delay reproduction until she felt at ease with the idea. Had others known of her use of contraceptives, her status in the community would have been in danger and she felt that her actions, once known, would reflect poorly on her parents and cause them undue stress from those who disapproved. With that, she chose to keep her use of contraceptives to herself and continued to try and balance what she felt she was as a Hmong woman and what others expected her to be.

In the issues noted throughout this section it can be seen that there are differences between what people think family and gender are and how these matters are actually experienced. While an ideal image may be retained in thought, through action, or a mutuality of being, matters of relatedness, emergence, and experience continue to define the contours of Hmong life across generations. Moreover, through generational experiences, the reproduction of family, gender, and being Hmong continue to be contested and refined.

Securing the Future of the Family

Above I have tried to provide an understanding of the dynamic nature of Hmong family life and the different elements that highlight the strains of generational

tensions and views. Consistently among my informants from all generations the matter of being Hmong and transferring that identity to future generations is of concern. As I mentioned, the birth of a child represents a bond of blood and further entanglement between families, which strengthens the mutual ties of obligation. What children also offer an opportunity of continuity as they learn from the older generations. In what I discussed above, ideas of family and by extension a Hmong continuity is faced with particular challenges as younger couples work to negotiate the different demands on their lives. For the older and younger generations, there is an awareness and great emphasis on the importance of fertility and for producing offspring for the sake of making and continuing family.

Sitting in the church with Ka Gua after service, older women came by and chatted with her about her efforts to have a child. One of them commented that it will be wonderful when they have a child because then, she and her husband would truly become adults and have a family of their own. I found this interesting given the fact that Ka Gua was already in her 30s, had been married for several years, and was a successful professional woman. When I asked her about this comment, she explained that children meant a fulfilment of her family duty to reproduce and that being a mother she would have a new status in the community. All of her other accomplishments were acknowledged, yet having children was the most important. It meant that the family would continue and that the Hmong would continue.

So while there is a profound encouragement to reproduce, there are always fears that someone will be infertile and struggle with reproduction. In my conversations, many of the younger women spoke of their difficulties in conceiving and they spoke of women in the older generation who had difficulties, but they had all ultimately been able to conceive. When asking about infertility, their tones would take on a much more serious nature and they would speak of how difficult and horrible it must be for the women who were experiencing the prospect of not being able to have children. In addition to creating friction in their marriage, should it become known that a woman was infertile, for many women there would be a degree of shame associated with their infertility as they would be unable to meet the mounting demands of family. The increased pressure, particularly from mothers and mother in laws, further compounds the stresses on the woman and adds to the panic and

frustration of the situation.

When it was thought that Ka Gua was infertile she was given an item of clothing from her aunt. Her aunt had several children and was considered to be extremely fertile. The thought is that there is a degree of contagion associated with the object. In this case, the item was a slip that her aunt had worn for several years and so the item had come to possess an encouraging property. Additionally, she had been sent to see Grandma Va and it was understood that the combination of these efforts had effectively resolved Ka Gua's issues. Generally, infertility is seen as a woman's issue and it is very uncommon for a Hmong man to admit he is infertile. I had heard some short remarks that some men were starting to accept more responsibility in the matter, it was commonly held that it is the woman who is the source of the problem. As I mentioned in my examination of *hais plaub* in chapter 1, there are men who use the perception, or the fact, that their wife is infertile as an excuse to have extramarital affairs. They often seek justification by saying that their wife is unable to give them a son and it has caused some men to suggest a return to polygamous practices. The culmination of these different attitudes and emphasis on reproduction reveal a shared awareness and concerted effort to ensure a Hmong continuity and therein, a reproduction of family.

Up until this point I have examined the formulation of family and its production from a very specific standpoint that has emphasised relatedness through blood and marriage. When discussing different issues and perspectives of infertility with May, she took on a saddened expression and said, "Yes, it is very unfortunate but there are things people can do. For one, they can adopt." May had been the first person to mention adoption to me and I asked her to tell me more about her thoughts on the matter. She began by explaining that she supported adoption and that everyone she knows who had adopted had all felt their lives had benefitted and that these couples appeared much happier and fulfilled to the rest of the community. I mentioned to her that I had not seen any Hmong parents with children who were not Hmong and so asked if all of the children who were adopted were Hmong, or if there was a preference in who they adopt, and what channels were available to couples who wanted to adopt. She thought on the question and she explained that the adopted children often came from within the Hmong community. I asked if there was a

service that helped facilitate the adoption and she went on to say that the adoptions were usually handled within the family. These adoptions did not follow a standardised form, nor was there any paperwork involved. Often times, one family within the larger, entangled extended family will have multiple children and if everyone agrees, the adopting couple will adopt one of the younger children. This is usually seen to lessen the burden on the providing family while generating a new family. She explained to me that it was common for the children to come from the larger families where they may not always receive all of the attention they should and so it works out for all involved.

In one case, a couple in Denver had gone without having children for several years. Eventually a family member in Fresno let them adopt one of their children. After having the child for one year, the couple conceived and they were able to have their own children. I mentioned this practice to other informants and many of the older generation were very familiar with the occurrence and they were able to identify other couples who had experienced the same thing. The couples had difficulty in having their own children and had adopted and within a year, the couple were able to conceive and bear their own children. While some saw this as an old wife's tale, others saw it as a form of magic or as being a natural way, or remedy, of reducing the stress of reproduction on the couple, then allowing them an opportunity to conceive on their own. Returning to the point on infertility above, women are often seen to be the factor of cause of a couple's infertility. Thus, from a perspective of magic, often the children can be thought of as seed children, or as starter children. It is understood that when the adopted child and couple come together a family is formed and the process of procreation is encouraged by the maternal instincts of the woman being heightened through her care of the child. This in turn permits her to bear a child of her own. Should a couple conceive on their own, the adopted child will usually stay with their adopted parents. In only one instance did I hear that the adopted child had been returned to their original family once the adopting couple had conceived. In this particular situation, the welfare and safekeeping of the child had always been of importance and the child had been adopted for the purpose of encouraging the couple to conceive with the understanding that the child would eventually return home.

While adoption as a means of addressing infertility served as the primary reason for adoption among my conversation with informants, it was by no means the only reason. While speaking with Kaub at a family weekend barbecue about the matter of adoption, he pointed to a man in his late 40s and explained that he had been adopted. No one had ever considered him anything but a full relative and he actively participated in family affairs. He had lost both of his parents during the war and the family had taken him in while in a refugee camp. While the matter of the adoption was never formalised outside of the Hmong community, he grew up with their children as one of their own. A similar situation had befallen May's father in Laos. He had lost both of his parents at a young age and had been taken in by another family and raised as one of their own children.

In these cases, Hmong children have been taken in by Hmong families and the community has perpetuated its solidarity. Furthermore, it offers an additional means of inclusion in regards to family and further demonstrates the network of mutual reliance and entanglement among families in the community. It also demonstrates that matters of family are negotiated through circumstance and that family is not necessarily facilitated by biological production alone.

Summing up Thoughts on Family

I began this chapter by asking what family is. While I was provided with distinct views of family, matters of emergence and entanglement reveal that the nature of the Hmong family is highly dynamic and far removed from the static descriptive and ideal models. While still a critical focal point in contemporary Hmong life, family relies on the interaction and involvement of those within its contours to shape an experience of family. Through experience, meanings of family are permitted to develop which reflect generational views that contain within them differing and contentious understandings of family, derived from their respective diverse experiences. Additionally, through extended families and nuclear families, matters of education and gender continue to affect relationships and how people understand themselves and are perceived within the contexts of family and community.

Finally, biological reproduction and adoption reflect concerns of continuity. This returns to the idea of family occupying a prominent position in contemporary Hmong

life, but most importantly, these matters point to the fluidic nature of family and relatedness that encourage efforts of reproduction and which continue to inform notions of continuity.

Moving from the social to the spiritual, in the chapter that follows I will be exploring the foundations of Hmong Christian life which further define a knowledge of the self, behaviour, community, and symbolic forms of identity.

¹ Since their wedding, the couple have had a son and are expecting another child. The families have resolved their issues and as Kaub had predicted, the child has brought the families closer together.

² When asking my informants about who they thought their children should marry, the majority always predicted that the marriage would be to a Hmong partner. Only Dave mentioned that ethnicity wasn't a concern but the man needed to be a Christian who was devoted to his faith.

³ As an example, when Kaub's wife was displeased with his decision regarding a situation among her brothers, her care in food preparation plummeted, the laundry went missing, and she did the bare minimum when entertaining guests, often commenting on the difficulties Kaub had made for her. This effectively forced Kaub to reconsider his position and over a week or so she won out and the situation was resolved.

Chapter 3

Hmong Christian Life: Conversion, Moral Performance, and the Impossibility of Being

The church had been discussing the upcoming Spring Cleaning in its weekly announcements and a large turnout was expected to make sure everything was done right. The pastors had all been sure to talk about the event in the preceding weeks and they would constantly remind everyone as they walked around and chatted with their weekly study groups and the groups of men and women that congregated just outside of the entrance of the church immediately following Sunday services. The whole idea was to freshen the appearance of the church by cleaning and weeding the lawn and fixing parts of the walls and the roof. There were concerns over finally addressing the removal of the invasive roots that threatened to crack the sidewalk and so several men were asked to commit to the task. I arrived at the church around 9:30 that bright Saturday morning to find that work was well under way and the yard was covered with tarpaulins, tools, and people running about. I knew a lot of the faces from Sunday services and from the C&MA office and they smiled and welcomed me towards the rear parking lot. A few of the men stopped digging at the stubborn roots and asked me how things were going and they explained what they were doing. Dave, the younger pastor in the church who I had met with before, came towards me with an extended hand and caught up on the conversation. After a pause he said, “You know we bought this church back in the 80s. Most of the other Hmong congregations are in other people’s churches but this one is ours. We have to take care of it.”

Dave went on to tell me about the community and its history. A lot of the members had gone to a bible college in Georgia and had committed themselves to the study and spreading of their faith in the Hmong community and through missionary networks in Southeast Asia, namely in Thailand and Vietnam. The majority of this community is comprised of Green Hmong and while they share numerous connections with the other churches and portions of the larger Hmong community through marriage and blood relations, they see themselves as a proud point in the whole of the Hmong community, defined by their faith and

understanding of the world.

Overhearing the discussion, Dave and I were approached by a man in his 30s, Louis, who eagerly agreed with the points raised by Dave. Louis added that he and his wife and children were all members and he insisted that the family was the core of the community and that was what held the church together. Louis' comments echoed what Dave and I had discussed on another occasion. Dave nodded in agreement with Louis and then left us to continue talking. Like many other informants, Louis was interested in why I had chosen to come to their church and he wanted to make sure that I understood what it was they did there and why the church was so important. He felt that at times the church and its members were misunderstood and that those outside of the community simply didn't understand the power of their faith and community.

Our conversation wandered and touched on issues of religion, faith, traditional Hmong practices, what it means to be a Hmong man and Father, and how these matters and perspectives create further divisions in the community and between generations. Louis was particularly keen to discuss traditional practices and his opinion of them. His demeanour shifted to a very serious tone and he strongly said, "It's the work of Satan." He went on by explaining, "We stopped that when the missionaries came but some people keep doing it. You have to stay away from it though. Its ok to study but it is no good. So let me ask you, why are all of the spirits always bad? Why do you have to bribe them? There are no good spirits at all. That is why it is the practice of Satanism." When I would offer some of my opinions on the matter he would return to his point, "But where are the good spirits? They have none!" He went on to discuss how the church was not only progressive in that it left the "old ways", but that men and women were more equal in the church than they were in other parts of Hmong society. To this point, I found it hard to agree simply watching the division of labour occurring around us. The men had continued with their heavy labour of digging and prying while the women had busied themselves in the church's kitchen in order to prepare lunch. Pointing this out, Louis shrugged and referred to the bible and the structure of family and the roles of men and women found there. As I was about to ask him to explain this further, a woman leaned out of the kitchen and shouted that it was time to eat. The men helped one another step

out of their trenches and holes and they all pulled off their heavy work gloves and Louis roughly clapped me on the shoulder and said excitedly, “Time to eat! You’re going to love this food!” Our conversation on family continued as we lined up to fill our plates in the spare room of the church just outside of the kitchen. Most of the women sat patiently against the wall watching the men eat while a few women went back and forth from the kitchen to the table. Once the men had all gotten their food, the women filed behind them, collected their food, and then retreated to the kitchen and their own sections of the church.

The experience of the Spring Cleaning provided me with a lot of insight into the attitudes and understandings of this Hmong Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) church. This particular church, as a collective institution, has largely insulated itself from the bulk of the Hmong community, specifically avoiding traditional practices and practitioners whenever possible and chooses to maintain connections only with select Hmong churches. Additionally, many of the members married within the church and so the majority of the families were tied together through their children and their children’s children and in so doing they have formed a very tightly woven community with their pronounced individualism. Sunday after Sunday I would see many of the same faces, with the crowds occasionally swelling during particularly important times, such as Christmas or Easter. Those devoted faces were always the ones attending the weekly prayer meetings, helping out at the different church functions and fundraisers, and were the ones most eager to tell me about their church, and were by far the most accepting of my visits. While they are one church of many in the Hmong community, I chose to introduce this chapter with them because they represent a very conservative form of Christian life that is anti-syncretic, and which is focused on evangelism and mission work. By anti-syncretic I mean to say that they have made a pronounced effort to remove traditional practices and thoughts about the world from their lives and their environment. The congregation has chosen to live their lives and define their community according to their interpretation of the scriptures. Traditional ways of life or syncretic practices that others have adopted are seen as being strictly non-Christian and are therefore a threat to their faith and way of living. Their adherence to a strict and conservative

Christianity has created clefs in some families and in areas of the Hmong community. Ultimately they provide a polarised image of life when compared to the traditional viewpoints I will examine in the chapter that follows. And when compared with other Hmong churches of different Christian denominations, such as the Hmong Baptist Church, and together the wide contours of what it means to truly be Christian become contested.

In turning my attention to examining the foundations of the Hmong Christian communities of Denver, I will be specifically addressing points of continuity, conversion, and morality that are key issues surrounding the means by which the Hmong have become, identify as, and struggle with, being Christian. As Vang (2010) and Pfeiffer (2014) note, the majority of studies focusing on Hmong religious life have largely focused on traditional shamanic practice and there has been little in the way of research concerning Hmong Christian communities or their interests. Vang attributes this to social scientists traditionally being interested in social problems and were thus drawn to the difficulties and problems of transition, and the inherent otherness of shamanic practice, that marked the resettlement of Hmong peoples in the US through the 1970s and 1980s. What studies of Christian life have been produced has largely focused on the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) and has been carried out primarily by Hmong American seminary students with little attention given to other Christian denominations (Vang 2010:78-79).

Southeast Asia has an extensive history of missionary activity. Jesuit Missionaries had been in Laos since 1642 with the Dutch East India Company in Vientiane but they had failed to convert any of the Hmong to Catholicism and by 1878, the Pope had ordered Oblates to travel to Laos to correct the situation. While they built churches and schools, even the Oblates produced little progress with Catholic conversion and the shamans continued to be the spiritual leaders of the Hmong; healing the sick, guiding souls in the afterlife and convening with the spirits. Protestant missionaries including the Swiss Brethren, Presbyterian mission groups, and the C&MA, had been in Southeast Asia since the end of the 19th century and were forced to leave Laos in 1939 because of World War II.

The C&MA were the first to convert the Hmong. The mission emerged out of the latter part of the 19th century with the merger of the Evangelical Missionary

Alliance and the International Christian Alliance. This union was the vision of Dr. A.B. Simpson who drew from Baptist teachings but focused on evangelism and mission work (Kong 2000: 5-9). With the end of War II, the C&MA returned to Laos in 1949 as a Husband and Wife team, Rev. and Mrs. Ted Andrianoff, who were specifically interested in reaching out to the hilltop people in the Laotian highlands, including the Hmong (Quincy 2000:98, Vang 2000, Vang 2010:79-80). In 1950 the Andrianoffs converted a Hmong shaman who then proceeded to convert his entire village. A year later a second shaman conversion occurred and she became an enthusiastic evangelist spreading the word of Christianity to other Hmong villages. The first Catholic conversion would not happen until 1954 (Capps 1994, Kong 2000, Quincy 2000: 98-100). By permitting Hmong shamans to serve as lay preachers, many Hmong people followed, coming to Christianity through what Vang has defined as a "People's Movement". Vang explains that the Hmong's People's Movement was characterised by the establishment of indigenous churches wherein, "The new believers maintain their own customs, culture, style of dress, food and language without missionary interference", and they are able to evangelise their own people (2000:5, see also Vang 2010:80).

As part of the People's Movement, many of the conversions that took place in Laos were encouraged through personal testimonies of the already converted, hearing the gospel, being pressured by family and friends, witnessing God's power over traditional spirits, and by personally witnessing miraculous healings. In addition to these measures, the establishment of the Romanised Popular Alphabet (RPA) in 1953 by American Missionary Linguist William Smalley, Reverend G. Linwood Barney, and French missionary Father Yves Bertrais, allowed for the production and distribution of missionary literature in Laos, prompting additional conversions (Vang 2010:79-82). Capps (1994) has also argued that conversion to Christianity was made easier by the incessant fighting in the region and the fact that the Hmong had to frequently move due to conflict, thus the constant reshuffling of villages placed an increased strain on the localised practice of ancestor worship and facilitated its abandonment.

Conversions continued after 1975 through the refugee camps in Thailand. In the US, protestant church groups began to sponsor many of the Hmong in the refugee

camps in an effort to help them relocate to the US and transition to life in the US, thereby increasing exposure to a variety of Christian denominations (Vang 2010:83). It was estimated that in 2000, fifty percent of the Hmong population in the US identified as Christian (Vang 2010:86). My own observations of the Denver Hmong community revealed that 2,000 to 2,500 of the roughly 4,000 Hmong living in Denver identified themselves as Christian.

The largest congregations in Denver belong to the two C&MA churches who trace their origins back to the establishment of the Hmong District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance formed in Denver, CO in 1978 (Kong 2000: 5-9, 31). Smaller congregations include Hmong Baptist, Pentecostal, Mennonite, Lutheran, and Catholic churches. The majority of my time was spent with the smaller of the two C&MA churches that had an active membership of nearly 350 people. With close ties to the district C&MA office, the church focuses on maintaining their local community and, in the founding spirit of the C&MA, on developing overseas mission work in Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. Many of the church youth that I met were committed to attending bible colleges in different parts of the US with the expectation that they would take on mission work once their degree programs were completed. As one informant explained to me, it was important to focus on mission work so that all the tribes of the world could hear the word of God and usher in the return of Christ and his thousand-year reign. This millennialism underscores much of their mission work and the emphasis is placed on Christ's return rather than on matters of eschatology.

In addition to the C&MA community, I also spent time with the Hmong Baptist and Catholic communities. These communities are significantly smaller, with the Baptist community having around 150 active members and the Catholic having around 100. I found myself on many Sundays shuffling between the different church services. While hectic at times, it provided a unique opportunity to see and better understand the different Christian perspectives and practices within the Denver Hmong community. In regards to my research and presence, of the three churches, the Hmong Catholic Church was the most reluctant to engage. While they acknowledged my presence and occasionally spoke with me, curious about why I chose to sit through a Catholic mass in Hmong, I was often left sitting alone in the

pews closest to the back. I continued to attend their afternoon mass over several months I was able to observe their practices and the social activities before and after services, but the community proved to be not as eager to engage with me as did the C&MA and Baptist churches. With that said, in what follows I will be drawing primarily from my conversations and observations of the C&MA and Baptist churches to begin examining continuity as an anthropological subject and its role in the Hmong American Christian experience.

Continuity and Breaking from the Past

The history of Hmong Christian conversions and the emergence of Hmong Christian communities that I have outlined in the beginning of this chapter, are scored by a renunciation of traditional spiritual practice and a pronounced break from the continuity of Hmong traditional worldviews. This break from the past has been a central subject of interest and source of debate in the anthropological study of Christianity. I will now examine the processes of continuity, discontinuity, and conversion so that we may form a more thorough understanding of the diverse forms of Hmong American Christianity.

As I discussed in the introductory chapter, in the emergent field of an Anthropology of Christianity, the corpus of Joel Robbins' work has focused on the issues of continuity and discontinuity, the rupture or break from the past, in a process he marks as "world breaking" and as "world making" (2004b). This breaking from the continuity of the past and the creation of a new, Christian world stands cleanly apart from the old and should be considered on its own merits separate from the history it came from. In his own work with the Urapmin people of Papua New Guinea, Robbins has documented a radical and sudden conversion to a revivalist centred charismatic Christianity. Within this conversion he identifies some remnants of past tradition surviving in social practices, but he also presents a Christian worldview that is distinct and independent of any other, which has resulted in people struggling between two cultural logics (2004a).

In Robbins' view, conversion to Christianity represents a distinct and decisive cleft from previous spiritual practices and ways of understanding the world that Christian conversion demands. He has argued that, "Christian converts tend to

represent the process of becoming Christian as one of radical change”, and that, “Faced with conversion, what anthropologists tend to doubt is that the changes that have occurred are as radical as converts claim” (2007a: 11, 13). He has also asserted that anthropologists see cultures as continuous, enduring subjects that are not readily subject to change and that previous efforts to explore Christianity in anthropological terms has been rife with shortcomings (2007: 9). These shortcomings have included the insistence that converted communities have retained forms or elements of previous religious life and that the communities have not really converted; that Christianity is viewed as a thin veneer over traditional systems of belief; that Christianity in syncretic forms is treated as being too diverse within a converted culture to warrant plausible examination; and that Christianity is often routed back to social subjects such as family, gender, politics and economy (Robbins 2003, 2004a, 2007a, 2011a, 2011b).

While Robbins’ work has provided a starting point from which to understand conversion and the break from the past, it has been argued that the changeover to Christianity must be understood as connected to previous experience and that the ethnographic record presented does not accurately reflect conversion experience in Papua New Guinea (Heinzmann 2009, see also Street 2010). I would add to these points that Robbins’ view of Christianity is quite narrow, essentialising Christianity, and in so doing, casting it as monolithic in structure. His writings focus on Pentecostal conversions and charismatic forms of practice and do not permit a wider gaze that is inclusive of diverse Christian denominations and their varied attitudes towards Christianity, conversion, and practice. In so doing, he has moved anthropology away from acknowledging and exploring legitimate and diverse Christian communities for fear of losing focus on the Christian aspects of the society. Now I wish to be careful here as I do not want to suggest that the communities and denominations are so diverse that they cannot be adequately studied as Robbins has suggested of past anthropological efforts. Rather, just as Heinzmann, I suggest that a wider and more inclusive gaze should be cast on Christian communities and their relationship with the past. To this point, Jacka clearly states, “I do not deny that rupture is an important process of conversion, yet I argue that as researchers we also need to seek continuities between the past and present that make conversion legible.”

(2005:644)

Furthermore, Chua (2012) has suggested that the delicate, dynamic nature and variations of Christian experience can best be understood through native exegesis, whereby the mechanics of things is understood through internal perception. This approach makes an effort to move past the blunt matter of rupture and disjunction and in turn teases out experiences that reveal attitudes and relationships as they exist through cultural change and without reductionist or essentialist arguments (Chua 2012: 16). She goes on to state, “it is vital not to impute an artificial homogeneity to native exegesis- a tendency that sometimes rears its head in ethnographies of small-scale, bounded, self-consciously Christian ‘cultures’” (2012: 29). Through this perspective, it is possible to ensure that a community is not representing as speaking with one voice, but rather the diversity of experience is adequately represented.

In consideration of rupture and discontinuity as points of anthropological interest, I am in full agreement with Robbins that the experiences of the converted should be taken as legitimate perspectives and sincere experiences. However, it is also critical that we acknowledge and consider the fact that there are different reasons and motivations, apart from institutional metanarratives of conversion, underlying people’s decisions to convert. To this point, Chua has provided a means to account for that diversity by including a native exegesis of being Christian, which allows for critical examination of the diverse nature of Christianity as it is experienced and understood in different Christian communities. In what follows, I examine conversion and Hmong experiences with conversion, which will allow for a further examination and understanding of the nuances of continuity and rupture.

Conversion: Processes and Experience

For the individual within the Hmong experience, the purpose of Christian conversion is to accept Jesus Christ into their heart as their lord and saviour and in so doing they come to know God and God’s purpose, ultimately becoming one with God. This acceptance of Christ is, for the Hmong, what defines becoming Christian (Vang 2000: 5) and is a means to provide a social identity and sense of social cohesion. For the institution of Christianity it is to save souls and bring those souls into the fold of God’s love and protection. In the case of Pentecostal Christian

conversion, Robbins notes that, “[the] most distinctive quality is pluralism in that it doesn’t eradicate previous beliefs but it changes them. “By a process of demonization, Pentecostal Christianity makes indigenous spirits representatives of the devil” (Meyer 1999 cited in Robbins 2004b: 128). This is further encouraged through the acknowledgement of indigenous spiritual ontologies, and in an anti-syncretic manner, how these ontologies work within narratives of the struggle between God and Satan (Robbins 2004b: 129, 135, see also Tomlinson 2004). This perspective is in keeping with the People’s Movement, spurred on by the C&MA in Laos where the, “Practices, customs, and cultures that are contrary to the Scriptures can be banned by the whole group” (Vang 2000: 5, 8, Vang 2010). In both cases, Robbins and Vang note that there is a guiding hand by the missionaries and those pushing for conversion. This guiding hand directly effects the selection of practices and beliefs that are to be kept and what is to be discarded. This is then reinforced in conversion and the acceptance of the new gestalt of practice and belief by the converted.

While emphasis was placed on the Hmong people’s self conversions as seen in the People’s Movement, there were clear differences between the styles of conversions offered by the Protestant and Catholic missionaries. As the Protestant missionaries maintained an anti-syncretic stance requiring that those converting forsake their previous practices of shamanism and ancestral worship, Catholic missionaries were more lenient and tolerant of traditional practices (Capps 1994: 164). In my own conversations with protestant Hmong Christians, the Catholic community was often accused of not fully converting and accepting the Christian way of life. It is not that the Catholic community practices a form of syncretism, but rather the Catholic Hmong freely move between the two systems, Catholicism and traditional practice, as they feel they need to. Because of this, they were often referred to by Protestant Hmong as the, “flip-floppers”. As Zehner points out, the problem with applying the term syncretism to a practice is that there is no general agreement on what syncretism specifically means and as such it is used simply to imply that there is a mixture of religions (2005: 291). I raise this point because it is important to make the distinction between the anti-syncretic stance of protestant churches and the very different acceptance of traditional practice seen in the Catholic

community and I want to emphasise that their acceptance does not constitute syncretism. As I stated at the outset of this chapter, the Hmong C&MA community represents a radical separation from traditional practice and a full acceptance of what they see as a proper Christian life and worldview. In contrast to this, I mean to suggest that the Catholic community, in their coming to terms with a Christian way of life, represents a different degree of acceptance and relationship of the past that permits for the inclusion of the two traditions.

In Robbins' research, conversion was a radical and community encompassing event that centred on a Pentecostal form of Christianity. Returning to the history of the Hmong, we can see that their exposure to different Christian denominations has occurred over a long period of time and their conversions to different churches has taken place throughout their diaspora. Over this time, there have been different motivations for conversion. In the stories that follow, the motivations for conversion are quite different between the two men and they have had different relationships with the past and traditional practices through their respective conversions.

Two Cases of Hmong Conversion

When I first met Joseph, I saw a neatly groomed Hmong man of small stature, in his 50s, sitting at the table he jumped at the opportunity to talk about Hmong conversion and his own experiences. He had grown up in a small village in Eastern Laos, following the traditional practices of ancestral worship. Sometime in the early 1970s when Joseph was about 11 years old, his father had been called to visit a relative in another village who's wife was quite ill. Joseph and his father travelled to the village and found the woman bed ridden and near death. A shaman had been treating her but had been unable to improve her condition. Another person in the village who had converted to Christianity had also stopped by to visit the woman. It was decided that since the shaman had not been able to heal her, they would ask one of the local C&MA missionaries to come and pray over the woman and ask God to heal her. The missionary arrived and all of those in attendance, including Joseph, gathered in prayer and asked God to restore her health. The next day the woman began to show signs of improvement. They prayed again and by the end of the second day, the woman had fully recovered. Joseph's father took this miraculous

healing as a sign of the awesome power of the Christian God and made the decision to convert and to also make his wife and children convert. Joseph recalled that once the family had converted, they stayed as far away from traditional practices and people and that there was a significant period of adjustment. Most of the difficulties came from other family members who still followed traditional practices and who could not accept the family's conversion. After coming to the US, he became a pastor and missionary and maintains that he has witnessed other miraculous healings through the years and this has strengthened his faith and resolve.

While Joseph had converted in Laos, others converted upon their arrival in the US. In the case of Kaub, he converted in 1983 after arriving in California from a refugee camp in Thailand at the age of 30. Kaub had lived in the camp since 1975 and had grown up with traditional shamanic practices, just as Joseph had. Kaub and his immediate family were sponsored by a Baptist ministry in California. With the mission's help, he relocated from the camp in Thailand to California with his wife and three children. He explained to me that the ministers had helped him improve his English and they helped him find work. The newly arrived Hmong were all living in a mobile home park that was provided by the church and the pastors of the church involved themselves with the Hmong community on a daily basis. Kaub recalled that many members of the community had continued to practice their traditional ways and the pastors would often express their dismay over the matter. "They always try to convert us", he explained to me, "Eventually, some of us gave in." Kaub explained that they were extremely indebted to the church and the pastors for all that they had done. It seemed only right that the men and their families converted to make them happy. They were in a new land with minimal English skills and were unsure of how or where to settle themselves. Eventually Kaub converted to the Baptist faith and had his family convert as well. Given that his mother was a traditional healer, this was a very difficult time and family relationships became strained. The Baptist pastors insisted that Kaub and his family cease all traditional activities and fully embrace Christianity. Kaub's reluctance led to numerous arguments until Kaub heard the calling to become a pastor himself. He attended seminary school, became ordained, and help found a Hmong Baptist church.

Kaub's approach to traditional practice has been moderate and accepting but he insists that the Christian faith be represented at ceremonies as well. An example of this is to be found in the soul calling of a child, a *hu plig*, we will examine in Chapter 4 where the deacons had been called to pray for the child's well being and protection. In many traditional cases, the Baptist community has accepted that traditional practice will continue and that they are bound to it through marriage and family. While they do not condone the practices, they try not to interfere. They will generally attend ceremonies and will choose not to eat ceremonial foods, or to *pei*, bow, at certain ceremonial occasions.

In contrast to Kaub's approach, Joseph and the C&MA have maintained an anti-syncretic approach that asserts that traditional practices were superstitions and the works of Satan and as such, were to be avoided at all costs. As noted in his memories of his family's conversion, this insulation has been the source of major family and social disconnects and he has continued to find a sense of belonging in his church with others who share his views and attitudes. Despite their efforts to insulate themselves, traditional practice remains as an influence on their daily lives. Traditional practices, viewed as the works of Satan and his demons, serves to reinforce their decisions for converting, and acts as the antithetical force that reaffirms their faith, practices, and worldview. Additionally, there is the persistent threat of someone's faith wavering, thereby allowing the person to backslide into traditional ways of doing things and it is critical to guard one's self from this potential.

To better demonstrate this potential, I can turn to my own experiences from a funeral. When I constructed the funeral drum for the traditional funeral, I handled materials that were seen to possess the power of traditional ancestral spirits. In doing so, I exposed myself to spiritual impurities and opened myself up to spiritual contamination. When I returned to meet some of my informants from the C&MA church, they met me in the foyer and stayed four to five feet away from me. They were reluctant to shake my hand and when I asked if things were ok, they replied that they knew I had been at the funeral and had been around the traditional settings and had been in contact with spirit stuff, *plig*. I was chastised for my carelessness and told that if I wanted to really understand the C&MA church I would need to protect

myself and that I would need to pray to ask that the contamination be removed. I was given several psalms to meditate on and I sat with one of my informants who then held my hand and led a small prayer. Afterwards, I asked them to explain why traditional practices affected them so if they didn't believe in it. I was told that they didn't believe in it, but it was undoubtedly the work of Satan.

This perspective reveals a clear contradiction in that they do not believe in traditional practices yet they lend legitimacy to its potential effects by defining it as the work of Satan. In so doing, it reveals how necessary traditional practice is in defining what a Christian life is, and what it is clearly not, and therefore how it should be lived and experienced. In this view, traditional practices have been reworked and incorporated into a Christian ontological and cosmological framework that exists for the C&MA Hmong as a constant threat to their conservative faith. When I mentioned the matter to Kaub, he told me that this was an extreme view and that when some Hmong converted, they, “really, *really* wanted to be Christian”. Kaub has found a moderate balance between his past and his Christian presence that permits for a very different relationship with the whole of the Hmong community while Joseph maintains a higher degree of insulation. Between these two cases, it can be seen that the denomination of Christianity and that denomination's stance on anti-syncretism and acceptance of tradition, coupled with the individual's motivations for conversion, result in relationships that exhibit varying degrees of what it means to be Christian and how they choose to understand and interact with the past.

It is also important to recognise that there are indeed different motivations for Christian conversions, as we can see from these two examples. Furthermore, as I mentioned previously, motivations can include true desires to believe, social pressures, obligations, and fear. In addition to these, it is important to acknowledge that there can be pragmatic reasons for conversion. Looking at the works of Gow (2006) and Street (2010), it can be seen that there is a pragmatism present that underlies the motivations for conversion. In Gow's case, the Piro people were interested in attaining access to education and services available through the mission without radically altering their own practices or worldviews. In Street's work, conversions took place among hospital patients as a matter of hope and perceived

efficacy of Christian healing. In all cases, conversion requires reconciling the past with the denominational moral and ethical requirements of a Christian present. Building from the subject of conversion, in the section that follows I will examine how being Christian in the Hmong community can be understood as moral performance and how this performance results in contentious ideas of what it means to be a Hmong Christian within the Denver Hmong community.

Christianity as Moral Performance

In the preceding sections, my intention has been to show that Hmong Christian life is composed of different practices and view points that are marked with different relationships to religious life, being Hmong, and in understanding God. Following Chua, wherein she sees, “morality centering on individuals being social beings, not as social characters” (2012: 158), I wish to continue developing an image of Hmong Christian life, and in so doing I will continue to examine the moral and ethical complexities of being a Hmong Christian and what it means to be a good Hmong Christian.

Anthropological interest in ethics has emerged from philosophical work and has served as a focal point in several ethnographic accounts throughout the twentieth century through to today (Laidlaw 2002, 2014:1-16). However, as Laidlaw (2002) and Robbins (2007b) have noted, the subject of ethics has failed to fully develop in Anthropology and there is a pronounced deficiency of analytical frameworks for examining the formations of morality and ethical behaviour. James Laidlaw’s own work has focused on addressing this issue and builds from anthropological examinations of morality and ethics within the British and North American anthropological traditions. Through this he has traced the development of an understanding of ethics in anthropology and has drawn on the works of Durkheim and Kant (2002, 2014). Laidlaw explains that Durkheim’s work evolved from the Kantian tradition but that eventually, Durkheim relinquished the power of the individual to the power of society and moral conduct became subject to regulation by society. In this, “society, conceived thus, is intrinsically moral, while the individual is only so in virtue of its incorporation into the former, so that the relationship is simultaneously part-to-whole and yet also moral opposition” (Laidlaw 2014: 16).

This shift represents a departure from Kant's position wherein an individual has a choice whether they wish to follow the moralities of society, and a move by Durkheim to see that moral behaviour is a matter of how well an individual is socialized. Thus, "What is the nature of human freedom and of the moral will - is entirely spirited away by Durkheim" (Laidlaw 2002: 313-314, 2014: 16-21, Robbins 2007b: 311).

Following Kant's line of thinking, Laidlaw continues to develop an understanding of freedom, and the will to be, through the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. For my purposes here, I have focused on Laidlaw's incorporation of Foucault in his understanding of freedom and morality. Laidlaw notes that the use of Foucault, particularly in the social sciences, has centred on the dynamics of power knowledge relationships where institutions diminish any trace or notion of freedom of will of the individual. Foucault himself noted that during his lifetime he was becoming associated with the subjectivity of the institution and the state, particularly through his work, *Discipline and Punish* (1995), and his lectures interrogating the state and governmentality (2008). As Laidlaw points out, Foucault attempted to distance himself from this association by examining the technologies of the self and the construction of the moral self. These themes occupy Foucault's later works and lectures and begin to complete an image that accounts for the individual situated within a social whole (Laidlaw 2002: 322, 2014: 92-96, Foucault 2000). Foucault provides a framework for understanding the moral self by examining historical attitudes and sources of desire and pleasure, and through understanding the self by reflective thought through inner moral dialogue, caring for the self and what he termed, "The 'technology of the self' — reflection on modes of living, on choices of existence, on the way to regulate one's behaviour, to attach oneself to end and means" (Foucault 2000: 89, see also Foucault 1992: 26-29, Laidlaw 2002: 322-324, and Robbins 2004a: 216-219). Most importantly, the incorporation of reflective thought and the resulting technology of the self represents the freedom of choice of the individual as they are confronted with various moral codes of conduct that are connected to larger thematic structures, such as the church and ideas of truth.

Through these frameworks, provided by Laidlaw and Foucault, there can be found an understanding of morality that exists through the relationships of the

institution and society, the individual, and the individual's formation of the moral self. While I agree with Laidlaw that there is indeed the freedom of choice within the individual, for the Hmong there is also the observable production and reproduction of moral behaviour through institutional and social collective subjectivity and the individual. This perspective returns to Foucault's arguments of institutional subjectivity, and to some degree, Durkheim's notion of moral reproduction in the actions of an individual and the various degrees of socialization. However, I do not mean to suggest that the will of the individual is always crushed by the will of the collective, but rather that within this relationship, there is a constant negotiation of wills that at times is accommodating and at other times is forceful or punitive in nature. And, as we are not privy to the processes of reflective thought and the ensuing internal moral dialogue of the individual, by examining what people say, what they do, and what they say they do, we are able to observe how the moral is understood and acted upon, or performed, through the decisions of the individual within social and private domains.

This approach leads me to a theoretical perspective of performance derived from Deborah Kapchan's 1995 article, "Performance". In it, Kapchan states:

"Performances are aesthetic practices- patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment- whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities. Insofar as performances are based upon repetitions, whether lines learned, gestures imitated, or discourses reiterated, they are the generic means of tradition making. Indeed, performance genres play an essential (and often essentializing) role in the mediation and creation of social communities, whether organized around bonds of nationalism, ethnicity, class status, or gender." (1995:479)

Kapchan's examination centres around the Moroccan theater and the expressions of genre, gender, history, and politics of identity as they define and challenge the boundaries and authority of cultural and social norms (1995: 482-499). In this sense, Kapchan notes that the actions of the actors in the theater reveal ideal and non-ideal aspects of life that are readily understood and interpreted, positively or negatively, by its observers. For Kapchan, the theater provides a space for these expressions yet the principles of reflection and expression extend to the domain of everyday life. Just as the performance on stage must provide some reference point

for the audience to engage with the work, so too must daily life find expressions that allow for mutual interpretation. Here I diverge from Kapchan's work in that the nature of moral performance retains not only an aesthetic quality in the eyes of some, but it is also representative of a habitus that permeates the multiple domains of daily life. In essence, all domains, or fields, become a stage where the self and communal expression are allowed to unfold.

Returning to the situation with Kaub's conversion, Kaub had accepted a Christian moral foundation when he chose to convert. Beyond merely stating his conversion, Kaub was expected to follow the moral teachings of his faith and to accept a way of living that includes codes that direct attitudes towards gender, the self, family, and community. The broad and subtle strokes of Kaub's actions and self presentation define what kind of Christian he has chosen to be, and how he is perceived by others. In Kaub's case, he has chosen a more accepting stance in regards to traditional practices and this is reflected in how he engages with traditional practices and practitioners, as well as with other Christians. While some may regard his actions as having adapted his ethical stance to include these engagements, others may question his devotion to what they interpret as being proper ethical conduct. A similar situation can be observed in how one moral foundation, such as that of the C&MA, understands the actions of another group such as the Catholics. In this situation, the Catholics are seen as having a higher tolerance for the incorporation of traditional practices; again, as several of my informants told me, they "flip-flop" between beliefs. While the Christians that I spoke with may not agree with what they have observed in the Catholic community, it shows that the moral foundations of belief, derived from the church and from the self, are performed in a manner acceptable to themselves and observable to others. Additionally, these situations highlight the point that there is not one Christianity, but rather several Christianities that are defined, performed, and experienced within and between multiple groups that legitimise and challenge one another. So in sum, as habitus, these codes guide decisions concerning behaviour within a shared communal acceptance of being. The resulting actions of behaviour and practice relative to one's self and others, may then be construed as a performed compliance to, or deviance from, accepted ethical values and norms.

While I am suggesting that morality in Hmong Christian life be understood as performance, I also wish to clarify that moral performance exists apart from what could be termed agency. As Laidlaw states, “put most crudely, we only mark them [moral acts] down as agency when people’s choices seem to us to be the right ones” (2002: 315). In this, he is calling into question the subjectivity and selective gaze of the outside observer, the analyst. In an effort to address this particular point and to further develop a model of moral performance, I have selected to examine activities with a range of behaviour that is deemed as being ethically right or ethically wrong through Hmong understandings of moral life, and not my own. So, in what follows, we can observe the means by which the social affects the development of the individual and vice versa, while also understanding that the performance of morality, or of ethical being, by the individual constitutes decisions made by a moral self, through the negotiation of different relationships within the social collective and through inner moral dialogue that addresses a Christian ethical telos.

Society and the Moral Self

After attending a church service one Sunday, I went fishing with some friends and family in Eastern Colorado. As it was a three-day holiday weekend, we left in the afternoon and we had arranged to fish at night and into the morning. When we arrived at the lake, I was surprised to find many of the C&MA and Baptist church members at the lake. I was met by many of the grandmothers from the church who had come with their sons and daughters and with their grandchildren. They all seemed just as surprised to see me there and they smiled excitedly from behind their floppy fishing hats and waved hello. They continued to bob along with their fishing poles slung over their shoulders as the little ones hauled tackle boxes half their size across the muddy road and through the wet grass. The sun was setting as whole extended families lined up along their favourite spots and the sounds of fishing lines being cast and the plunk of lures hitting the water

Looking around and reflecting on everyone and everything I had seen at the lake, I came to realise how important hunting and fishing was to the Hmong community and how many of my informants were obsessed with hunting, fowling, and fishing. It was a favourite topic for many and would often come up in our

conversations. In many social gatherings, such as barbecues and dinners where often times we ate whatever seasonal game, fish, or fowl had been caught, it was common to hear people chatting about the new sportsman mega-stores opening in the area, new gun acquisitions, what shot to use for what game, setting up hunting blinds, fishing poles and reels, tackle, and the best bait, upcoming trips, and catches from the previous seasons. Rarely would actual locations be shared as the best spots were closely guarded secrets. When people would tell me about them I was quickly warned not to tell anyone and not to discuss where they had slipped off to the previous weekend. If I told them I was going fishing, they would sometimes try to tease the spot out of me by naming different lakes or streams, hoping that I would reveal a crucial detail of the area. After these interactions I would usually be pulled aside and told that whoever I was talking to was notorious for stealing fishing spots or that if I told certainly people in the community anything, the whole community would end up there in force and the spot would be ruined. At times, the need for secrecy was so intense that specific family members, related by blood or marriage, were actively excluded from knowing.

I asked several of my informants about their attitudes towards hunting and fishing and I received a variety of answers. A consistent theme was that they felt one with nature and could embrace the wilderness. While some Christian Hmong insisted it brought them closer to God, others, Christian and non-Christian, felt that by sharing what they caught or hunted with friends and family they were helping provide. For them, it was not merely for sport and hunting and then selflessly distributing their gains was what they and their ancestors had done while living in the forests of Laos and in the camps in Thailand, and this was a natural extension of that traditional past, whether they had actually lived that way or they thought communal sharing to be an essential part of an imagined rustic past. For many of those who had been children when they left the old country, or who had been born in the US, it offered a time to step away from their contemporary lives in the US and through the act of hunting, fishing, and sharing, they were presented an opportunity to experience and to be a part of that past as they understand it. For those who were deemed to be selfish and hoarded their catch, their character was in doubt and they were cast as stingy, untrustworthy, and conceited and there is the threat of going too

far and shaming one's family, tarnishing their personal honour, and jeopardising their social status. Furthermore, they were often talked about as never helping out in any area of life, being lazy, dirty, backwards, and primitive in thought and action; they had backslid too far into the old ways, even though this contradicted the very image of the generous and sharing collective of the ancestors and the romanticised views of the old ways of life. At times, this resulted in pressures being put on the person, usually through exclusion and gossip, occasionally through direct confrontation, to encourage them to do the proper thing by sharing with the community and contributing to the social whole.

Visiting the C&MA church the following Sunday, it was clear that the pastor had also taken note of people's excitement over the beginning of the fishing season and it featured as the central theme of his sermon. When the pastor took up his spot on centre stage, the power point flashed on and he began. The pastor is a man in his late 50s and he commands attention with his substantial character and his booming voice. His sermons are often dynamic and animated and his words often crash through the church through his masterful use of crescendo and silence. In this particular sermon, he began with a reserved tone, like a parent holding back before scolding a child. From behind his podium he looked out over the congregation and then commented on the diminished attendance. His next words were accusatory and stern saying that some had clearly chosen to place their own desires before the church, the community, and most importantly, before God. He drew out the correlation between the start of the spring fishing season and the thinning of the congregation. He said that the temptation to do other things, such as hunting and fishing, was great but that it was drawing people away from their true responsibilities and that their behaviour was, in no uncertain terms, sad and unacceptable. Drawing on various biblical passages and examples, the pastor outlined qualities expected of a good Christian. His sermon further emphasised the importance and responsibility of spreading God's word in the world and the obligation of devoting one's self to this mission at home and overseas, committing to the family and its propagation and its stability, and committing to furthering a personal relationship with God. When his sermon had finished and some final comments and notifications were attended to, the congregation stood and shuffled to the foyer where they began muted conversations.

Some immediately headed for their cars, with one man particularly anxious to reach his truck that was shamelessly covered in gun logos and stickers from his preferred duck call manufacturer.

When I left the church, I wasn't completely sure of everything that I had just witnessed. A week later I raised the subject with an informant who was familiar with most of the Hmong churches. They told me that they had heard a sermon at another Hmong Baptist church, along the same lines months before but it had to do with sharing. The sermon was about a Hmong man who had felled a deer during a week long hunting trip and he had taken it upon himself to distribute the meat among his community. After he had done so, his wife was furious and nagged and berated him for giving away all of the good meat. The man explained to her that she needed to be patient, that what he had done was the right thing to do, and that they would be rewarded for their generosity. As time went by, the community did indeed repay the debt and the man and his wife received meat, fish, and fowl throughout the year. As it turned out, much of the game that I had been eating at the different barbecues and gatherings over the year was from the community giving meat to my informant, Kaub, who had been the one to fell the deer that was first shared.

Aside from the issue of sharing because it was what Kaub perceived to be the Christian and Hmong thing to do, not sharing created a mildly difficult situation in how Kaub's wife was perceived by others in the community. Because of his status in the church and the community, it was and continues to be important to Kaub to maintain a particular display of ethical behaviour by leading through example in order to maintain and bolster his status. Through our conversations it was implied that if he held no sway over how his own family behaved, how could he be expected to properly lead others. In this, he felt that his behaviour and the behaviour of his wife reflect on the whole of his and her families and that people would talk, or gossip, about what was seen to be improper. In this particular case, people did talk. People commented on his wife's unwillingness to share and to help others in the church. After several conversations with his wife about the matter, Kaub convinced her that she needed to be more open to sharing and that they would benefit from others' generosity in return. I was told that she mended the relationships by spending time with different people and being more involved with activities at the

church. Over time, tensions eased and while she began to be more conscious of how she and Kaub were perceived, Kaub would occasionally remind everyone of the point of sharing. Often when he would emphasise the matter in prayers or over dinners, his wife would seem to become agitated and it turned out there remained a degree of animosity over who had been right and who had been wrong.

In the situations above, there is an image of what constitutes part of what is seen as proper and ethical behaviour for Hmong and Hmong Christians through the lens of social structures and institutions. Most importantly, there are two, very different cultural logics at work that inform the character of proper behaviour in both the Hmong community and the Hmong Christian community. In the case of the collective enforcement of behaviour through the Hmong community, there is an emphasis on contributing to the collective and participating with the interest of the collective in mind. To not share results in adverse consequences for the offender through exclusion, derision, and defamation of character, either overtly or silently. Through examining the C&MA sermon, we can see that emphasis is placed on duty and responsibility to the church, the church community, and the family and is supported by the use of scripture and biblical rhetoric. Both of these examples fall in line with Foucault's notion of institutional subjectivity in that individuals become subject to social and institutional expectations of behaviour. However, there also exists the will of the individual, or in Foucault's terms, the technology of the self, in choosing how their relationship to these institutions and practices unfolds and how they choose to act upon this relationship.

Furthermore, just as in the case of the two conversions, between the C&MA and Baptist sermons there exists different relationships to the Christian ethical telos of their respective faiths and varying degrees of acceptance across the two cultural logics of being Hmong and being Christian. For the C&MA, it was the act of hunting that was taking people away from the church and their obligations to the church, whereas the Baptist church chose to focus on a value of sharing as it is understood within the Hmong community. Between the judgmental social pressures and the possibility of being accused of unethical behaviour, adherence, or conformity, to expected normative behaviour becomes observed through public action that can be witnessed by others so that there can be no questioning of the

individual's sincerity in action, intention, or within their relationships with the community, individual's in the community, or to the church itself. And while we can account for the echoes of Durkheimian observable social pressures that encompass expectations of conformity and social reproduction of social morality, the inner moral dialogue of reflective thought of the individual can only be observed and understood through their choice of action and reaction to the situations they find themselves in. Thus, through performance, how an individual has elected to construct the moral self in relation to the pressures of social conformity and how these relationships and moral dialogues inform notions of being an individual, being Hmong, and being Christian, is revealed.

The situation with hunting and sharing provides a means to further understand how moral practice and performance exists within particular social and institutional domains. And while the moral and ethical are observable in these venues, again, the principles extend to larger domains with greater social exposure and increased visibility. Every year the Hmong council in Denver picks a clan to plan and host the Hmong New Year celebrations. The clan spends the entire year organising the event which includes coordinating the vendors and the different traditional blessing ceremonies, dances, and singing groups. On a cold morning in November, I walked into the main events building of the Adams County Fair Grounds and I was almost run over by three small boys dressed in traditional Hmong vests while the silver coins that had been sewn into the bright orange and green patterns jingled against one another. I immediately heard the familiar mix of White and Green Hmong being spoken, with the rhythms of speech occasionally breaking to allow for borrowed English words and phrases. Several families had already been seated in the rows of folding chairs in front of the stage while the New Year officials explained the order of activities that would take place over the next three days. I spoke with a few people near the door and they explained to me that they were expecting several thousand people over the course of the festival and while it sounded like a lot, attendance was not expected to be as big as previous years.

Behind the main floor was a small room where the vendors had set up shop. In addition to traditional dresses, vests, and silver jewelry, they sold lime green toy guns for the boys and small princess outfits for the little girls, as well as skin creams,

soaps, and pots and pans. Tucked away in the corner of a few stalls roots and herbal medicines could be seen poking out of bags and their cloth wrappings. An insurance agency owned by a Hmong husband and wife had even set up a booth. Another vendor area had also been set up in the adjacent building and as I was walking away from the stands of clothes, the Hmong ball game began. On one side of the big hall, Hmong women and girls stood in a line opposite a line of young men and boys, some dressed in traditional garb while others wore their everyday clothes. They smiled and talked to one another and casually tossed colourful beanbags and tennis balls back and forth to one another. I recognised a few of the participants from the different church youth groups I had met. The idea was that young men and women can stand and speak to one another and get to know each other and possibly become a couple. If the young woman doesn't like the young man, she will toss her ball to someone else or stop playing the game. If the couple like one another, the man will keep the ball. As the ball is the woman's possession, the man can then go to her family and claim her. While this is the traditional method of courting, it was apparent that not everyone took it as literal or as seriously as it had been explained. Standing there I could see that some of them had been pressured into playing by their friends, and that those remaining seemed to be forced into the activity by their hovering mothers. It offered a way to publicly show who was available for courting and being so public, everyone could see that the young couples were behaving and their engagements were quite innocent.

I continued on to the other building and once I passed the racks of DVDs of Hmong movies made in Thailand, I came across the C&MA food booth and the booth of the Baptist church directly across. They had prepared sausages, larb, curries, and papaya salad to sell in order to raise money for their respective churches. Both groups waved at me and told me to come to their booths, each claiming to have the best food and insisting I would prefer theirs over the other. Behind the counter, twelve to fifteen men and women of all generations on each side scrambled over one another to fill the different chaffing dishes while church leaders looked on, taking note of what everyone was doing and constantly shooing away the little children running between the boxes and stacks of cups and plates. I recognised many of the faces from the church services and the different church events I had been to,

particularly the older ladies at the front line of the booths scooping curries and pounding papaya and peppers in huge mortars.

Looking at the two church booths set up, those working behind the counters are publicly displaying their identities as Hmong Christians. While their involvement with the church may be known among their immediate community and family, this work firmly places them as Hmong Christians in front of the whole of the community and there can be no doubt of their affiliation and their faith. More importantly, these identities become attached to what can be understood by others as being moderate Christianity and very conservative Christianity. For those outside of the church groups, the different stances of each church on traditional practices was well understood and accepted. While there is the relationship of being identified as Christian relative to the community, there is also debate between the two churches of what makes a good Christian and who actually fulfills that task.

In addition to this public display of identity and belonging, there is also the desire, by the extremely devoted, to help the church as much as possible. This fervor of wanting to assist creates degrees of competition within the members of the church and also between the different church groups. At first glance the official public discourse between the C&MA and Baptist churches tends to be quite amicable and accepting of one another. The pastors often speak with one another outside of the church and plan larger community events and missions. Over the course of my spending time with the whole of the Hmong community, it became apparent that there were indeed heated differences between the congregations of the churches and these differences were aired in different ways. Most significantly, gossip was an avenue through which to vent frustrations between the churches. This usually entailed hearing that a certain person was not a, “proper Christian”, or by casting aspersions that challenged the faith of the others by simply stating, “We work harder for our church. We are better Christians than they are”. If word had gotten back to someone that they were being accused of not being a proper Christian, there was often an accusation fired back to the same effect. And so the volleys would go back and forth, particularly among the younger generations of Hmong Christians. And again, through these actions there is a public verification of behavior that facilitates the performance of moral conduct that is reinforced through social critique,

inclusion, and exclusion.

But beyond these matters of representation, comparison, and jabbing between the two groups, there also exists a desire of continuity in each. Through a lens of continuity, we can see that each group has an interest in the continuity of not only their church, but also in a Hmong Christian way of living. Looking at the New Year booths, the very purpose of the two churches' involvement was to raise awareness and funds for the perpetuation of the church and its activities; locally and through their respective missions. Leading up to the event, church leaders had called upon their congregations to fulfill their duties to God, to the church, and to the community by participating in the preparing for and running the booths at the New Year event. Both groups have invested considerable time, resources, and energy in developing their respective churches and communities. As such, members from both churches feel that the lives they have developed are in keeping with their respective faiths and it is something they wish to pass on to their children and the generations to come. Here, alongside the marked desires of individuals who wanted to help, there are also those who were reminded of their moral duty to serve and of their responsibilities to others, reflecting the obligations of mutual dependence. Additionally, in this, we can see different families and generations come together. Here the younger generation can learn from their elders through example about how they should participate in society and contribute to their community.

Whether the young members of the congregation in the booth are responsible for making rice, turning the pork in the portable ovens, greeting customers, or preparing sauces or plates for people to eat, there is a proper way to do things that they have learned from their mothers and fathers, and community elders. All of these efforts constitute a reproduction of social practice that reflects the moral foundation found within a diverse Hmong Christian community. In what follows I examine the idea of the antithetical, which poses a challenge to the maintenance of a Hmong Christian moral authority and suggests what can be termed as an impossibility of being.

The Antithetical and the Impossibility of Being

In the situations I have examined above, we have been able to see moral performance as an expression of how people understand the moral self in relation to society. I wish now to add to that by looking at the conservative Christian views of the C&MA, moral performance, and the impossibility of being.

In his work with the Urapmin of New Guinea, Robbins identified an impossibility of being that existed in the Urapmin struggling with a charismatic Christian ethical telos. In this case, Robbins has presented us with a homogeneous experience of rupture, discontinuity, and conversion and within this struggle, Robbins saw that there was a moral incompatibility that existed between the former ways of being and Christian life. Robbins explains that, “the system of Christianity is set up as a system with expected failures- it “condemns the will” of the individual and promotes passive behaviour, not allowing them to engage in the functions of the community” (Robbins 2004a: 246, 247-252). Through this, the Urapmin must commit to, and accept, the ethical telos of Christian life and complete the process of rupture and world breaking as balancing or adhering to the traditional becomes an impossibility.

While the Urapmin are presented with this impossibility, so too are the Hmong, albeit in a slightly different manner. As I have pointed out in this chapter, in the case of the Hmong there are different ideas of what constitutes a good Christian and that there are very different ways to understand the relationships that exist between an individual and their faith. Moreover, conversion and acceptance of a Christian ontological understanding represents a clear departure from a traditional Hmong animated worldview.

At the outset of this chapter my informant, Louis had told me that the C&MA viewed traditional ways as being Satanic. Understanding that, many members of the C&MA actively avoid coming into contact with traditional practices because of this satanic association. While it is seen as being reminiscent of the old ways of doing things and being meaningless, it is also chocked full of meaning when understood to be part of God’s world and that it represents everything they don’t want to be, the antithetical of their Christian faith and practice. Furthermore, with the C&MA being very conservative, there is a critical view of any acceptance of any part of traditional

life. For many of the C&MA, the mixing of the deacons at the *hu plig* for the child that we saw through Kaub's experience, would be wholly unacceptable. It opens the faithful up to be subject to the forces of Satan and to accept that proximity draws into question a person's faith and commitment. It places that person precariously close to backsliding into the old ways of doing things where they will cease to be a moral person honouring God; they become subject to the antithetical.

As a counterpoint to Christian goodness, the satanic always exists. In this manner, the antithetical always exists and is ever present. Furthermore, as the C&MA believe in angelic warfare, the forces of Satan are at war on earth and a person is susceptible to their influence. This renders traditional practice particularly dangerous as it is based on confronting spirits (demons). In this case, the threat of backsliding is very real and it becomes important to be able to show how you have distanced yourself from those threats, how you have committed yourself to your faith, and how you have been vigilant in self-discipline. There is a need to publicly show the degree of one's devotion and how the threat of backsliding has been diminished. Thus, there is a return to the idea of morality being performative.

Additionally, there is the issue of sin. As Robbins pointed out with the Urapmin, Christianity is constructed with a certain degree of failure built in. In addition to human fallibilities for which sin accounts, the antithetical nature of traditional practice always exists to test their faith and their commitment, and to tempt them back to the old ways, and because of this, reaffirming their sincerity and devotion, through public display or personal dialogue, becomes critical. As there is always the threat of backsliding, or being perceived as having done so, their form of Christianity is one of constantly becoming and of constantly verifying that becoming. In this way, many never achieve recognition as having fully converted as they must constantly reassert themselves as Christian through consistent church attendance, bible study, and completely forsaking traditional practices, all the while being seen as being held in the grip of the antithetical and the threat of backsliding. This simply adds to the social critique of being Christian and to the on going comparative and competitive display of being. In sum, the demands placed on the converted and the congregation by the acceptance of a conservative Christian ethical telos creates an impossibility of being a Christian who is immune to, or able to exist

apart from, the power of the traditional world. This results in a spectrum of expression that lends itself to diverse Christian practices and perceptions of the world around them and the traditional Hmong world.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide a basis from which to understand the introduction of Christianity to the Hmong in the US and how Christianity is understood and experienced by the Hmong of Denver. More importantly, the introduction of Christianity has presented the Hmong with an alternative ontological perspective that stands in stark contrast to the cyclical nature of the traditional Hmong animated world. This bifurcation of Hmong religious life further contributes to changes in a conceptualised Hmong continuity through spiritual perspectives and the interactions between different Christians and traditional practitioners.

To this point, we have seen that there is not one way to be Christian and that what constitutes a proper Christian is debated within the Hmong community. Moreover, we have seen that the issues of Hmong morality are constructed across multiple domains, public and private, which results in a morality that can be observed through performance and the struggle to maintain the idea of being Christian. In its performance, the individual is permitted an opportunity to express their own choices and reflect upon their own moral selves that are counterpointed by the threat of the antithetical. Furthermore, these expressions reveal relationships between the individual and the social or institutional whole, the relationships between the individual and others, and the individual as they understand and relate to themselves.

Returning to the conversation with Dave in Chapter 2, Christian views inform notions of family that can be impressed upon children. Additionally, the idea of family continues to sit as a core element of Hmong life but is further justified through a Christian religious perspective of family, which reinforces expectations of moral and ethical gendered behaviour. Returning to Kapchan (1995) on gender and my employment of performance as a moral concept, gender within this context can be understood as a reflection of social norms and as a reflection of the internalised

concept of the moral self. At the beginning of this chapter, Louis' remarks on gender demonstrated his understanding of equality, yet from an outsider's perspective there were incredibly clear lines of gender division surrounding labour and social interaction. Moreover, prior conversations with Dave situated the man of the family as head of the household and decision maker, thereby rendering the status of the woman of the family as the dutiful and obedient wife, to be lower than that of the man. These contradictions in perspective and experience speak to the ontological, spiritual, and moral foundations of the Hmong Christian communities and their integration of traditional social views. In turn, this creates an alternative vision of a Hmong continuity that they wish to reproduce in their children, which will then again be affected by generational experiences and views that were touched upon in Chapter 2. The culmination of these factors further exposes an entanglement of Christian Hmong spiritual understandings of the world, juxtaposed by traditional social values. Additionally, the diverse Christian perspectives of the Hmong community offer further critical insight into what is being reproduced within the community and through family, which in turn furthers a plurality of expression regarding what it means to be Hmong.

To further contrast these matters, in Chapter 4 I will be addressing traditional Hmong spiritual practices and perspectives of the world. This chapter will also reveal an understanding of the traditional Hmong life cycle and further demonstrate the reproductive nature of Hmong life while highlighting the overlapping themes of the previous chapters.

Chapter 4

The World Is a Beautiful and Dangerous Place: Traditional Life and Praxis

The title of this chapter suggests that the traditional Hmong world is at once filled with the beauty of an animated understanding while remaining a precarious place, and indeed in many ways it is. While there are of course good things that happen, there are also hidden dangers that inform people's decisions and actions in the world. In the preceding chapter I examined the role of a Hmong Christian morality as it is performed within the community and how Christian perspectives inform a Hmong Christian understanding of the world and social life. Here I now wish to turn my attention to what can be termed traditional practices and how the performance of these practices define the contours of Hmong traditional life that lie in contrast to that of Hmong Christian life.

In the introduction to this thesis I defined traditional practices of the Hmong in the US as those practices which trace their origins to Laos and which have continued to be a defining part of life for many of the Hmong in the US. These practices are founded upon an animistic ontology. While the principles of animism may be observed in the Denver community, the interpretation of the world differed within and across generations. As a result of this, some elements of ceremony and processes of ritual have been altered to reflect different experiences of individuals and of generations. Many of these variations are derived from linguistic barriers and through experience the Hmong have had in the US. In what follows I will examine a Hmong funeral and a soul calling ceremony that will mark how followers of traditional beliefs engage in what they feel is a traditional praxis. Moreover, these events reveal how these Hmong understand themselves relative to one another and how they are situated within, and as part of, the world.

To begin with, during a conversation with a group of informants, I was told a story that demonstrates the connections and the dangers that exist between Hmong daily life and the animated Hmong world. During the early 2000s, a Hmong man in his early 20s came to a local shaman in Denver and complained of fatigue, fright, sleeplessness, and nightmares. When the shaman asked what was happening in his

dreams, the man replied that he felt as though he was being pecked, pinched, and scratched incessantly and that this entity was tormenting him night after night. It was decided that the shaman would look further into the matter and he determined that the man had suffered *bang plig*, or soul loss. In order to remedy the situation, the shaman performed a ceremony to determine where the man had lost his soul or who had absconded with his soul. During his voyage through the spirit world, the shaman learned that it was a chicken that was tormenting the man, a vicious and vindictive fighting cock to be exact.

Not understanding why the cock would bear such ill will towards the man, the shaman turned his inquiry to the man and asked him to explain why he thought the cock would be angered. The man explained that he raised fighting cocks and that he had a cock that had died sometime before the onset of the dreams and the appearance of the physical symptoms. When pressed about the death of the cock, the man confessed that it had not occurred in a cockfight, but rather by his own neglectful hand. He explained that he would often give the cock nothing but beer to drink and as the cock would become drunk, he would punch or kick the animal for his own amusement. After a severe scolding from the shaman for his idiocy in his treatment of the animal, the shaman returned to the spirit world in order to complete a *hu plig*, soul calling, for the cock. Here, the shaman bartered with the cock and offered him bribes, begging him to leave the man alone. Eventually, matters were settled, the cock returned the soul he had taken, and the man was left to recover.

This story highlights some of the key points for understanding the Hmong animated world, most notably the possibility of interaction between an individual and the human and non-human elements of the Hmong cosmological model. Of particular note is the cock being asked to return a stolen soul by a shaman. As keepers of knowledge and traditional ways of doing things, shamans play a central role in traditional practices. Their stories, performances, healing practices, and interpretations provide a means by which to examine the traditional Hmong world. The shamans serve as interlocutors between the earthly realm and the spirit world and in this duty, they must often do battle with spirits, bribe spirits, or use trickery to coerce the spirits into doing the shaman's bidding, just as in the case with the cock. In order to better understand the role of the shaman, I must first discuss the Hmong

concept of a person's spirit, or soul and the cosmological framework the shaman works within.

That Spirit Stuff

As Nicholas Tapp notes, the soul of a person is comprised of *plig*, or spirit stuff, and the interpretation of a person's *plig* can become an involved process for the shaman. Tapp goes on to state that, "the personal self is envisaged in terms of several different parts which are given particular names relating to parts of the cosmos". Furthermore, "...it is generally believed that there are *plig* associated with different parts of the body, any of which may 'fall', or flee, causing illness." (Tapp 2002:147, 148). As such, a person can possess numerous *plig*, or souls, and because of this, they can suffer soul loss, or *bang plig*, which must be remedied with a soul calling, or *hu plig*, just as we saw in the situation with the man being tormented by the cock.

While Tapp's work has largely focused on the Hmong of China, my own experience with several traditional practitioners in Denver reflects his findings on the matter. Generally, the older traditional practitioners that I spoke with would not hesitate to describe their understanding of the idea of soul or souls, while the younger generation would often give pause before discussing the matter. When speaking with Kou during the preparation of Grandma Va's funeral he said, "Uh, I guess I believe it. I'm not really sure, but it makes sense to me I guess." When I questioned him about his hesitance he replied, "Well I don't really understand all of it. I don't always know what they're [the elders *sic*] are talking about. Some of it we just do because we have to." I found Kou's thoughts on the matter repeated in other younger informants. When I raised the matter with their elders, I was often told that they didn't understand it because they could not speak with each other effectively about such matters. I found this odd as I had observed cross-generational communication on countless occasions. I learned that while much of the younger generation is able to understand what is being said in broad terms, nuanced meanings and obscure details are lost. They simply shrug their shoulders and move on. Often in these exchanges they would respond to their elders in English or in a mix of Hmong and English. To further complicate matters, in some situations a person may

be confronted with the White and Green Hmong dialects as well as English, Thai, and Lao all being used in the same conversation. As Dave from the C&MA church mentioned, it can be very intimidating speaking Hmong to the older generation. He explained that at times they can be very judgemental and are not always patient in trying to understand broken Hmong, which leads to further misunderstanding and conflict.

In one of my conversations with Grandma Va's husband, I asked him about the matter. He explained that he felt that the younger generation had simply become too Americanised and that they no longer took a serious interest in the old ways or in learning to speak Hmong. As an exception, he reminded me of a man I knew as Thaiv who was 35 at the time and lives in Fresno, California. I had first met Thaiv at a family gathering soon after he and his wife had their first child. Thaiv's father was a traditional practitioner and with Thaiv being the oldest child, he had forced Thaiv to learn how to do the old way of doing things. This meant that Thaiv had attended and had been directly involved with Hmong funerals, New Year events, weddings, and blessings. His father had made Thaiv spend considerable time speaking with older members of the Fresno community and made sure that he was present for community meetings, all for the purpose of grooming him as a leader in the Hmong community and as a means to ensure that the traditional ways of doing things continued. His father also insisted that Hmong be spoken in the home. As a result of this, Thaiv is fluent in White and Green Hmong and the younger generation would often look to Thaiv for guidance on what to do at events and in family situations because of his experience and his ability to speak with elders.

Talking about Thaiv, Grandma Va's husband took a deep breath and sunk in his chair. He told me that was how it was supposed to be. Children should have been raised more like Thaiv, to respect and follow the old ways. He went on to tell me that it was more than simply a language barrier. Plenty of adult Hmong spoke English perfectly well but they simply had not passed on the knowledge. He remarked that some had chosen Christianity and he could accept their abandoning many of the older ways. However, the custodianship of traditional knowledge was failing because of laziness on the part of the parents who had continued to identify with traditional ways. In his eyes, the children could be blamed for only so much but

the parents too were just as, if not more, responsible for the situation.

When Thaiv had returned to Denver for another family gathering, I asked him to share his thoughts on the subject. He explained, “Its really hard to do everything they ask of you. Its an incredible amount of work. Look at what I have been doing here. I have been running around talking to everyone, I have to keep track of the money, everyone wants something.” He laughed and said, “It never ends.” It was true that every time I had met him he had an exhausted appearance. He is quite a tall man and his face revealed a persistent fatigue and he would often have to pat the perspiration from his forehead. I replied that I would like for him to explain a few things that I saw around us. Laughing again he said, “See! Even you.” Thaiv went on to tell me that he had accepted things and that he felt obligated to follow his father’s wishes. He believed in the idea of multiple souls but he held some doubts about the makeup of the traditional world. In his view, the younger generation was not willing to put in the time to understand the traditional ways. While he acknowledged that his father provided a constant reference point on things and that others were not as fortunate, the younger generation had ample opportunity to sit with their elders and learn about Hmong history and traditional perspectives on things.

In the situations above, Grandma Va’s husband and Thaiv attribute a misunderstanding of the traditional world and practices to an apathy within several generations. When speaking with Kou he revealed to me that much of what he knew about souls had come from his grandfather, who had been a powerful shaman. Kou explained that when he fell ill as a child, his grandfather would give him medicine and offer blessings. While doing so, his grandfather explained how Kou’s soul was situated within his body and how his physical health was affected by his spiritual health. For the majority of the younger traditional practitioners I spoke with, they too had derived their understanding of souls from experiences with a shaman when they had fallen ill as children, albeit in varying degrees. And while they accepted the premise, none of the younger generation of practitioners, Thaiv included, identified their souls as belonging to, or being associated with, specific parts of the cosmos. Rather, the soul, or *plig*, was understood as simply being soul stuff with little regard as to where it came from.

In the case of the Hmong Christians, the matter was quite clear. They possessed one body and one soul, which created a Cartesian model within a linear Christian cosmological model. With traditional practitioners, different generations offered different opinions on how they understood the relationship of souls within the traditional cosmological model. As I noted with my younger informants, they did not directly associate different souls or portions of souls to any particular cosmological origin. In this sense, they arrived at a Cartesian perspective in that they understood there to be a division between body and soul. And while acknowledging a potential plurality of souls within them, the souls worked to achieve a balance with the body but stood clearly apart from the body as a component. For older informants, views varied considerably. They would acknowledge that their souls were attached and connected to parts of the Hmong cosmological model of the world, yet no specifics of location were mentioned. This was largely due to difficulty in conveying the complex organisation of the world. When I did call upon a translator, the older informants still appeared frustrated when trying to provide a detailed response and would often throw their hands up in defeat. Even so, the information they provided revealed a division of body and souls as entities but mutually reliant on one another to complete a person. Any loss or deviation in the health of the soul would result in physical symptoms. Likewise, observed physical symptoms were attributed to problems with a person's soul or souls.

Within the explanation given by two of my informants, the relationship of a person's body and soul involves the flow of energy through the body as the two interact. In a conversation with Kaub, he sipped at his hot water and said, "Drink, the hot water, will cool you down." When I asked him to explain this further, he replied, "Inside, you are too hot, the hot water makes it cool. It is the energy in the belly." I had not expected Kaub to share this belief as he is a Christian and believes that he has only one soul. He went on to tell me that his soul and his body work together and that they both must be healthy as they need each other. He also explained that those who followed the old ways believed the same thing. Between the body and soul, there are energy flows whose conditions reflect the overall health of the symbiotic relationship and those flows need to be tended and cared for. In the

section that follows I will examine animism and Hmong cosmological structure in order to better situate an understanding of the self and souls within the world.

The Animated World, Shamans, and the Hmong

Just as Hmong Christians centre their lives around their faith, traditional views of spiritual matters derived from a traditional understanding of the animated world play a central role in structuring, guiding, and experiencing life for traditional practitioners. In the article, “Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights”, Her (2005) has raised the question of whether or not Hmong shamanism should be defined as a religion. In exploring the cosmological underpinnings of Hmong shamanic practice, Her makes a distinction between religion, as seen from a distinctly Western perspective, and what people practice, or do, in their daily life, as in the case of how the Hmong would view their own practices. As Her explains, “It is true Hmong Americans (as well as those outside of the U.S.) do not have an official name for their religion, yet it is not entirely clear if that concern is a pressing one in the eyes of many people”, and he goes on to state, “It is also clear to me that they are aware of how problematic it is in trying to summarize a set of very complex ideas into a brief statement of definition” (2005: 2).

Returning to a quote from the introduction, the interwoven complexity of Hmong shamanism is further reiterated in Symond’s observations of Fadiman’s work, when Fadiman states, “Medicine was religion. Religion was society. Society was medicine. Even economics was mixed up in there (Fadiman 1997: 60, Symonds 2004:10). As such, it can be argued that a clear delineation between religious life and the praxis of everyday life and experience is not possible from the Hmong point of view as the two are intimately woven together to create and maintain the world and the people therein. Considering this point, the same can be said for the Hmong Christian communities as they continue to integrate their faith and devotion into nearly every facet of their lives. In both cases, this integration results in a symbolic expression of belonging and of identity within the wider Hmong community and further attests to efforts to reproduce their respective expression and concept of a Hmong continuity.

In light of this, within the context of the Denver Hmong and for the purposes

of this work, traditional spiritual views provide a clear counterpoint to Christian life as we saw in the preceding chapter. As I touched on in Chapter 3, during the Christian conversions of Hmong villages in Laos during the 1950s, Hmong shamanic practice was characterised as Satanic by the Baptist missionaries. In effect, by classifying traditional shamanic practice as Satanic, the Hmong Christian communities elevated shamanic practice to a religious category of ‘other’ in which a differing cosmological structure exists. Within this structure there are housed what could be construed by many Hmong Christians as spirits and demons. This view of shamanic practice was then reinforced and propagated by newly converted Hmong shamans and community members, and all connections to traditional practices were severed. As whole villages and extended families were often converted, the perpetuation of Christian practice and the resultant clefts of social division became more pronounced and easier to maintain and have since continued to define the contemporary Hmong social setting of Denver.

While Hmong Christians clearly set themselves along these lines, younger traditional practitioners often remarked that they could consider traditional views as a religion, while older practitioners simply disregarded the distinction. The general feeling among the older generation was that the older ways had served them well and if the Christians wanted to contest the traditional beliefs that was a Christian affair. When I brought the subject up with Grandma Va, she became silent and thought for a few moments. She snapped upright, poked a finger up, laughed and said, “Maybe there is one God. Maybe he does all of this because he likes to confuse us. He just laughs at us all. Yes, maybe one God.” Her response startled me, which made her laugh even more. While she jokingly accepted the premise of a single God that day, she continued to interact with the world through a lens of traditional understanding.

I return again to the man and the cock as this provides us with an opportunity to further develop an understanding of traditional Hmong spiritual practice and the Hmong animated cosmological model. With the spirit of the cock absconding with one of the man’s souls, the man’s worldview comes into focus as one rooted in animism. Animism as a subject of anthropological inquiry has a long history that houses numerous debates. With this in mind, I wish to point out that my goal is not to attempt to settle or deeply engage in the theoretical minutia of this debate, but

rather to highlight the diverse anthropological histories and engagements of animism and to use this debate to build a working foundation and definition of animism and an animistic ontology from which I may continue to explore Hmong traditional practice.

In his work on Amerindian ontological alterity and perspectivism, Vivieros De Castro states, “Animism could be defined as an ontology which postulates the social character of relations between humans and nonhumans: the space between nature and society is itself social” (1998:473). In addition to this definition, Pedersen defines ontology as, “...theories or understandings about what exists” (2001:413). I would like to supplement this by stating that an ontological approach also attempts to account for how people see themselves being situated within those understandings of what exists. With that said, I have drawn on these definitions in my examination of traditional Hmong practice because it highlights the issues of the social relationships between the human and the nonhuman, which is quite readily observable in Hmong daily life. Additionally, these definitions are open enough to allow for the parameters of social relationships of the human and nonhuman to be defined within the unique context of culture and society. In so doing, a clear and distinct explanation of the world is allowed to emerge that marks the unique, ontological points of practice and experience, as well as the interpretations and explanations of those experiences.

Early approaches to the subject were defined by Tylor’s (1903) examination of the subject in which animism was marked by the belief in spiritual entities that inhabit the world. Furthermore, there is an awareness of a duality of being, or self awareness, wherein humans are able to define a clearer separation between themselves in the waking world and what Tylor terms the “phantom”, or “second self” as the foundational understanding of the soul. Within this model, power and meaning are ascribed to the soul as well as to the spirits situated within dreams or associated with the natural world. This creates a foundational relationship between humans and spirits, or the human and non-human. Additionally, for Tylor, the presence of animism is a characteristic of lesser-developed societies and is part of a natural course of evolutionary development, which he establishes through the use of multiple cultural examples. Therefore the study of animism provides a foundation

from which to understand the natural development of religion in a society and for drawing connections between religious refinement and a society's position within a hierarchical social evolutionary theoretical model and evolutionary agenda (1903:417-501, 428). Regarding Tylor's development of the soul, Durkheim acknowledges that, "For Tylor, this extension of animism was due to the particular mentality of the primitive who, like an infant, cannot distinguish the animate and the inanimate." (Durkheim 1915:53). Durkheim's own work would go on to postulate that animism and totemism were intimately connected to the "phenomena of nature" (1915: 48) and that the observations and experiences of the unknown provide the framework from which to begin examining forms of religious life and practice (1915).

While Tylor's theoretical lens provides an outmoded means of examining religious or spiritual practice within a society as correlates to social evolution, Tylor's initial questions of how people view the world around them and themselves within that world has continued to provide grounds for further debate in contemporary anthropology. Drawing from, and in reaction to, the initial and foundational perspectives of Tylor (1903), and of Durkheim's positioning of animism and totemism as foundational themes in the development of religious life and practice (1915), contemporary works have approached animism through an ontological theoretical lens of alterity that allows for a further exploration of what animism *is*, and what it *is not* within respective traditions and practices (Bird-David 1999, Halbmayer 2012, Ingold 2000, Pedersen 2001, 2011, Vivieros de Castro 1998, Willerslev 2007). To help further clarify this distinction, Halbmayer notes, "In current theories animism is understood as a relational ontology including other than-human-persons.", and that, "...animism is antithetical to modern scientific knowledge" (2012:7, 14).

In consideration of this, it is important to note that there is much debate among academics and the Hmong communities over the specifics of Hmong cosmological structure and the mechanics therein. Several models have emerged that attempt to explain the construction of the Hmong cosmos and its operations, most notably those of Symonds (2004) and Her (2005). According to Her, the cosmos is composed of three distinct and interconnected realms: the Upper realm,

the Spirit World, and the Earth (2005:5). Within this structure, the human soul, which can consist of up to nine different types of souls, cycles through the different phases of birth, death, and renewal. The model that Herr has presented represents the three domains on equal terms in regards to the maintenance of cosmological balance and how spirits move between domains.

While similar in some respects, the model proposed by Symonds sees the Hmong cosmological division stemming from a balance of opposites, or a structure of binary opposition, such as those of life and death, and are manifest as the “Land of Light” and the “Land of Darkness” (2004:3-35, 11). The perspective primarily accounts for what Her would refer to as the Spirit World and the domain of Earth. Symond’s work clearly focuses on gendered divisions within Hmong society and her main interests center around examining the point of birth and at which point the Hmong initiate the ceremonies of *hu plig*, or calling in the soul, for a newborn child. There are certainly elements of her work that speak to the domain, or process, of rebirth and the transition from the Spirit World to the domain of Earth as in Her’s model. However, the transition of the soul through the process of renewal to the upper realm, as Her discusses, is largely marginalized or absent within her proposed binary model. In both cases, the cycle of the human soul, birth, death, and renewal, through these domains of the Hmong cosmological model are imperative to the perpetuation and maintenance of the cosmological order of things. This is not to say that either model is more correct or more complete than the other. As both authors note, the description of Hmong cosmological structure, or map, and the specifics of cosmological mechanics varies between Hmong communities, among practitioners within the communities, and may also differ within the clans (Symonds 2004, Her 2005). As in my conversations with Kaub and other young traditional practitioners, while attending funerals it was explained to me numerous times that traditional practices and the details of cosmological structure and mechanics were often attached to clans, or specific families, where the knowledge of religious life was supposed to be passed from generation to generation. In my observations this has resulted in a wide range of interpretations of traditional practices, which has contributed to the confusion, and in some cases, deeper divisions of identity and belonging among community members. As a brief example, one informant was

positive that the spirit of a deceased person passed immediately into the land of dark, where another informant was confident that it passed into the land of light. Yet another informant was unsure about what happened to the spirit of the deceased. They understood that the spirit had to rejoin the spirit of their ancestors and that the person's soul would have to travel, but the details of that voyage were something, as one young man put it, "only the old people know about."

While there is debate in the community over how the traditional world is structured and how people are subject to its mechanics, as I have pointed out, it is the shamans that serve as intermediaries between the earthly domain and the spiritual realm. In order to commune with the spirit world, Hmong shamans will enter trance usually through bouncing and chanting, or they may commune through prayer. While they may experience what may be described as soul flight, Hmong shamans do not go through a transformation whereby they become an animal or other natural entity as is often associated with shamanic practice in other cultures. With that said, as they lower the red or black veil over their face they are effectively between worlds for the duration of their performance.

Over the course of my discussions with shamans, it became clear that the position of the shaman is not necessarily one of privilege. Rather, it is one of restriction, which constantly invites illness and difficulty into their lives. They exist at the centre of community affairs as healers, spiritual advisors, community leaders, elders, and clan leaders, and they are a critical resource for planning and conducting traditional ceremonies, as well as being the keepers of traditional knowledge. With that said, they are constantly called upon at inconvenient times to deal with particularly troubling issues. When I asked Grandma Va about being a shaman, she lamented over how difficult a life it had been for her. While growing up in Laos, she had been chosen to become a shaman by the spirits at the age of 15 and her selection had been marked by a serious illness. She explained that she was constantly called away by others to deal with their problems, she always had guests in her home, much to the annoyance of her husband, and she had been plagued with illness. Many people, traditional and Christian, saw her many periods of illness being rooted in her numerous dealings with the spirits. As an example of one of her ailments, she spoke of a recurring dream that had bothered her of late. She explained that demons would

come to her while she slept. In her dreams she would see her grandchildren, whom she had watched over in Laos and when her family had first arrived in the US. She was very happy to see them as young children and infants again and she allowed them to come close so that she could hold them again. The children would surround her and without warning would then begin clawing at her. They would bind her hands and as she frantically slipped her bonds, the children would in turn bind her feet. And so the dream would go on repeating these events until she would awake screaming or her husband would understand what was happening and wake her.

Over time, Grandma Va determined that demons she had encountered in the spirit world had learned of her love for her grandchildren and they had deceitfully used that image to lure her. She felt as though her dreams were where she was most vulnerable and the demons had understood this and had taken advantage of her compassion. These nightmares went on for several weeks and had made her extremely ill and physically weak. When I visited her during this time, she would often have to sit. When she did walk around the house, her condition caused her to shuffle and hold on to furniture to maintain her balance. She continued a daily regimen of prayer, herbs, teas, and over the counter medications and over the course of around two weeks she was able to finally rid herself of the demons and shore up her spiritual defences through her prayers and offerings on her altar.

While Grandma Va has continued to live in the Denver community, many of the shamans from Denver are elderly and have since moved away to live with their sons and daughters in Minnesota or California so that they may be cared for. This has created a problem for many traditional practitioners in Denver and when a shaman is needed, one is often flown in from St. Paul, Texas, Oklahoma, or California to perform specific ceremonies or blessings. In one particular case, a shaman was flown from St. Paul while two others were brought from Oklahoma while only one was recruited locally from Denver. Often times shamans are located through the clan system and it is this network of families and associations that help facilitate the finding and shuffling of shamans over large distances.

In what I have examined thus far, we can see that traditional Hmong views of the world are indeed distinct from those of the Christian faith. Within the milieu of the traditional Hmong world of Denver there are indeed dangers, but there are also

vibrant expressions of understanding the world and one's place in the world. That said, there are numerous issues with how traditional practices are understood, how people choose to incorporate traditional perspectives into their lives, and how people understand and engage with the world around them.

One of the key points of this engagement is the matter-of human and non-human interaction. In the situation with Grandma Va and the demons, the demons had bothered her of their own volition. In the case of the man with the cock, he had brought the troubles on himself through his own actions. This returns me to matters of performance that I discussed in the previous chapter. Just as Christians perform their morality through their actions with and for one another, so too do traditional practitioners perform a morality that reflects their particular worldview. This stems from an entanglement with the animated world and how an individual chooses to acknowledge and respond to this entanglement. To this perspective I suggest that we understand that within the Hmong animated world, there is potential in what is around us and with what, or who, we engage with. In essence, this is not to say that everything in the world *is* animated, rather everything *can be* animated, or have the possess spiritual qualities. Thus, there is an issue of potential, or potentiality, in objects and things and how people choose to engage or avoid them.

As a clearer example of this entanglement, Grandma Va had a tree in her front yard. It was not a particularly big tree and at the base, the knotted wood had formed a small hollow. Many years ago, one of the grandchildren had placed a conch shell in the hollow and over the years it had become wedged within the hollow and had become part of the tree. Whether she had forgotten about its origins or chose to ignore them, Grandma Va had seen the shell in the tree as an act of whimsy by the spirits. Perhaps a spirit had directed the child to place the shell there or the shell had simply decided to place itself there did not really matter as it was there and seemed happy and well situated in its chosen place. Many times, while several of us stood on the front lawn talking, I would see Grandma Va go over to the tree and gently pat the shell and smile. In her view, the shell possessed purpose and a spirit of being. It did not matter how the shell had traversed the world to come to rest in the tree, the fact that it was there was revelatory enough and its presence made Grandma Va understand that a spirit was tied to the shell, and thus it was to be treated as a spirit

should be within the animated world. Within this relationship, Grandma Va had perceived the shell as inhabiting the qualities of a spirit through ascribing value to a spirit's purpose. In this particular case, the shell represented a gentle and benevolent spirit that was more than welcome to remain in its spot within the tree. With the shell being there, it presented an entity that could affect her decisions of interaction. The shell could also represent a threat to others because of its animation. Should they choose to move or abuse the shell, they could anger the spirit in the shell and risk unknown spiritual consequences. While some chose to trust Grandma Va and stay away from the shell, others chose to ignore her, yet they still stayed away from the shell in the off chance she was right. In consideration of this interaction and whether they truly believed or not, this entanglement of spiritual relation made many of my informants quite cautious when dealing with what they felt were or could be spiritually charged items.

Bearing in mind what we have surveyed in regards to the structure and means of understanding the traditional Hmong world, we can now turn our attention to the following accounts of a traditional Hmong funeral and a new-born's *puv hli*, or ceremony acknowledging the first 30 days of life. Here we are provided with situations that account for the traditional Hmong life cycle wherein we may find further interwoven nuances of traditional praxis, generational understanding, lived experience, and a longing for continuity.

“Two Strings to Lead Your Animals”

In October of 2012, Niam Xyoob, a Hmong woman in her early 40s, suffered a massive aneurism and died several weeks later while in an induced coma. Her five children and her husband were suddenly faced with having to prepare for and organise her funeral. The family were traditional practitioners and so numerous meetings were called with relatives to discuss what to do, when to do it, and how to prepare themselves. Xyoob's father, who had passed a few years before, had been a shaman and so Xyoob was familiar with much of the planning process. In addition, Xyoob and many of the older family members had attended numerous funerals throughout his life in Laos, Thailand, and in the US. All of the older members were familiar with death and loss from their experiences in the war and through the

difficulties of their transition to life in the US. However, the children of Niam Xyoob were not prepared for what was to take place and so they turned to some elders for advice but they also turned to the internet to try and understand what was going to happen over the next few weeks.

The first meeting was called late one evening on the family farm. For many, the farm was difficult to reach and it took a little over 2 hours for everyone to arrive. Pulling up to the farm, the cows walked slowly along in their pasture and the house sat as a dim outline. The only light to be found came streaming from the living room window, and men could be seen pacing and pointing at one another. Once the cars were parked, the garage was opened and around twenty women came scurrying out into the dim light to set up different pots of soups, curries, and rice. Masi directed me to go upstairs with the men and to listen to what I could so that I could understand what was going to happen and why. I was also told that I would be asked to do things, but only things they thought I could handle. She shoo'ed me towards the stairs and I left them to deal with their cooking (It was also to get me out of the way of the women and it simply wouldn't be proper to have a man helping them). Leaving the increasingly noisy clanging of pots below and entering the living room, I was met by 41 men, sitting anywhere they could. The living room was quite a large space, but it felt as though the floor was sagging under the strain of so many feet. I said hello to the elder leading the meeting and I was introduced. I knew about half the room and I saw the other half whispering, trying to figure out why this man had injected himself into this situation.

The meeting was to determine what everyone's role would be in the funeral. Tasks were assigned to families and to individuals according to their previous contributions to social events and due to their varying degrees of connection to the family which then determined the extent of their obligation and duty. As the planning continued, it became clear that those in their teens would also be expected to help with smaller tasks. A few of the older boys were brought in to stand with their fathers, and for many of them, this was to be their first time being involved with the planning of a funeral, and so the finer points of responsibility, duty, their expected behaviour, and representing their respective families were explained to them in stern, commanding voices. As this continued, the mixture of those speaking

effortlessly in Hmong and the laboured responses of the young, in their rough use of the language interspersed with English, rose to meet the volume of the central speaker.

The actual funeral arrangements and where the funeral would be held was also discussed and it was decided that a funeral home that had been used often by the community and who was familiar with Hmong funerary practices be used. Once these matters had been agreed to, the monetary burden of the funeral became the central focus of discussion. Men began to offer their help with money, some wanting to contribute as much as they could, others being more recalcitrant, argued that they would provide for the funeral in other ways. Hmong funerals can easily run into the tens of thousands of dollars and many of my informants told me that \$40,000 to \$50,000 dollars was not uncommon. In some cases, they explained, an extremely important and wealthy person may command a funeral expense of more than \$100,000 dollars.

A dialogue of negotiation and leverage continued well into the night. In the end, those who were reluctant to contribute were pressed by those around them to remember the time where they had been in need and were helped by others. The conversations addressed many things. Who would provide the flowers for the altar? Which of Niam Xyoob's clothes would be used? Who would provide materials for the backdrop? With an expected attendance of almost 3,000 people from the Denver community, St. Paul, Oklahoma, Georgia, and California, who would cook and how would the food be prepared and brought to the funeral home?¹ And finally, who would arrange for the shamans and the materials they would need for the different parts of the service? After much debate and a bit of finger pointing, these matters were ultimately finalised and the tasks were distributed among the families. Everything, regarding money, labour, and expected material contributions, had been recorded into a spread sheet that was then checked again over the course of the funeral to ensure that people followed through with their obligations. With the closure of the main discussions and the winding down of side conversations, the men slowly stood up and began to file downstairs for dinner. I was told to eat, go home, and be prepared to work the following Saturday. With all that had happened weighing heavy on my mind, I stood in the garage where the women had prepared a

substantial feast and I listened to the conversations of the groups of men on one side and the groups of women on the other. The youth gathered with others who were close in age and they cried, laughed, and talked considerably about the looming work that was to come.

I went back to the farm on Saturday as I was told to do. Three shamans had been brought in to prepare for the funeral and to conduct the services a week later. Their preparation included not only gathering their materials, but also being with the family and their relatives for comfort, guidance, and in order to learn about Niam Xyoob's life and travels so the ceremonies and direction of her spirit could be performed properly. The primary shaman, Soob, was in his early 70s, and the two others in their late 50s. They kept to themselves by the shed and barn where they hunted out small pieces of lumber to construct some of the things they would need for the funeral. It was well known among my informants that I had a budding interest in woodworking and carpentry, so after greeting everyone and asking about Soob's woodwork, I was told that I needed to go and build the stand for the funeral drum by the barn where Soob and the other shamans were working. I was surprised at being given this task but it was mine to do and a hastily drawn set of plans on crinkled yellow paper was thrust at me. It had no written measurements and was a simple sketch of what they had envisioned; a central post roughly six and a half feet high, a cross bar at the top, and another bar extending to the ground. The profile was trapezoidal, with the drum hanging in the centre section with enough room for the shamans to walk around and through the piece. As the shamans set to working the smaller pieces of lumber from an old palette for the instruments Niam Xyoob would take with her, I was given the beams and bolts for the drum and I got to work with Thoob, a member of the family. It was fairly easy to construct and it was done within an hour and a half. We decided to leave it in pieces until the funeral so that it would be easier to transport. After looking at the pieces, I offered to stain the stand so that its rawness would be toned down and it would look nicer at the funeral. When I explained I would do it at home, the man working with me and a few others were speechless. After many awkward seconds, Thoob looked at me and said, "You really don't have to. Really, you don't want to do that.", he muttered. When I explained it wouldn't be a problem, the men continued, "You don't want this in your

home, that would be crazy. This is a piece for the spirits. Do you really want to take that in your home? Nothing good can come out of that.” I saw what they were getting at and that they were clearly concerned that I would even think about bringing the stand into my home. It was later, at the funeral, that I learned that what I had built represented the centre post of the traditional house and that, in addition to representing the central structure of family and ancestry, this post operated as the locus of spiritual activity.

As we set the drum up in the funeral home, the shaman Soob observed and critiqued our work. With his approval, Kaub instructed Thoob and I to cover the drum with the spiritual money he held in his hands. The full sheets of paper were covered with gold and silver bars that Niam Xyoob could take with her on her journey. Using white paste, we set to work gluing the images over the entirety of the drum while Soob and the other two shamans sat near us smiling and laughing as they kept pointing and saying in broken English, “You missed that spot. Use more gold, don’t be cheap.”. By building and decorating this ‘door’ for the spirits, I put myself in a situation where I was in immediate contact with, and susceptible to the influence of, traditional spirits. As we continued our work, others behind us hung the massive paper chain of spiritual money from the ceiling. Set like a squat 4 meter high tree, easily 4.5 meters in circumference, this ghostly construct of thinly sliced and stacked pieces of tissue paper represented money that Niam Xyoob would be able to use in the spirit world along her journey to her ancestors. Constructing the drum and my proximity to the spiritual money would be viewed as some of the main reasons for my ritual and spiritual impurity in the eyes of some of my Christian informants.

Hmong funerals traditionally last three days, during which the body of the deceased lies in state and their spirit is guided by a shaman who traces the journey of the person’s spirit from where they died back to the house in which they were born. This requires the shaman to know the villages and camps the person had traveled through over the course of their life and how to put these places in order so that the spirit may find its way to the underworld. Initially, there was concern that Niam Xyoob’s funeral would only be able to last two days because of the funeral home’s schedule and because of monetary concerns. After several conversations back and forth between Niam Xyoob’s family, the heads of households related to Xyoob’

family, and the funeral home, it was decided that the funeral would last two and a half days, which Xyoob and others felt counted as the traditional three.

On the first day, the deceased is presented in a casket for a time and the body is then taken away to be cleaned and dressed in traditional clothing by the women and young girls of the family. In this particular situation, it was an opportunity for the women to say goodbye to Niam Xyoob and to cry and console one another as they expressed their grief through memories of her. When the women had finished their preparations, the body was then laid out on sheets upon the floor and the shaman's prayers and blessings, in Hmong and punctuated by the beating of the funeral drum, were offered to the spirit of Niam Xyoob so that she could understand that she had passed and so that she could then prepare for her journey. With Niam Xyoob's body lying facing the mountains in the west, flower arrangements and messages of condolence were placed around her left side so that she could be viewed from those who walk by and so that a number of family members could sit on her right. They had seated themselves in front of Niam Xyoob in order to receive people and so that they could stay and offer their own prayers to Niam Xyoob and to comfort one another. This space was largely filled with women and the men of the family remained at the doors of the home or walked around in order to greet people and thank them for their attendance.

In addition to Niam Xyoob's flowers, a wooden crossbow and several small, wooden bolts, constructed by the primary shaman, were laid across her chest and at her side in order to help protect her on her journey. She was also given special shoes to help her on her way. These shoes have wide soles, with curved and pointed tips. Their purpose is to allow the deceased to walk in the underworld once their spirit has been guided back to their place of birth and has passed on. As Kaub explained to me, "In the land of the darkness, they will be faced with a constant cold. It is snowy all the time and there is no shelter for them. When they get to the land of light, there is sand and too much heat. They have no water. The shoes, they are just like the snow shoes to help the people in the snowy mountains. It is the same for the sand."

As the shamans completed their prayers and continued to prepare and guide the spirit for its crossing, family and community members grieved for Niam Xyoob and offered their prayers and their condolences to Niam Xyoob's immediate family.

The food that had been prepared in people's homes was brought in and the narrow, long banquet area was immediately filled with the smell of a peppery congee and coffee as everyone gathered for breakfast. The afternoon would see even more food such as soups, curries, and large trays of beef *larb*, a sliced beef dish. All the while people continued to come and go while the shamans continue their prayers and chanting as one of the shamans tended the funeral drum. In his chants, Soob offered the spirits of sacrificed animals to accompany Niam Xyoob, which were symbolised by two strings by which she could guide her animals on her journey in the after world. Additionally, money and food were brought in to rest next to her and were thought to better prepare her and to ease her transition.

The second day continued much as the first as the shamans continued to provide directions for Niam Xyoob's spirit through her life in the United States, back through the refugee camps in Thailand, through the different villages where she had lived in Laos, and finally to the village and house of her birth. When I asked Kaub why it was so important for the spirit to reach their place of birth he replied, "They have to go back for their jacket." I became confused and when I asked him to explain he explained, "You know, the jacket that you are born with. On the little baby." I replied, "The placenta?" He immediately shot back, "Yes! That is it. That is the name. You are born with it and you need it to stay protected. So they have to go back for it. It is buried there when you are born."

Breakfast and lunch foods were again brought into the home for everyone. Along the wall a long table had been prepared and several of the older male family heads sat with small glasses and cans of beer. At different times throughout the day, representatives of the attending families would be called to pay their respects to the elders and to Niam Xyoob's family. The elders would offer a blessing to the assembled young men and the young men were then expected to bow three times to show their appreciation and respect. As the people feasted and the elders were honoured, blessings and the chanting guidance of the shamans continued to echo from inside the main chapel. Here, the shamans continued to instruct Niam Xyoob on what she would encounter on the long and difficult journey through the underworld and that she should continue to move towards the place of her birth and to her ancestors. This time, the shamans were accompanied by a young man playing

the *qeej*, a flute that translates the shaman's instructions into the language of the dead.² Apart from soothing Niam Xyoob's spirit and reinforcing the directions they had been providing her, their instructions also began to instruct her on how to find the bridge that stretches over the river at the end of her journey in the land of light. It is here that she must decide to cross the bridge where her journey will have ended and she will be reunited with her waiting ancestors. Once a spirit has rejoined their ancestors, when the time is ready, that spirit can then ascend to heaven, or if needed, be reincarnated into whichever form and role they are to fill as the world sees fit. How a person works through the cosmological model of ascension and the process of reincarnation, varies from clan to clan and from family to family. In one case, a family provided a tapestry at a funeral that displayed their belief of hierarchical ascension. At the very top of the purple tapestry sat the image of a pegasus unicorn, marking the perfected reincarnated form. This had been told to me in later conversations with three funeral home directors. They continued to explain that they had been serving the Hmong community for over twenty years and were very familiar with the Hmong funeral process. They noted that over the nine or ten funerals they saw each year, the families or clans would bring in their own materials and arrange the space as needed, much the same as Niam Xyoob's family had done. The directors found it very difficult to find consistencies in the details of practice through what they had observed over the years, with the exceptions being observable, key elements such as the funeral usually lasting three days, the hanging of the paper money, the shamans chanting prayers, the playing of the *qeej*, and the feasting by the funeral party. They reiterated to me that the order in which things occurred varied from family to family or from clan to clan and that these are matters that are usually passed down through the family and are stories that are marshalled by the older generations of traditional practitioners.

The third day was committed to finalising the journey of the deceased. In order to ascertain whether or not Niam Xyoob's spirit was ready to cross over to the underworld, that morning one of the younger shamans performed and interpreted different auguries and different signs from the funeral. Outside, the split horns were thrown and read as the shaman communed with Niam Xyoob's spirit to acknowledge her understanding and satisfaction of her status. Her spirit was again offered food,

beer, and liquor by pouring the different drinks onto the ground, as rice and other foods were carefully placed into a winnowing pan. After the horns had been read, the food was removed and the winnowing pan was taken through a bamboo gate and archway while the shaman continued his chants. As part of the ceremony, a cock was sacrificed and its heart burned. The sacrifice was carried out as quietly as possible behind some bushes as not to draw attention from those passing by.

It was further explained to me that in addition to the sacrifice of a cock, traditional funerary practices in Laos would also include the sacrifice of a dog. To serve in its stead, a stuffed toy dog is used. I had seen the dog before but had assumed that it belonged to one of the children and that it had been misplaced. When I saw it next, its throat had been cut using a *Hmong knife*³, and to further demonstrate the animal's sacrifice and transition, red or pink spray paint had been applied to the ripped lining and stuffing. The limp and butchered remains of the dog were left tethered to the gate as the shaman and winnowing pan passed through. Once on the other side of the gate, the shaman rolled the pan back through the gate on its edge. After the pan had stopped rolling, the shaman determined whether Niam Xyoob's spirit was fully ready to depart the world by observing whether the pan had fallen face up or face down. In this particular case, the pan landed face down, which was interpreted as Niam Xyoob saying that she was at peace with everything and everyone, and that she considered matters of her funeral and of her life on earth over and closed. Had the pan indicated otherwise, the shaman would have been expected to perform a *hu plig* ceremony, where her spirit would have been called back so that things could be made right for her passing to the underworld and for the continuation of her journey. Most importantly, things need to be made right in order to avoid having her spirit remain in the world and haunt or cause problems for family members or relatives.

When the shaman had finished his tasks outside of the funeral home, Niam Xyoob's body was then taken to a cemetery where many of her relatives had been interred. As the casket was placed on the canvas bands over the open grave and everyone gathered round, Soob offered a final prayer. Abruptly opening the casket he said, "look once more upon the sun for it is the last time that you will see it." Quickly closing the lid and opening it again he said, "look once more upon the

darkness.” Closing it again and then lifting the lid half way he gently said, “Do not be afraid on your journey home.” With that, Niam Xyoob was now on her own as the casket was permanently closed and everyone rushed to lay flowers at the grave.

As a final appeasement and remembrance of the deceased, the *tso plig*, releasing of the soul, ceremony is performed. Usually, this ceremony is held a year after the funeral. On rare occasions, the ceremony is held earlier than a year but it would be considered improper to not wait at least a month. For Niam Xyoob, the *tso plig* was held about six weeks after the funeral had taken place. The paper spiritual money that had been hung in the funeral home was taken and burned at the family farm while the shaman Soob again offered prayers for Niam Xyoob. The funeral home was again rented for the next day and a small service for around a hundred and fifty to two hundred people was held. While most of the people gathered to eat together in the banquet hall, a few sat together in the main chapel in front of a small shrine that had been assembled. The lights were dim and the candle light provided a very soft environment for people to quietly reflect. Niam Xyoob’s traditional jacket had been set up in the front part of the room where her body had been. It was supported in a way that it cradled a small stool and a winnowing pan. Within the pan were pictures of Niam Xyoob, family pictures, small bits of food she had liked, and small containers of beer that were last offerings to her spirit. People continued to offer their prayers throughout the day as they remembered her and while she has in no way been forgotten, the *tso plig* marked the end of grieving for family and friends and a call to return to their lives.

“May You Bless Our Family With Many Children”

Late in the summer of 2012 I was invited to attend a *puv hli* ceremony for an informant’s aunt who had recently had a baby. The aunt, Kalia, was in her late 30s and while she sat with her son on her lap, she explained that she had been worried that she wasn’t going to have a child and that she owed a lot to Grandma Va for helping her through all of her difficulties in conceiving. The ceremony had actually begun the night before in a small Chinese buffet restaurant in a small town north of Denver. The evening had been set aside to specifically thank the elders and the shaman Grandma Va for all of the help they had given Kalia and her husband over

the past two years. Since Kalia had traveled from Texas and had arrived earlier in the afternoon, the event was open primarily to immediate family and a few others who were close to Kalia, her husband, and the couple's parents. In total, there were a little over thirty people packed into the corner of the restaurant and many had come from Oklahoma, Texas, and Minnesota to be a part of the event. Grandma Va sat at the head table with her husband to her side. The table was a bit taller than normal and she seemed dwarfed by everything around her. As people talked and offered their thanks, Grandma Va sat somewhat stoically, listening to their speeches of gratitude and acknowledging the young men present as they continued to bow, or *pei*, in a show of respect and thanks. As the evening wore on, the conversations turned to the events of the following day where Grandma Va would call in the soul for the young boy and receive blessings from the spirits. Normally the *puv hli* would have been performed after the first 30 days when the mother and child were able to leave the home, but because of the distance and the difficulties in bringing everyone together, the ceremony had been delayed for nearly eight months.

When I arrived in the middle of the afternoon, the scene in the house was one of mass chaos. After saying my hello's I sat down in the kitchen and watched as everyone prepared the food and the space. The group from the previous evening had grown to well over fifty people and everyone was jammed into Grandma Va's two bedroom house and were spilling into the garage. While everything seemed loud and frantic, slowly everything came into a sense of order and I saw that the women of the family, from all of the different generations, were the ones who were running around in a full state of panic as they kept getting huge plates of fish, vegetables, rice, and pork ready. They had also arranged to buy a full, roasted pig, which sat on a long table in the garage. At about four feet long, everyone admired the pig every time they passed by. Since it was the only stationary entity in the house other than myself, it felt as though the bright red cherries in its eyes were staring demonically right back at me.

After several hours of food preparation and my enlistment as table and chair mover, the actual ceremony began. Grandma Va began her prayers for the new born near her altar in the garage. Kalia held her son up and Grandma Va spoke for several minutes while she laid her hands upon the infant. She called to the spirits to bless

the child and she called for the child's spirit to come from the spirit world and to be accepted by the family and community that had gathered to celebrate. Grandma Va asked the spirits to grant the baby fortune in life and to bless the mother and ensure her fecundity. After Grandma Va had finished her prayers, elder men from each of the households that had assembled took turns offering prayers, well wishes, and thanks to Grandma Va and the family gathered. Many of the prayers from younger men were offered in English and the mixture of English and Hmong filled the small garage as people gathered around the mother and child and tried to place their hands on the child while they prayed. The prayers often centred on the well being of mother and child but also that the mother will have as many children as possible in the future to make a strong family. As the flow of prayers began to slow, a space cleared before the table. The young men of the family were told to go in front of the table by their fathers and to bow, or *pei*, to the elders seated there. In between each *pei*, the eldest of the young men would ask the elders to and Grandma Va to bless them with many strong children. The men continued to *pei* several more times, each time they bowed their foreheads would touch the ground and they would groan as they rose. Later in our conversations, the young men that had been bowing stood with their wives and girlfriends and insisted that it was their parents who wanted big families, not them. Some of them already had little ones and they had decided that the one or two they had were enough. As one woman talked to me, her young son pulled constantly at her hair. While she slapped at his hand and begged him to leave her hair alone, she explained that they felt obligated to obey their parents and *pei* for the elders out of respect, but she insisted that it was their parents who wanted them to have big families. The young couples sighed and agreed, mumbling that their parents were simply out of touch with the reality of today's world.

While the conversations continued to drift away from the garage, the men who had offered their blessings to the baby spoke with the mother and they tied white strings on the baby's wrist as a token of protection. Again they offered their blessings and all of the men seemed to end their blessing with a tug at the baby's fat cheeks. Soon after, the wives of the older men left their positions along the walls of the garage while others poured out of the kitchen and into the garage to offer their own blessings and well wishes to the baby, all the while the baby's wrists growing

more and more tattered looking with different lengths of string and his cheeks continued to become a brighter shade of red from all of the pinching and tugging. As things seemed to be quieting down, an announcement was made that the church would like to say a prayer for the baby as well. There were no objections but an uneasy silence seemed to come over everyone. Three deacons from the Baptist church were present and they too laid their hands on the child and spoke their blessings. They spoke in Hmong and in English and offered wishes and blessings along the same lines as those of Grandma Va. When they had finished, a Christian prayer was then offered over the food that was laid out on the table and everyone was invited to join around the table and eat.

I chose to represent the two events in this manner because together they coalesce into a view of the Hmong life cycle, wherein one, the spirit of the deceased passes to the Hmong underworld and in the other a spirit is called forth to bring new life, and in the other, a new life has come back into the world and is acknowledged by family and community. Furthermore, these events recall the key issues of Hmong life examined in Chapters 1 and 2 concerning matters of community and of family. Here, immediate and extended families were called upon to assist with the ceremonies and to help those in a time of need.

This was particularly evident during the funeral. My first observation of this was during the meeting at the farm where heads of households and whole extended families met to discuss how the funeral would be organised and proceed. Just as church activities brought together the village in an observable form, so too the funeral brought together a Hmong village that was largely traditional but also contained Christian Hmong who had come to pay their respects and honour their obligations. While the negotiations carried on and people agreed to their responsibilities or were coerced into performing them, the networks of mutual reliance were also observable. As I noted above, the costs of funerals would be an extreme burden for one family to bear. Moreover, there are blood and marriage ties, and a history of Niam Xyoob's family haven given to other families in their time of need and so a sense of indebtedness exists that serves to strengthen the ties of mutual reliance and obligation.

In the case of the *puv hli*, an extended family had come together to bless and honour the child and mother. Again, there are obligations that family members are expected to meet and for some, Kalia had attended their own children's blessings. Being a smaller event, there was little to no reluctance in helping by anyone present. For the most part, the child represented new life being brought into the family and the elders saw this as a chance to pass on their views and ways of life. When I spoke with Kalia after the blessings, she told me that she planned to speak Hmong to the child and that would be their first language. She also told me that this was what her parents had expected of her when raising her new son and that he be taught the traditional Hmong ways of doing things.

Additionally, within these moments, matters of relatedness again return as individuals interact with one another. By doing so, they redefine and further establish their ties to one another, and through these experiences, family emerges and comes into focus, and more directly, comes into being. The experiences and connectedness of the situation provides further meaning to the concepts of family that connect with the experiences of all of those involved. Here, family is reproduced and understood as a part of their experience as a Hmong person and as part of what makes a person Hmong.

Furthermore, in Kalia's view, she was following the wishes of her immediate family and those of her elders. She intended to raise her son in a manner that reflected her understanding of traditional Hmong life. So in addition to a shared experience of family, for Kalia and other traditional practitioners these events reaffirmed through their shared thematic views of the world and their shared experience of practice.

In the case of the deacons offering their blessings at the *puv hli*, this reflects their own moral and spiritual beliefs. They had attended the ceremony as fulfilling their obligations to family but they also felt that they needed to represent what they felt was in the best interest of the child. As Christians do not celebrate or acknowledge the soul calling, or *hu plig*, of a child, a *puv hli* is a shared practice between the two spiritual traditions that celebrates the life of the child. Everyone present was tolerant of the actions of the deacons and in turn, the deacons had been accepting of the traditional blessings that had been offered. When speaking with one

of the deacons later, they explained to me that through their prayers and blessings, the child was now protected and in Christ's grace. While Kalia and her family were accepting of the Christian blessings offered, in many ways, in my own observations and conversations afterwards it felt as though the deacons had blessed the child to make themselves feel that they had done the proper thing and to ease their own conscience on the matter. They had performed what they held to be their moral obligations.

These means of moral performance also reinforce a reproduction of the symbolic through their known social standing, their perspectives, and through their actions. Within the context of the *puv hli*, their identities as Christians was plainly evident through their choice of what to participate in and what to avoid. The fact that they had agreed to attend the *puv hli* also spoke to their own ethical standards of practice in regards to what they felt they could be around and what they needed to avoid. Had the deacons belonged to a stricter congregation, such as the C&MA, they would have avoided the situation altogether.

In addition to a reproduction of Christian symbolic thought and action, the Deacons also stood as symbols of an ontological alterity that challenges traditional understandings of the world. Moreover, a Christian ontology represents a different way of understanding the world that directly informs understanding what it means to be Hmong, thus offering an alternative vision of a Hmong Christian continuity, counter to that of traditional perspectives. This speaks back to Vivieros de Castro's (2009) thoughts on ontology and the validity of alternative ontological perceptions garnered from their respective social sources. Here, a plurality of ontological expression and understanding defines the moment and the identities of all those involved.

As a further complexity, in both situations, the younger generation was instructed on what to do and when to do it by the older generation. During the funeral the conversations between father and son in the living room was for the purpose of instruction and the conveyance of knowledge. While the main point had been to explain what was going on and what was expected of them, the conversations were also meant to make sure that the younger generations knew how to bury their own parents when the time came. This was a subject that had also come up in my

conversations with Thai. When asking him about his own experiences he remarked, “Well, its also security for them (elders). They know that they are going to cross over correctly if they know their sons understand it.”

As we saw with Grandma Va’s husband, and in the case of Kaub and many other younger Hmong, there is a struggle to convey traditional knowledge across generational lines in a consistent manner. Not everything is fully understood or embraced by the younger generation. There is a sense of obligation and obedience, but just as we saw in Chapter 2, there are tensions evident through the transference of knowledge between generations. These tensions speak back to the experiences of the younger generations and their exposure to US ways of life and continued Americanisation. Several times over the course of my fieldwork younger informants complained about the length of funerals. They felt that three days for a traditional funeral was ridiculous and the cost was completely unreasonable. Many expressed that they wished that the community would adopt the more Western practice of a one day funeral and save everyone the trouble of having to deal with traditional matters. Everyone who expressed this view to me openly admitted that they did not fully understand the dynamics of traditional spiritual life. As they did not understand, they did not grasp the extent of change they were asking of their elders. The elders in turn see these attitudes as incredibly disrespectful which only serves to widen the generational gap of misunderstanding and fuel feelings of frustration on both sides.

Events such as the funeral and *puv hli* are focused opportunities for the conveyance of knowledge. And while ideally a continuity of Hmong life would emerge that mirrors the wishes of the elders, the meanings of why things are done has become muddled. As an example, the meaning behind bowing is understood to be one of respect. While the younger generation understands that they are showing respect, they are unaware of why they have to show respect at certain times. The sessions of *pei* are often hurried with many people not bowing fully. In some cases the young men’s bodies would move from a standing position to the floor in such quick succession that observing their bowing was more akin to observing an exercise yard. In most cases, the young men would follow the lead of the oldest in the group on when they should bow or recite a blessing. It was assumed that he would have done these things before and would know how many times they should bow or what

they needed to say. However, this was not always the case and it was not uncommon to see some confusion in the groups. Often an older man, usually over the age of 50, would stand off to the side and provide occasional coaching to the oldest in the group. While those in the group were told what to say and do, they were rarely told why they were doing it. In my conversations with the young men, the most common response was that it was showing respect and that they did it because they were told to do it. To them it was simply an obligation to their family that they felt they had to fulfil. Their actions reflected their compliance to family pressures and their acceptance of traditional ways, but their actual meanings of why they were doing something was of little interest.

To further illuminate this gap, at the *puv hli*, after the blessing had been performed, I learned that two chickens had been sacrificed. One had been sacrificed in Grandma Va's garage, and the other in the backyard. When I heard about this, I asked Kou what he knew about it. He explained that he had no idea why they do that, it was something that was just done. The sacrifices had been carried out by a man, not much older than Kou, and when asked, he offered me a similar response. When I asked an older man about it, he explained to me that one had been sacrificed for the spirits inside that Grandma Va had called upon to watch over the child. The other had been sacrificed outside for the couple that brings children from the sky. When I asked him to tell me more about the couple, he explained that they were the Hmong equivalent to the Western image of the stork bringing a baby to a waiting couple. The chickens were to offer thanks but to also feed and nurture these spirits so that they would continue to bless the families with more children. To this point, the man who had performed the sacrifices and Kou, who knew of the sacrifices, the actions were empty of meaning. The meaning had not been adequately conveyed and so many of the younger generation simply go through the motions of practice, unaware of why they are performing the action or what they are reproducing.

Asking the man why he could explain this to me and not to the younger Hmong performing the actions, he said, "The don't care to understand. They can't talk to us. You, you are asking, they do not care to ask." Attitudes such as this were prevalent among the older generation and many have abandoned attempting to convey the meaning of traditional matters to the younger generations. However,

they call upon the younger generations to assist in these practices and so some form of the practice is being reproduced. Others in the community who had children of their own in the past few years told me that they did not understand the meanings behind many of the details of the *puv hliv* ceremony but they had elected to have the ceremony performed for their children and said that they would do so again if they have more children.

Chapter Summary

To conclude, the purpose of this chapter has been to establish a base from which we may understand how traditional practitioners situate themselves within an animated Hmong world. In this we can see that this view of the world affects how people understand the relationships that exist between bodies and souls. Concerning body and soul relationships, the traditional perspective, which centres on the idea of a person possessing multiple souls stands in sharp contrast to Cartesian dualist perspectives of the Christian Hmong. Moreover, the Hmong animated world is one of potential that further informs the decisions of individuals and how they interact with non-human elements relative to this understanding of the self.

This chapter also further emphasises the difficulties of conveying a Hmong continuity across generations. As we saw in the case of Niam Xyoob's funeral and Kalia's *hu plig*, there are clearly difficulties surround the transference of knowledge as it occurs through practice and explanation. While events such as the funeral and *puv hli* presented here speak to the critical networks of family and mutual reliance, issues of language and misunderstanding continue to hinder cross-generational communication and empathy thereby affecting practice and what is being reproduced, socially and spiritually. Furthermore, matters of social and spiritual reproduction, and concepts of what constitutes a Hmong continuity are further compounded by contentious ontological perspectives through symbolic definitions of the self, family, community, and practice.

In the next chapter, the matters that have been discussed in this and preceding chapters will be brought to bear on Hmong approaches to health, healing, and reproduction. Through matters of health we will be able to observe the interconnected elements of society, family, and spirituality as they engage with

traditional health perspectives and practices; further illuminating the reciprocal reproductive nature of these factors and their synthesis, resulting in a complex approach to matters involving biological reproduction.

¹ In this situation, many of the men had simply followed the lines of gendered labor and volunteered the services of their wives and daughters for the cooking and their sons for the delivery.

² See Catherine Falk (2004a) *The Dragon Taught Us: Hmong Stories about the Origin of the Free Reed Pipes Qeej* and (2004b) *Hmong Instructions to the Dead: What the Mouth Organ Qeej Says (Part Two)*

³ A long, crescent shaped knife roughly 30cm in length and is used for everything from cooking, to woodworking, to ceremonies. It is simply referred to by my English speaking informants as a “Hmong Knife”.

Chapter 5

Health, Healing, and Reproduction

As I stated within the literature review in the introductory chapter, medical pluralist arguments, particularly those involving the Hmong, focus on the collision of disparate medical systems and ways of thinking that often result in tragic consequences. (see O'Connor 1995, Fadiman 1997, and Culhane-Pera 2003). While these works document particular cases, they do not account for what does work for the Hmong and how the Hmong have come to understand and engage with medical practices. And again, this represents a critical point in assessing and understanding Hmong medical attitudes given that the majority of these works were produced in the 1980s when the Hmong had newly arrived and had not fully situated themselves within the social and institutional domains of the US. That said, my examination here focuses largely on the younger generation's engagements with medicine as this group is of the age most concerned with matters pertaining to fertility and reproductive health. This group further represents the adaptation of the Hmong and the intermingling of cultural perspectives with a clear emphasis on traditional understandings of the body, health, biological reproduction, a reproduction of the social and symbolic, evident through a reproduction of practice.

To begin, I will be examining Hmong attitudes towards medicine and providing an overview of traditional Hmong understandings of the body and how they approach diagnosis and treatment. I will then examine the process by which they address fertility issues and pregnancy. I will also be discussing Hmong approaches to prenatal and postpartum care in an effort to demonstrate how traditional approaches address pregnancy concerns and to further establish how the Hmong understand and engage with traditional health practices. Most importantly, these matters further contribute to a reproduction of Hmong life and spiritual practices and perspectives which speak to the issues of family and continuity.

An Overview of Hmong Approaches to Health and Healing

Over the course of my time with the Denver Hmong community, the subject of health arose as a topic of interest that was freely discussed by those around me.

While the questions I asked were often steered towards matters of health and healing, the subject was of natural concern for my informants and it was not uncommon for someone to ask how to address a particular health related issue, such as a cold or a rash, and for them to take in as much advice as possible from the experienced mothers and grandmothers available. In this section, I wish to address the foundations of Hmong traditional approaches to healing and health so that, after a brief discussion of the clinic that follows, we may then turn our attention to matters of reproductive health, addressing matters of fertility, and prenatal and postpartum care practices.

As we saw in Chapter 4, the Hmong funeral demonstrated that there are intimate relationships with the body and a person's soul and that the cycle of life is dependent on attempting to maintain a balance between the body and soul(s) within the world around them. While this relationship is a foundational characteristic of being Hmong, as we saw in Chapter 3, concerns over the relationship of body and soul have extended to Christian life and perspectives and remains a core focus in Christian practice. To this point, we will be able to further address the importance of these perspectives throughout the remainder of this chapter beginning with the classification of illness.

A detailed examination of the attitudes towards health and health care held by the Denver Hmong has been conducted by Dia Cha (2003). Within her work, Cha identifies two major categories of understanding illness and determining the best course of treatment dependent on the perceived affliction. The classifications of illness largely fall within two categories, one being physical illness and the second being of spiritual matters (Cha 2003: 110). It should be noted that while Cha provides us with an examination of Hmong attitudes towards health and health care, there are some limitations. The study often identifies ideal situations to be examined and there is little to no accounting for generational perspectives. In my own experience, Hmong approaches to health and healing can be messy affairs that play out differently across generational lines and which vary due to experience with Western medicine. That said, I found that the majority of illness and matters concerning overall health was understood within this bifurcated structure of diagnosis.

In regards to physical illness, a general diagnosis will often conclude that an element within the body is out of balance. As Cha explains, “When a couple is infertile; or a person is losing weight, or appetite, or both, or simply feeling weak, the Hmong believe that something is missing from his body, It is held that there is not enough blood or fat to support the body's effective functioning.” (2003: 116). Recalling my conversation with Kaub in Chapter 4, he and other informants would consume hot water or teas in an effort to regulate their bodies. When asked about the practice they would tell me that the hot water would in effect cool you down, meaning that their internal heat could be tempered by the heat of the water, or that their internal heat was in need of stoking and that the hot water or tea would help them return to a balanced state.

In another situation that demonstrates a physical ailment, a man in his 60s had a skin condition on his foot that had left his feet with a rash, marked by blotchy patches, and his feet were extremely itchy. To remedy this, he soaked his feet in warm water that contained thin slices of Thai chilli peppers from his wife’s garden. It was understood that the heat and the oils from the peppers would condition his skin and cool the skin down and restore balance in his body. Most importantly, in addition to restoring balance, these treatments would give the skin time to repair and cleanse itself as the chilli oils encouraged blood flow in his feet.

The treatment lasted for several weeks and when it seemed to not be completely resolving itself, the man visited a doctor where he was given an ointment for the condition. When asking the man about his choices, he explained that the treatment he had been performing at home had helped his body return to a healthy state and that the doctor’s ointment only worked because his body had returned, as closely as it could, to its balanced state. He felt that if he had just gone to the doctor, the ointment would not have addressed the central problem of his body being out of sync.

The situation above represents a form of illness that only affected the man’s body. While he involved Western medicine, it was only after he had done everything he could using traditional remedies. Furthermore, he perceived Western medicine to be efficacious only after having restored the balance and function of his body. Building upon this point, over the course of my discussions and observations

of different generations, small colds, cuts, scratches, fevers and the like, often begin with treatment in the home. If the illness progresses, then the patient or the patient's family will turn to the clinic for assistance. Or, if the situation is sudden or more serious or dire, they will immediately involve Western medical professionals to address the problem. This could be seen in the situation with Niam Xyoob who's funeral I examined in the previous chapter. When Niam Xyoob suffered a sudden stroke she was immediately taken to the nearest hospital. There was no debate as to what needed to be done right at the moment the stroke was discovered. While she was held in the hospital for several weeks in an induced coma, it was decided that Western medicine was not providing the care needed to remedy the situation. A decision was made to keep working with the doctors but her husband had decided that they should begin to consult a shaman on the matter to see if any additional efforts could be made to help her recover. This decision was made quite late and shortly after she passed while still in her induced coma. There was no resentment towards the clinic but there were questions as to whether or not anything could have been done to supplement the treatment that would have led to a better outcome.

When discussing situations such as these with a group of informants at a church gathering, one informant remarked to me, "Western medicine can be good, but they don't know everything. That's why you need both, you use the traditional, then maybe the doctor". This order of treatment is largely persistent among all generations of Hmong that I spoke with as we saw in the case of the man addressing the skin condition on his feet or in the case of Niam Xyoob where the family made the decision to attempt to balance her treatment with traditional medicine.

In addition to physical ailments, there is also the category of spiritual treatment. As I mentioned in previous chapters, there is the issue of soul loss, or *bang plig*, where, within a traditional context, one of the souls of a person falls away or is taken by a spiritual entity. Returning to the situation in Chapter 4 regarding the man and his cock, the man was suffering a form of depression or mental distress stemming from his mistreatment of the cock and the resulting vindictive spiritual assaults by the cock. In this particular case, the spirit of the cock had to be appeased but the man's soul was also in need of repair. To remedy this a shaman had been called and a *hu plig*, had been performed to address and rectify the matter. This situation, as it

was understood by all involved, clearly represented a spiritual ailment that resulted in physical conditions, such as the nervousness and sleeplessness, but could only be rectified by a spiritual guide and prayer that focused on returning the man's lost soul and restoring balance to his being.

This particular situation is very straightforward in its mechanics and how it was addressed and resolved. Other situations are quite complex but follow a similar outline of thought. When meeting members of the Hmong Student Association from the University of Colorado, Boulder, I met Steven. Steven was a senior and expected to graduate with a visual arts degree in 2012. We met alone and over a cup of coffee Steven explained that while he did not fully understand how Hmong medicine worked, he appreciated it and trusted that his parents knew what was best for him if any health needs arose. After discussing his views on traditional Hmong life for some time, he sat back in his chair and said,

“When my little brother got sick, they didn't know what was wrong, just that he had a fever. My parents took him to the doctor and there was something wrong with his lungs and he had an infection. They tried to do a couple of operations but he was still having problems so my Grandparents came to see him. They said that one of his souls had been taken away. They arranged for a shaman and the shaman found his soul in the mountains on a frog, the frog had taken it. My grandparents then, well, they bribed the frog with prayers and offerings to let go of my brother's soul. He was better in a few days but occasionally he still gets sick from everything. My grandparents insist its the frog coming back, so they go right back to the shaman.”

When I asked him his thoughts on the matter, he had no issue accepting that it was possible that a frog had absconded with one of his brother's souls and that the shaman's story was true. And while this young man also acknowledged that Western medicine saw his brother as having a vicious lung infection, he felt it was just as easily explained through the actions of the frog interpreted by the shaman. To him, Western medicine was only able to address one part of the problem; the physical, biological issues that had caused his brother to become ill. Traditional means had generated an alternative perspective on the matter and provided an additional form of treatment through medicine and prayer that created a fuller path to his brother's recovery.

Returning again to the situation of Niam Xyoob, the family had accepted that the hospital had diagnosed her as having had a stroke and they had accepted the hospital's plan of treatment. In addition to this, they had understood that this entire event also involved a spiritual disruption and that her physical well-being was dependent on her spiritual recovery. Therefore, the family had begun to make arrangements to speak with and employ the services of a shaman to address the spiritual matters of the situation so that Niam Xyoob's body would be in a proper state to fully benefit from her doctors' treatments in the hopes that she would recover. Given the severity of the situation, it would be quite easy for an outside observer to inject an element of pragmatism when examining the family's decisions. However, as the family weighed their options, the discussions that swirled around her condition and plans for recovery addressed traditional matters in a tone that was matter of fact and were essential for her recovery. For the family, particularly the older members, there was no doubt that her spiritual state was in a grave condition and her spiritual matters needed immediate attention. As the family began the process of consulting a traditional healer, Christian members of the family also began to pray for her recovery. While not uncommon to witness prayers being offered in such a traumatic situation, the purpose behind the prayers served two functions. The first function was to ask for God's guidance in the matter and to help her recover as she was a beloved member of the family and she was needed to continue to watch over her children and husband. The second purpose was to pray for Niam Xyoob's soul. While Niam Xyoob was a traditional practitioner and a shaman would have a particular way of addressing the matters of a collection of souls within a person, the Christian relatives had sought to identify a singular soul that was Niam Xyoob. Within their prayers, they called for her spiritual well being in the hopes of providing the same balance that a traditional healer would provide. The Christian family members did not see this as a matter of conflict as we all are children of God but they still believed that a person's soul had to be "right" in order for them to heal and recover from illness. Being right means that the soul is in a healthy state through God's grace and it can therefore exist soundly within the body.

While *bang plig* is most often associated with traditional practices, it can also occur in Christians as well. Should they become frightened or feel that they have

come into contact with demons or spiritually tainted objects, they can suffer a similar condition. While they would be hesitant to refer to it as *bang plig*, the feelings associated with the matter are similar. When I would ask about the matter, older Christians would often tell me that they would need to pray in order to ask God to ease their soul's trauma or fright. These prayers might be answered immediately or it may take several days or weeks for a remedy to arrive. In this we can see that while there are different views about the cycle of life and how the world is constructed and operates, the means by which there exists a symbiotic relationship between body and soul persists throughout different Hmong spiritual perspectives. To this point, when an illness is determined to involve a spiritual nature, prayer, traditional or Christian, is called upon to restore the relationship of body and soul so that medicine, traditional or Western, has a better chance of being effective and the person can begin their recovery.

This perspective mirrors what we saw with Ka Gua in the introductory chapter. In her case, it was determined that Grandma Va would be able to place Ka Gua's body and soul in a copacetic state through prayer and the use of traditional medicine. While traditional prayer conflicted with Ka Gua's Christian beliefs, the principle of prayers being administered with medical treatments was shared. In later conversations, Ka Gua revealed that she was able to come to terms with traditional approaches by accepting the practice as a variation of how Christianity would have approached the same situation. Most importantly, this internal reconciliation helped her then come to terms with the pressures and expectations being placed on her by family. From this she was finally able to formulate an understanding and acceptance of her situation.

Differentiation of Healers and Hmong Diagnosis and Treatment

While I was in Denver, all healers were referred to as a shaman. This can be a complex issue, particularly for the younger Hmong, as they often use the word shaman when talking about anyone who has anything to do with the mediation of spiritual matters or health. Most of the problem returns to the difficulties of cross-generational communication and not fully translating or explaining the terms for other types of healers beyond the shaman. This being the case, the word shaman is

often the only word used to refer to healers that represent a wide range of abilities and specialties. Cha's work accounts for the different types of healers within the community and lists them as: shaman, herbalist, fortune teller, massage therapist, egg reader, needle user, and soul caller (2003: 59). The majority of the healers that I spoke with or observed identified themselves with one or several of these categories. In case of Grandma Va, she would perform all of these roles with the exception of needle user, and this was more a matter of her not mentioning it and my not having witnessed her perform any acupuncture or observe any acupuncture paraphernalia openly about her house.

A category that I would add to the list would be the role of a mother in the healing process. All of my informants first consulted their grandmother or mother about any medical issues. Their mother or grandmother served as their first step in discussing, diagnosing, or treating any concern or ailment they may have concerning their health. If their mother had passed, they may ask other older women who they consider Mother to help them, or for men, they may turn to their wife's advice. Most of the older women in the community possessed a general form of healing knowledge that was usually passed down from mother to daughter which covered a wide array of common medical issues such as colds, burns, rashes, blisters, wounds, sprains, and the like. Some of these women would also be known to be a specialist, such as being a massage therapist, herbalist, or egg reader, in addition to possessing a general knowledge. So if a person's mother was not able to address a health related issue either through family knowledge or her specialist knowledge, the mother may then talk to friends or family in the community for referral to a specialist who could potentially help the person. Depending on the situation, the afflicted may be directly tasked with talking to another specialist as well. If the matter is still unresolved, they may determine that they need to seek out a shaman or soul caller who can look further into the matter.

As Cha has noted, there are forms of diagnosing a shaman's capabilities of addressing a patient's affliction (2003: 111). While I had heard of shaman's performing diagnostic ceremonies in order to determine whether their abilities would be the best suited for treating a particular affliction, I was never afforded an opportunity to witness such a ceremony. Rather, people within the community

generally called upon shamans or healers that they were familiar with or who they had been referred to by family members. At times, healers or shamans living out of state were called upon to diagnose problems that were thought to be of a spiritual nature and related to *bang plig* in order to determine the best course of action. As we saw in the case of Ka Gua in the introductory chapter, her mother and mother in law enlisted the services of a shaman in Laos to determine the possibility of her bearing children which then permitted the two mothers a means to justify seeking out someone locally to address the matter with herbal treatments and prayers. During her treatment, the mothers remained involved and in contact with the shaman to ensure all was going well and that everything was in order and progressing as it should.

In addition to the process of finding an appropriate healer, if a diagnosis cannot be made in the home, or if traditional treatments do not seem to be producing the desired results, the afflicted person may go see a doctor. In some cases, as in Niam Xyob's, the situation dictates that Western doctors be consulted first. However, this generally arises out of a life threatening situation.

Accessing Traditional Medicines

When addressing matters of understanding Hmong attitudes and practices associated with traditional notions of health and healing, we also must consider who has access to the medicinal components used in treatment and prevention and how people acquire and distribute these materials. When asking about where medicine comes from, most of those I spoke with replied that it came from the garden. Usually this meant that it came from their mother's garden as many of the younger generation have not continued the practice of gardening in their own homes. While most people in their 20s or 30s had at least one potted plant in their house, the plants usually had been given to them by their mother or grandmother at a point when they had been ill and their mother had called on them to help nurse them through their ailment.

Most of the time, my informants would be willing to discuss health and healing but they would often stop short of telling me exactly how they prepared and administered family recipes. This was particularly the case with fertility treatments. They explained to me that the treatments and recipes had been passed down from

mother to daughter and that the recipes would only work if they were kept in the family. If the recipe was told to an outsider, the recipe would lose its efficacious properties and the family would be left with nothing. While they would not refer to their recipes as magical, the premise of their explanations rings of magic and privilege of access. This being the case, they would often show me the plants but would leave ingredients out, at times they would not reveal the weights and measures to be used, or they would change the subject to avoid discussion on the matter. When I was told a recipe, I was told that I could not print the recipe because it would certainly lose its power. Moreover many want to keep the recipes confidential because they are a source of income. It is not uncommon for some women to be paid for producing their recipes for another family. Should the recipe become known, this then becomes a threat to their livelihood. So with these restrictions I would often have to be satisfied with taking note of the different plants' shapes and sizes, their colours, and their aromas as they sat in outdoor and indoor gardens, but not being a botanist limited what I could fully account for.

One of the earliest stories I had heard of gardening was from Grandma Va. When she had arrived in Oklahoma around 1980, the family was living in a housing project. The place was described to me as unkempt and they did their best with what they had to make it a home and settle themselves in the area. The area behind the apartment building along the chain link fence that divided the complex from the railroad tracks had been left to grow wild. She explained to me that it simply wouldn't do to not have a garden and so she set herself to the task of clearing the area and there she planted a garden to help supplement her family's food supply and to provide medicine for her family and her clients. She remarked that the complex managers were quite confused to see the area cleared away and a garden thriving in the previously ragged space. However, seeing that it was kept clean and that the encroaching weeds and vines were being kept at bay, they permitted the family to keep the garden. She had always kept a garden and cared for livestock, and while she rarely kept live animals in the states, she was always sad when she remembered the animals that she had left behind in Laos but talking about her garden, and gardens past, her demeanour would instantly become energised and her broad smile and gentle laugh would immediately return.

When talking about gardens with people from all generations, it was generally understood and explained to me that it was traditional to keep a garden at home and that it was usually the women who tended the planted vegetables and herbs. In Kaub's home, the garden was kept on a lower tier of his backyard and it was not uncommon to see his wife harvesting spring onions and peppers in the area. At first the garden resembled a small patch of wild weeds and chaotic bushels of green. After looking at the patch over several visits, the garden fell into place, and while not in neatly tilled rows with plastic markers, the garden had a sense of order to it wherein Kaub's wife knew that the chillies would return every year in the same location, the onions would fill in between the patches of herbs, and squash and the like would grow in their particular shaded corner. It was not uncommon to see the different vegetables make their way from garden, to kitchen, to dinner table on a daily basis. In addition to the garden, Kaub's wife kept numerous plants of medicinal value in pots within the house. Some of the plants addressed specific purposes, others addressed a wide range of ailments, and some, by themselves were useless and so they were to be used in conjunction with other plants or herbs to bring out their medicinal qualities. She tended her plants daily, carefully watering them and plucking the dry leaves or fallen fruits from the pots. This careful pruning kept the plants vibrant and many were spilling over their containers, down their stands, and onto the floor.

When speaking with Steven about his brother's condition and his thoughts on the matter of the frog and his brother's soul loss, in passing he mentioned his mother's garden and how she had tried to grow different medicinal plants and herbs to help his brother's condition. I was invited to the house and when I arrived I was brought to the backyard. There, just as in many of the other homes I had visited, sat a well manicured garden similar to that of Kaub's wife. Around the edges of the garden iron hand tools had been organised in preparation for planting seeds and seedlings. His mother explained that she had learned to keep a garden from her mother and that she had kept a garden since coming to the US. She had tried to pass the practice on to her young daughters but she felt that they had little interest in learning the practice and that their school work and other activities limited their time for helping out in the garden.

While the garden can contain medicines with powerful healing properties, socially it is also a source of power for many women. By this I mean to suggest that women who keep gardens are able to exercise greater control over who can access their gardens, and by extension, who can benefit from their efforts. I was never made aware of anyone being denied any medicinal herbs or plants. And while I had heard of men keeping gardens, there was a shared understanding that women were generally the gatekeepers and tenders of the gardens. Women's gardens were a source of pride among the older women and those that kept a garden. Just as with hunting, gardening was a connection to past ways of life and practices, whether lived or imagined, and offers further insight into how the Hmong have continued to reproduce their past lives in the US. Because I always asked about gardens and medicine, Kaub's wife spent considerable time telling me about gardens she had in the past, and she would often sigh when remembering plants and different patches and terraces she had given up each time they moved. After our conversations, there were many times that I was sent home from Kaub's house with bundles of green onions and other vegetables that had been carefully picked by his wife and packed in crumpled bits of aluminium foil.

As the garden presents one means of accessing herbal medicine, other medicinal plants and herbs are available from vendors during seasonal holidays and festivals. Returning to the Hmong New Year, the vendors within the vendor hall continued to focus their attention on the sale of dresses and traditional pieces of Hmong clothing and jewellery. The stacks of beauty creams, skin lighteners, and the like were often piled high and spilling from their containers. As I had mentioned before, tucked just out of sight, are bundles of herbs and roots that have been neatly sorted, dried, and bound together for sale. Their trimmed stalks could be seen just under the silk embroidered blankets and occasionally a faint herbal odour touched with a scent of fresh earth would waft out of the stack when the covering was lifted for a customer.

Clothing being their main business, the herbs provided a good secondary income for their booths. The vendors always seemed reluctant to acknowledge their possession of the herbs and would carefully hide them as discreetly as possible but always leave just enough so that a knowing eye would be able to see that they had

supplies available for sale. Most of those I saw purchasing the herbs were women in their late 40s and older. At times they would have children or grandchildren in tow and they would carefully look over the herbs and stuff them into their purses or sacks before paying the old woman behind the booth.

This practice of supplying the community with rare or hard to get herbal and plant remedies carried on throughout the year. At the soccer tournament in July, booths had been set up along the side of the field as a makeshift market. The majority of the vendors were locals and a few had travelled from Minnesota. In this situation, they had not gone through the trouble of concealing the herbs from view and they laid them in stacks within plastic tubs upon the tables. The majority of these herbs were for addressing concerns of reproductive health and fertility. Looking closely, it could be seen that the roots had been carefully carved to represent male and female figures, pronouncing their potent effects for the appropriate sex. Pieces or slices of the herbs were to be used in teas, ointments, and mixed into certain foods. As I mentioned before, it is very rare for a Hmong man to admit to issues of infertility but it is quite common for Hmong men to purchase these items for their perceived effects on sexual potency and health attributes.

In addition to the collections of herbs, roots, and medicinal plants, other forms of medicine can often be located at booths such as these. While there is a financial end to the matter as many of my informants felt that drugs from the clinic or pharmacy could be incredibly costly, there are also concerns about having some pharmaceuticals readily available to the community. With some of those I spoke with, they worried that they would be denied medicine if they went to the clinic or they would not be able to access the medicine they needed quickly enough. The knowledge of most of these pharmaceuticals seemed to be quite limited and they are perceived of as being extremely efficacious in the hands of an experienced shaman. I was not aware of any pharmaceuticals other than penicillin, but I had heard of other pharmaceuticals, Vicodin and Percocet most referenced, being available in the past. From what was explained to me, the pharmaceuticals are used in conjunction with traditional herbal remedies that are prescribed by the attending shaman. In most cases, penicillin was the common drug that was sought out in order to address venereal diseases. Usually these treatments were very discreet in order to protect the

reputation of the person requesting the treatment. Try as they might, word usually spread that certain people had been seeing a shaman for treatment and it was not uncommon to hear that if needed, certain shamans should be sought out for their specialisation on the matter and because of their access to pharmaceuticals. It was known that some of these pharmaceuticals, particularly the painkillers, were obtained through left over prescriptions from family members and others in the community. Occasionally, news would spread that an older grandmother had been arrested for the distribution of pharmaceuticals at a festival or gathering and that she would be facing jail time or heavy fines. While arrests had not occurred in Denver, the stories usually involved family members or relations in St. Paul or Fresno and so family members in Denver would be become aware or involved in the situation. When I asked if a similar situation existed in Denver where people had access to the pharmaceuticals, I was told by several of my informants that they could be had but that it was not as available as it had been in the 1990s and early 2000s. When I asked one informant why they would choose to purchase pharmaceuticals this way instead of seeing the doctor, they replied,

“They (the buyers) think that it is going to work better than what they get from the doctor. It comes from the old ladies and they are going to sell something that works. If it worked in the old country it will work here and the old ladies are the one’s who know. Its a condition in their head that they think this, but they still do it.”

Additional means of accessing medicines generally consisted of over the counter medication, balms, and ointments. Tiger balm, often sold at Asian Grocers, Mineral Ice, NyQuil, Pedialyte, and Sudafed¹ were common items, the bulk of them being available at Walmart. It was understood that the medicines could be taken alone but their efficacious properties were enhanced if they were taken in conjunction with traditional herbal remedies. For most, these served as general cure-alls but in specific cases, other over the counter medications would be examined and chosen based on their perceived effectiveness. These could include inhalers, cough medicines, lozenges, and sports creams. And while some of these goods and medicines could be used by the person themselves, their administration was often given over to the person's wife, mother, grandmother, or shaman for use.

In regards to one particular medicine, its availability was facilitated through

the channels of the community and could be obtained from friends or relatives and therefore lacked a specific point of access. I had heard stories of a miracle medicine from three of my informants who are in their 30s and 40s. The medicine in question was described as a rich loam like substance that is black in colour and is collected in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Several times one of my informants, Thoob, had set out with his friends to try and locate the substance but had always come back empty handed. I ran into him returning from these trips twice and he often seemed down after his venture into the hills. He would have a beer and sit on the sofa and explain that he would be rich if only he could find this magical dirt. When I asked him to tell me the name of the medicine, he began to think and then began to say something when his wife piped in and said, “Its magical poo.” He quickly agreed and said, “Yeah! Its magical poo, but its not really shit. Its like that though.” I was very confused on the matter and I continued to ask about the substance every time I saw him. His shoulders would sag and he would tell me that he still was unable to find it. When I asked others about this magical poo, they would say that it was a local thing that some people in the community had discovered when they had been in the mountains fowling. The only name that would be consistently used was *guav*, which translates as poo or more exactly, as useless, and so the substance was often described as healing dirt, magic dirt, and magical poo. The material was rumoured to cure aches and pains in a person’s joints and to ease any swelling, and it was also rumoured that it would get rid of rashes overnight. While my informant had some of the magical dirt and had used it within the past six months and swore by its efficacy, he had been unable to obtain any further samples, always saying that another person or their mother was hoarding the bulk of the material but that he would definitely try to get more. What little he did have had been boiled and filtered into old water bottles that were stored in his garage. Generally, the magical dirt was moistened and turned into a thick paste that was used as a compress on rashes and swollen joints. With Thoob’s preparation of the material I learned that it could also be prepared as an elixir to be drunk to address digestive issues and to be used as an overall, general health supplement.

In this situation, a material with perceived medicinal qualities imbued from nature is, in theory, available to anyone who is willing to trouble themselves to seek

it out in the wild. As Thoob had explained, once found it is often hoarded and so access to the medicine from a commerce or exchange standpoint can be very limited. Most importantly, it reveals that, just as in the case of NyQuil and other pharmaceuticals, *traditional* Hmong medicine need not be only plants or materials brought from Laos and Thailand. Rather, new plants, herbs, and substances have been introduced into the traditional Hmong medicine cabinet through their experiences of life in the US and in Denver that are then incorporated into Hmong health practices. When asking relatives of Thoob who were visiting from Minnesota about the material, some had heard of the magic dirt but they had never seen it. Others had heard nothing but quickly asked Thoob to tell them more about it and some requested to purchase some of the material to take back to Minnesota with them. So in this manner, medicines sometimes exchange hands through channels of familial and communal relation.

As can be seen, there are numerous channels of access and distribution available to individuals. While there are some medications that can be dangerous, the majority of the herbal medicines are sold and traded openly in an unregulated manner. And while someone may have knowledge of the medicine and its effectiveness, the medicinal materials are often times handed over to someone with greater knowledge for application and administration. At other times, the medicine is obtained by those who are more knowledgeable in treating ailments and will procure materials from various vendors and stores or from the personal gardens of families and friends in order to treat the afflicted. Furthermore, it is important to understand that medicines and means of accessing those medicines change and that what constitutes medicine will continue to evolve.

Fertility Treatments and Reproductive Health

In consideration of the points pertaining to Hmong attitudes towards health and healing that I have addressed thus far, I now wish to turn our attention to matters related to reproductive health, conception, prenatal care and postpartum care. As I noted in Chapter 2, women are often seen by the Hmong as being the faulty element in a relationship in regards to reproductive issues. Stories of men coming forth and admitting their fertility issues were extremely rare and often the only anecdote

offered was that the men drank herbal teas given to them by a shaman and their wives also took fertility treatments as a precaution. Because of this, all of those I spoke with who had sought out fertility treatments were women and their experiences are examined below.

Grandma Va's house is tucked away in a small Denver suburb, just to the northwest where many of the Denver Hmong had initially settled. Grandma Va and her husband had moved there in the late 1980s after coming from a refugee camp in Thailand to California in the late 1970s. The house itself is not particularly striking at first glance as the neighbourhood was built in the 1950s and all of the houses share a similar outward appearance. However, upon closer inspection it is impossible to ignore the fact that the house has been well lived in and that it has been subject to countless busy feet and hands as people have come and gone over the years. Its concrete steps are worn smooth in the middle, the top of the black cast iron handrail has been rubbed to a delicate shine, the roof has a slight sag to it, the shutters clack, and the brown paint above the brick base is slightly chipped away where errant ivy vines have taken hold. While the outer physical features of the house itself seem to be marginally maintained, the gardens that surround the sides and back of the house and which continue to wind through the latticed patio, are immaculately kept.

Grandma Va plants her gardens in the early spring and meticulously tends to them everyday. Her arthritis, and being over 80 years old, somewhat limits her mobility and activity but every morning she can be found plucking the bright yellow flowers that grow from a tiny vine inside a half barrel planter to make her daily tea. She constantly pulls at weeds and throws them into the small patch of lawn, while occasionally she darts in and out of her tiny greenhouse, where she keeps her medicinal plants and herbs for cooking, to find her shears or other hand tools for tilling. Her slightly listing work shed holds her larger gardening tools and is bursting with potting soils, fertilisers, pesticides, and her ever growing collection of seeds and bulbs.

The massive, bushy clutch of mint, nestled along the fence, constantly threatens to engulf her young sunflowers. Looking at the bushy carpet she explained that she used mint for many different things and that she had to constantly work to keep it from encroaching on the rest of the garden. It was one of her favourite plants

to have because of its scent and she found the covering of mint beautiful but she always reminded me of how easy it was for mint to get out of hand. I had walked through her gardens many times and every time, I found something new to ask about. Sometimes I would be told how a particular herb was fantastic for treating an upset stomach, or how several of the herbs could be made into a medicinal press for dressing swollen areas of the body. Occasionally I would ask about an herb, thinking that it may hold some secret curative or magic property, and she would look at me and stand silently for a moment before saying in a direct tone, "I like that one on my chicken. Makes it taste better."

On one particular visit, she tried to explain the layout of her garden to me. She stood by the kitchen table that looked over the manicured beds and held a plastic medicine cup in her hand that was filled with the strong smelling, stimulating tea made from tiny yellow flowers. She knocked back the tea like a shot of whiskey and began to explain that a lot of the plants in her care were old and had come from Thailand or Laos. Others could be found locally or in the garden centres around Denver. She remembered sewing the seeds of some of the plants into the hems of her long skirts when she had to leave the camp in Thailand to come to the US because they were afraid that they wouldn't have any medicine in the new country and what medicine they did have would be seized by the waiting customs agents. Their fears were not completely unfounded as the bulk of their belongings, including pictures, heirloom bars of silver and gold, traditional pieces of jewellery, clothes, and other miscellaneous items, were taken from them by customs officials when they reached the US. She then pointed at other plants here and there that had been given to her over the years as gifts from friends, family, and patients of hers whom she had helped with various issues.

She went on to explain that she had always gardened. When she was a young girl living in her village in Laos, she had become ill and her uncle, a local shaman, had come to see her. He explained to her that she had been called by the spirits to become a shaman, and as she continued to learn about remedies and treatments, she began to develop and tend her own garden full of the medicines and herbs she needed for her practice. She had some experience with cultivating plants as she had grown up in a family of opium farmers and she had continued to farm opium to

support her growing family. Over the years she cared for her community, while in Laos and in the US, and continued to develop her practice to the point that she was renown for her treatment of fertility issues and for ensuring a successful pregnancy. I would often hear women in the Denver community, young and old, comment, “If you want to have a baby, you need to see Grandma Va. She will make sure you have a baby”, or, “If you want to make a million dollars, find out what Grandma Va says to the spirits when she makes her medicine. I know some of the herbs but I don’t know what she says to make it work!” No one seemed to know exactly what she would say to make her medicine so effective but the stories about her ability to help women with conceiving were always told with a degree of amazement. Often times informants would refer to couples in the Denver or St. Paul communities or women they remembered from Laos who had been unable to conceive or unable to keep a pregnancy who had all been helped by Grandma Va’s prayers, medicine, and massaging techniques.

Leading me into her small greenhouse, Grandma Va pointed to a corner shelf and a squat, bushy plant with long and thin bright green leaves flowing upwards and over the edges of the pot. Three delicate, narrow white flowers stand in the middle of the bushy ensemble and seemed to stand straight up, with their yellow central cones just beginning to emerge and bud. “This is a special plant”, Grandma Va says. She stopped and picked out some of the dried leaves that had accumulated on top of the grass and then went on to explain that this pedestrian looking plant was one of the central pieces of her herbal treatments for reproductive issues. Based on what others have told me in their descriptions of Grandma Va’s treatments, this is the plant she often uses when a woman is having difficulty becoming pregnant or the woman wants to increase her chances of conceiving. Just as I had experienced with others, Grandma Va stopped short of revealing all of the properties of her recipes and this special plant.

Caressing some of the longer portions of the plant, Grandma Va said that she had used the long leaves of this plant for years in her treatments and she has had a great deal of success with it. She reminded me that she does not share her secrets with others and that the whole process is not fully revealed even to the patients themselves or else the spirit she communes with would be troubled and the treatment

would cease to be effective. She went on to say that most other treatments are also carefully guarded secrets, much like the different remedies found in family medicine, and that each healer will have his or her own formula for success. Again, Grandma Va emphasised that the treatment process had been developed over her lifetime and that treatment begins with the patient coming to Grandma Va's house for a diagnosis and then usually twice a week to administer the herbal remedy and so that she can massage the patient and regularly check their condition.

To prepare the herbal treatment, she takes small clippings from the potted grass and places them over a steamed egg. To prepare the egg, the top is delicately pierced to produce a fine hole only a few millimetres wide and then placed over a steaming pot where the egg cooks and the yolk and egg whites begin to foam and run out of the egg. The way the yolk cooks and becomes situated among the egg whites permits Grandma Va an opportunity to discern the chances for conception and, sometimes, she is able to read the flow and pattern of the egg to predict the sex of the child. With the egg placed onto a plate, the long herbs are then laid across the top of the cooked egg and a prayer to the spirit of her altar is said over the assembled plate. The patient then mixes and eats the egg and an herb combination while Grandma Va says an additional prayer over the patient while she continues her massage treatment. As an additional measure, during the week Grandma Va will offer prayers, additional uncooked eggs, incense, money, and liquor to the fertility spirit. The process is then repeated during the patient's visits until the patient conceives. When the patient becomes pregnant, it is often expected that they will then pay Grandma Va for her services, usually totalling \$1000 USD.

The spirits she usually engages with are largely concerned with fertility. Drawing on her assessment and diagnosis of her patient, Grandma Va is then able to commune with a particular spirit through her altar, and she is able to ask for blessings for the patient's health and healing. Her requests often involve asking the spirit to locate a lost soul or to restore balance to the individual and to bless them with the ability to conceive by allowing her treatment to be effective for the patient. The altar itself resides in her garage and stands about four feet tall, just slightly shorter than Grandma Va herself. There are two sides to the altar with a gap in the middle and both pedestals remain draped in sheets of paper money with bright gold

or silver rectangular centres and five red diamonds, with one sheet pinned to the side which bears small smears of chicken blood and small tufts of feathers from the sacrificial hen dabbed in tiny spots of blood. The shelf of the altar contains numerous bowls filled with full and half burned incense sticks, small plastic medicine cups filled with rice liquor, her heavy brass finger bells with long flowing red ribbons, and her split horns.³ In the middle, her red hood is hung across a small sword she uses for fighting malevolent spirits, along with her gong and her brass ring. At one point, Grandma Va picked up the large brass ring and shook it around the garage. The heavy brass coins erupted into a near deafening rattle. When she stopped, the garage felt strangely quiet and after a few moments she turned and explained to me that was how she cleansed the area so that she could begin talking to the spirits or if she needed to travel to the spirit world to confront different spirits. She stared at me for a few more seconds and seeing that she had startled me with the sudden onset of noise, she then burst into laughter saying, “It is only for good, always for good”. Moving closer to her altar, she nudged her charred wire waste basket where she had been burning offerings out of the way with her foot and she began to tap at an egg standing upright in a bowl of uncooked rice in the centre of her altar. After checking its placement she said, “This spirit loves eggs. That’s all this spirit wants to eat. I never have enough eggs.”

Returning to the situation with Ka Gua that began my thesis, she found herself pushed towards Grandma Va by her mother and mother in law, as well as by her husband’s request. She had been pressed to see Grandma Va and to begin treatment for her perceived infertility and so that she could condition her body to ensure that she would successfully conceive a child. She followed a strict regimen of attendance wherein she would eat the egg medicine that Grandma Va had prepared and she would be massaged by Grandma Va. The massage focused on her lower abdomen and it was understood that the massage would coax her organs into a relaxed and balanced state that was conducive for conception. Grandma Va would offer prayers and ask for blessings at her altar while Ka Gua sat patiently by and Grandma Va explained that she continued offering prayers and asking for blessings for Ka Gua throughout the week to help the process along. In addition to this, Ka Gua’s mother, a Christian, continued to pray for Ka Gua’s health and soul and asked God to heal

her and to help her daughter conceive. Her mother had faith in Grandma Va's medicine and while she did not object to Grandma Va praying and asking for blessings, she felt as though she could supplement her daughter's treatment with her own prayers.

When Ka Gua finally did become pregnant, the reaction was that Grandma Va's medicine had worked and that both parties praying for Ka Gua had helped her body and being be more receptive to the medicine. There was no clear claim as to which prayer had been more successful, just that it had worked and God or the spirits had seen fit to grant Ka Gua a child.

Within this context, we can now return to the issues highlighted in the beginning of this chapter and in Chapters 3 and 4. As we have seen, there is a focus on maintaining a healthy relationship between a person's body and their soul. Within the Christian view of things, the person's soul and their understanding of the soul is something that emerges through an inner moral dialogue and through an establishment of a technology of the self. Their view holds that there exists a soul that is a distinct entity unto itself, yet it is intimately bound to the body and that it maintains a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship with the body. Furthermore, the moral and ethical underpinnings of Hmong Christian faith drawn distinct lines as to how men's and women's bodies are to be used; to procreate in order to establish their own families. Therefore, the maintenance of spiritual and physical health, just as we saw with Niam Xyoob, is of critical importance and it is only through prayer that the soul is properly cared for, which in turn permits the body an opportunity to respond to medicine and treatment.

When I spoke with Ka Gua about her treatments, she found the entire process extremely tedious and she continued her treatments solely to appease her mother, mother in law, and her husband. When she began her treatments she was hesitant to admit believing the entirety of what she was being told about her soul, her body, and Grandma Va's process, particularly considering what she had come to know through Christian perspectives. She commented several times that, "Well, its Grandma Va, everyone knows it will work. There's no sense in fighting it. If I'm going to get pregnant, she is the one who is definitely going to make sure of it." So even though she was unsure of her own desire to conceive, Ka Gua had resigned herself to the

idea that Grandma Va would ensure her pregnancy. As her treatments wore on over the next few months, Ka Gua began to sound more and more convinced of what was happening to her and she felt that the matter of her conceiving was no longer an issue and that it did not matter what she did as she would conceive soon. This was an important realisation for Ka Gua because she had stopped the birth control that she had been taking for several years and she had taken on the idea that her body was going to expel any lingering issues or side effects from the birth control through Grandma Va's treatments and through her own prayers and those of Grandma Va and her mother.

The process of herbal treatment and prayer was repeated with another informant, Taub, who is a relative of Ka Gua. Taub lives in Fresno and came to visit Ka Gua on several occasions and identifies as a traditional practitioner. Prior to Taub having her first child, she too had gone through the same process as Ka Gua and was convinced of its effectiveness. She had seen a shaman in Fresno who had followed a similar procedure and had no doubt that the combination of prayer and medicine is what had ensured her pregnancy. For her second and third child, her mother had contacted Grandma Va and had asked her which herbs she should use in preparing the treatments for Taub at home. Grandma Va told her which herbs to procure and the process for preparing the eggs and which massage would be appropriate. Grandma Va then coordinated her prayers and blessings with Taub's mother over the phone for both pregnancies. Taub felt that Grandma Va's method was proven to be quicker and that even over distances, prayer had helped her receive the spirits' blessings so that she might conceive.

On her third pregnancy, Taub was concerned over the sex of the child. Her first two pregnancies had been girls and she felt desperate to have a boy. She spoke with Grandma Va on one of her visits and she received a mixture of herbs to take that were supposed to influence the sex of the child and give Taub and her husband a son. Taub followed the instructions and she did have a son. The actual mixture of herbs was difficult to determine. They had been dried and crushed and there was no way for Taub to determine the exact nature of the herbs she had been given. The herbs were taken with an egg, just as she had done in previous treatments, and Grandma Va had continued her prayer sessions for Taub and she had checked with

Taub's mother on a regular basis to ensure that Taub was receiving the proper massage regimen and that she had kept up with consuming the egg and herb mixture. For Taub and Ka Gua, this was further proof of Grandma Va's effectiveness and further solidified their belief in the combination of prayer, traditional medicine, and massage in preparation for conceiving. In addition to these factors, both women acknowledged that while trying to conceive they had both also adjusted their diets to strengthen their bodies and they both took multi-vitamins and had limited their intake of fast food and the like. So while they both relied on Grandma Va's command of medicine and her favour with the spirits, the two women had also taken steps on their own to prepare their bodies for pregnancy.

Additionally, in both women's situation, their mothers had remained involved in their treatments and in ensuring that they kept a watchful eye on the women's process. For Ka Gua, this also included her mother in law and many of her treatments also saw her mother and mother in law present during the treatment process. Her mother would often talk about Ka Gua's progress with others and so her treatment became a well known subject within the family and within her church community. For Taub, her mother often discussed her progress with members of the family in Denver and everyone knew she was trying to conceive a son in her third pregnancy. On many occasions I heard her uncles and aunts speaking with her about how wonderful it would be to have a son since she already had two daughters and that her mother and father would be happy if they finally had a grandson. This involvement by their parents turns the women's entire affair and experience into a public matter and continues to provide a source of pressure that encourages the women to focus their attentions on conceiving. In essence, the matter of reproductive medicine truly becomes family medicine.

As much as these experiences are about traditional approaches to biological reproduction, attention to social and spiritual reproduction are also at work. In the case of Ka Gua, she continued to rely on the prayers of her mother and her own prayers over the course of her treatment to ensure that she conceived. As I noted previously, Ka Gua had reconciled the two spiritual perspectives in order to comfort herself with what was happening. The continued involvement of her mother also served to perpetually tie the interests of Ka Gua's family to the creation of her own

family. Through these experiences Ka Gua continued to develop her own concept of what her family would and should be. With Taub, her understandings of traditional practice made her experiences with traditional treatments much easier. In both cases both women were confronted with their own spiritual understandings. Additionally, both women found a form of reinforcement of their respective beliefs through their experiences as both conceived after treatments and attested to the efficacy of the treatments. While Ka Gua felt that her reconciliation of her spiritual views with traditional spirituality had widened her gaze, Taub found stronger belief without the need of spiritual debate. In effect, these experiences have provided a reinforcement of belief in both women which has in turn affected their understanding of the nature of the world and themselves as part of the world. The nuanced differences both women generated have thus altered how they would explain their spirituality and how they relate to it. Most importantly, these new forms of relation then lend a new perspective of how they will explain these matters to their children, thereby affecting the reproduction of ideas, views, and approaches to the body, biological reproduction, matters of family, and experiences of Hmong women.

Prenatal and Postpartum Care

Once pregnant, both women continued traditional methods of prenatal care in addition to what their Western doctors had prescribed and continued to make plans to deliver their children at local area hospitals. Ka Gua explained that she had Grandma Va continue to massage her throughout her pregnancy in order for the baby to develop properly and to ease the discomfort of her pregnancy. Several times she tried to explain to me exactly how Grandma Va did the massage but she confessed she was often tired and tended to fall asleep during the massages and did not fully understand what had occurred although she recalled Grandma Va seeming to move between massaging her on the sofa or floor and then disappearing into the garage for prayers intermittently. Grandma Va had simply described the process as massage and a continuation of the treatments that she had been administering to Ka Gua the entire time.

Wanting to further understand what Ka Gua was trying to describe, I then asked several people at the C&MA church their thoughts on traditional prenatal care

and I was directed to an upcoming clinic that was to take place two weeks from the day. The day of the clinic arrived and I made my way to the church. When I walked in, the entire place reverberated with the voice of a young man who had gathered several women around him. He was directing everyone's attention to an elderly grandmother who sat on a front row pew in her cardigan sweater. Her smile beamed out from behind her hair that had been pressed into her face from her beanie. She spoke no English and so the young man stood in the centre, translating for her. The old woman was a massage specialist and she had just begun to explain how a woman should go about massaging adults and children. After showing different methods involving different starting and stopping points, she would stop and encourage those around her to discuss what she had just shown them and she tried to get them to ask questions and would occasionally quiz them to ensure that those watching understood. The demonstration was in the Green Hmong dialect and one of the young men questioned me on how much I understood. When I told him that I understood parts of it and that I was more familiar with the White dialect, the man went on to explain that she was demonstrating how to take care of younger children and that the massage techniques were very important for dealing with the overall health of babies and toddlers when they were confronted by doctors. When I asked him to explain exactly what he meant he said, "Well, the kids, they have to get shots and they can get bang plig from that. If you do the massage right after, it calms them down and stops that. But she's saying its (the massage technique) different for boys and girls though."

After about ten minutes of massage basics, she went on to explain how important it was for a woman to be massaged during pregnancy. It was not only to ensure that the mother was relaxed and that there was then less stress on the child, it was to ensure that the body was kept in proper condition so that everything the child needed was effectively and efficiently provided. Furthermore, just as Ka Gua had told me, it was to help the mother deal with the discomfort of pregnancy and to help make the best of the situation.

The young man came over to greet me during the first break and introduced himself as Marcus. He was a new father and he told me that he had learned a lot in the first session and that he felt more confident in taking care of his newborn. I

asked him if it was he or his wife who usually took care of the baby and he explained that his wife was usually the one who handled any health issues with the baby. He felt that these lessons were helping him understand what she was contending with and what to do in case she was unavailable and it was up to him to take care of things. Saying that, he quickly smiled and said, “Of course I could just call my mom too.” He explained that what I was seeing was all traditional Hmong medical practices and even though they were Christian, they still believed in the efficacy of the treatment and it was important to learn.

While we continued talking a young woman came up to us and introduced herself and her cousin. Lias was a member of the church and her cousin Zeb had recently joined. Both of the women were mothers. Lias was 26 years old and was the mother of four. She had two boys and two girls and she commented on how happy she was to finally be learning traditional massage that she could use on her children. She recalled getting massage treatments from her mother during her pregnancies but her mother had not passed on the knowledge to her. Learning the different methods from the grandmother in the church was helping her increase her knowledge of taking care of children and as she described it, “learning things that mothers need to know.” Zeb too was familiar with massage therapy, and after acknowledging its benefits, she gathered her baby and shuffled away to a cooking class that was being held in the basement.

The grandmother clapped her hands and ushered everyone back into a circle around her. One of the bystanders had volunteered their toddler, a boy of about 2, to be used in a massage demonstration. The grandmother had the boy lay on his back on the pew and she explained that with boys, and men, the massage should begin on the right side of the person’s body, and for women, the massage should begin on the left. She went on to explain that this was particularly important when massaging a pregnant woman. Her rationale for this was that the massage beginning on their respective sides maintained the proper flow and function within the body depending on the person’s sex. While she continued to massage the boy, Lias piped up excitedly. She said that it all made perfect sense to her now. When she had been pregnant, both of her sons had rested their heads on the right side while in utero, and her daughters had rested their heads on the left. While the grandmother did not

validate this point either way, for Lias it was a revelation that helped her complete her understanding of prenatal care. After the second session break, she began to tell me the stories of her pregnancies and she explained that both of her sons had experienced difficulty in turning. Her mother had sent her to see a massage specialist and she had gone to see her Western doctor. The doctor had decided that they would most likely need to perform a caesarean section delivery as the baby had not turned and there was a potential threat to Lias's health during delivery. After seeing the massage specialist and engaging in private and group prayer, the baby turned and she delivered naturally in both pregnancies without complications. She emphasised the importance of prayer in the entire matter to which Marcus, who had re-joined us, nodded his head in strong agreement. With the end of the second break, the grandmother once again summoned everyone to her and again sought out a volunteer. On this round, Lias enthusiastically thrust herself forward in such a way that she surprised the grandmother. She then laid down and drifted into a relaxed state with a long sigh as the grandmother set to work, massaging Lias's shoulders and reiterating the starting points of the massage and how to progress around the person's body.

When comparing my notes from Ka Gua, Taub, and Lias, all three women followed the advice of their Western doctors and maintained regular check ins and examinations. They also consistently took prenatal vitamins and continued to watch their diet in order to maintain what they felt was optimum health, with an occasional admission to indulging in certain foods because, as Ka Gua said, "The baby wanted it." In all three cases the women had maintained their prescribed regimen set forth by their Western doctors and they had continued their massage treatments that always included a prayer component. In their explanations of the experience, the traditional approaches simply maintained their health and bodily function so that again, any Western medicine would be as effective as possible should they require it. Additionally, all three women felt that the traditional means of prenatal care better encouraged fetal development and it alleviated much of the discomfort of their bodies changing and the labor of carrying a child within them, something they felt Western medicine didn't fully appreciate.

Just as all three women had followed traditional means of pregnancy care, they

also all followed traditional postpartum practices. In all three cases their mothers had been present for all of the births. They explained to me that their mothers would know best what to do once the baby had arrived and so it was expected that their mother would come and stay in their home for an extended period of time, usually three to four weeks, after the birth. The new fathers often had a different opinion on the visit. While obliged to be hospitable to their mother in laws, the men often held soured feelings after a week or two as they couldn't really escape their mother in law's incessant scrutiny. During this time the new mother was kept within the house with the newborn and is forbidden from venturing outside. She is fed a special diet of boiled chicken and rice and is restricted from eating any spicy foods. Her head must always be covered and the baby's head must also remain covered during their month indoors in order to keep in body heat to further encourage their recovery and to help them stave off illness. In addition to these measures, the new mother also has her body wrapped with a long sheet. The new mother's mother helps address all of these matters in the first month and helps ensure that everything is followed properly so that the new mother and child are kept safe and that they recover and gain their strength.

The boiled chicken is prepared by taking the meat of a freshly killed hen⁴ and boiling it with a prepared mixture of dried herbs. Each family has their own recipe for which herbs to include. Any time that I requested them to tell me what the mixture was, again the new grandmothers would quickly intervene and explain that it was a family secret passed from mother to daughter and that if it was told to anyone outside of the family, the curative properties of the mixture would be lost. They seemed to think that it was particularly dangerous to be discussing the matter with a man and they found it odd that a man would be so interested in women's knowledge. The ingredients were so secret that none of the three women knew exactly what was in the mixture and they understood that they would be informed when they were older. At face value, the chicken provides a good protein source to aid in the new mother's recovery. The rice and herbs that have been added are understood to cleanse the new mother's body and to restore it as closely as possible to its condition before her pregnancy.

This effort is further encouraged by the use of the body wrap. The idea is that

the wrap will in effect remind the body of how it was and how it should be shaped. It is also believed that the wrap will help the woman's organs move back to their natural position which will further aid in her recovery. In regards to returning the body to its proper shape, when discussing the matter, Ka Gua felt that this also had to do with maintaining her beauty and femininity. Her mother had told her that one of the reasons that Asian women were always thinner than the (Caucasian) American women was because Asian women wrapped themselves while American women did not. Her mother felt that this was one of the secrets to many Asian women maintaining their beauty and figure even after having several children. Discussing the process of wrapping with her doctor, Ka Gua had been warned not to use the wrap as if done improperly, the wrap could result in blood clots or cause other health matters to arise. Taub had also heard of this warning before yet both proceeded to use the wrap, Ka Gua after her first child and Taub after all three. Lias had also wrapped herself and had no issues arise while doing so. In all three cases, the women were closely attended to by their mothers and the women were constantly checked to ensure that they were making a satisfactory recovery. In addition to these measures, throughout the ordeal of recovery and seclusion, Ka Gua continued receiving massages from her mother, albeit less often than she had from Grandma Va. The massage was accompanied with personal prayer and praying with her mother and husband. They asked for a fast recovery by again addressing the condition of her soul, and for protection and blessings for their new child. Ka Gua felt that her recovery had been further facilitated by prayer in the sense that praying had helped restore the balance between her body and soul, and in so doing, her body regained its natural, proper function and was therefore better able to repair itself.

As the first month ends and the woman's mother leaves the house, a *hu plig*, or soul calling ceremony is performed as a traditional practice for the new baby. Often family and close friends are invited where the new mother gives thanks to all those who helped her, particularly if she called upon a shaman, and blessings of protection and fortune are bestowed upon the new child. For Christians, the baby and mother are presented to the church where the church then prays for blessings for the mother and child as the new baby is publicly acknowledged and accepted into Christ's grace and care. And in both cases, a new life joins the community.

Further Reflections

In this chapter I have addressed Hmong approaches to health and healing, traditional medicine, reproductive health, and prenatal and postpartum care. While this has provided insight into practices of the Hmong, there are several issues at work. As we saw with Ka Gua and Taub, the experiences changed and reinforced their understanding of spiritual matters. The involvement of Ka Gua's mother also reveals attitudes towards motherhood and gendered expectations of Hmong women to reproduce and make family. With Ka Gua, her mother remained involved throughout the entire process of preparing Ka Gua's body to conceive and she helped prepare Ka Gua to be what she felt was a proper mother. She instructed her on what to do during the postpartum period and encouraged her to continue to receive massage therapy after conception to help ensure the health of the pregnancy, all the while reminding Ka Gua how important it was for her to have a child and have a family of her own. In regards to this, Ka Gua's mother reproduced what being a Hmong mother means by showing care and compassion towards Ka Gua's condition and experience. She had been sent to Grandma Va because her mother and mother in law believed that the experience would produce results. Here, both her mother and mother in law reveal their own understandings of health and how the body works, which they passed on to Ka Gua who then reconciled the experience within her own spiritual framework and understanding of herself. Ideas of motherhood as the concerned care giver and nurturer have been heavily reinforced and a continued insistence on the importance of family serves to shape Ka Gua's understanding and vision of the subject.

In addition to this, the insistence and pressure of her mother and mother in law further reveal gendered expectations in that they stressed that it was the duty of a woman to bear children. Her mother in law had taken a traditional stance on the matter and often provided examples from within the community that focused on the happiness and cohesiveness of family for those who had children, contrasted with the problems and feelings of emptiness among those without children. She also pointed to the traditional structures of family and noted the obvious fact that only women could bear children and a woman who chose not to have children deprived her own family and her husband a continuance and legacy of family. From a spiritual

standpoint, she reminded Ka Gua of the children that she and her husband had left in the spirit world and that it was her responsibility to claim them. Ka Gua's mother pointed out similar situations but further punctuated the importance of the matter by referencing scripture that added additional emphasis on the role of the woman in the family and that they were to meet the expectations of God to reproduce and to serve the interests of their husbands.

While Ka Gua acknowledge that her mother and mother in law had drawn these perspectives from the face value of their observations and from their own experiences, Ka Gua could not help but note that she felt she had no choice but to follow their guidance and that she would have to relinquish control of her decisions for the sake of her parents and for her husband and his family. The assertions that she had put forth concerning her own understanding of gender and self became subverted by the wills of others and through this, Ka Gua was forced to revisit and assess her own view points on the subject. In sum, through her acquiescence and subsequent decisions and reconciliations, Ka Gua has reproduced ideas and images of Hmong understandings of gender, family, spirituality, and concepts of health and the body, although slightly modified to fit her own needs while keeping within the expectations of others; further revealing the complex and overlapping fields of practice and understanding that continues to inform self awareness, identity and gender, ideas of community and family, systems of spirituality and belief, and the continued maintenance and reproduction of entangled this assemblage.

¹ These are common medications for childhood dehydration and for child and adult allergies and colds.

² Stories of early interaction were collected from several informants over my time in the field. At the time, the distribution of condoms was particularly difficult for many as a Western notion of family planning was in opposition to producing large families. Furthermore, the subject of sex is rarely discussed or even mentioned and so the memory of receiving lectures on sexual health and having condoms given out were very shocking for many.

³ The split horns of a young water buffalo are used in divination while the finger bells are used during trance and while "riding the horse" (the shaman's bench) during a shaman's engagement with the spirit world or while offering prayers.

⁴ With all three women, the visiting mother would either bring live hens with them to keep in the yard or garage or would go and procure live hens in the local market after arriving.

Chapter 6

It Takes a Village to *Make* a Child, It Takes a Child to *Make* a Village

After much reflection, I chose to title this last chapter as a compliment to the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child”. The issues that we have explored through the different chapters represent a multifaceted approach to understanding social and spiritual matters that contribute to a Hmong approach to not only biological reproduction, but also to the reproduction of the social and spiritual strands that inform a Hmong continuity. The entanglement of traditional and contemporary views of life, diverse degrees of emphasis on family and society, contrasting ontologies that hold contentious views of the spiritual, the imagined ideal, and the lived and understood experiences of Hmong life are the elements which defines a family as a Hmong family, a child as a Hmong child, and which shapes the character and richness of the Denver Hmong community. In what follows I will be addressing the development of my approach to researching Hmong reproduction over the course of this thesis, and the overarching themes found within the ethnography. Additionally, an examination of a *puv hli*, a one-month blessing for a newborn, that I attended after returning to Denver in 2015 provides an opportunity to examine the locus of reproduction and the intersection, apposition, and entanglement of theoretical issues that I have addressed. The chapter concludes with thoughts and reflections on the whole of the thesis and on future directions.

To begin, within the introductory chapter I noted that when I began my research I had initially set out to examine cultural attitudes towards disparate medical traditions surrounding biological reproduction within a marginal and largely hermetic Hmong community. While my research could have retained this focus, to address reproduction solely from a biological standpoint would have neglected the layered entanglements of key cultural elements that comprise the fundamentals of Hmong life. By broadening my view, the flow and interdependent nature of Hmong sociality, spiritual life, and traditional views of medicine and health unveiled reciprocal forms of reproduction that places reproduction in a wider and much more meaningful and critical context. And through these alterations, a tapestry coalesced

that emphasized the rich qualities and connections of Hmong life, Hmong approaches to reproduction, and a sense of continuity, all of which plainly rests within several areas of anthropological engagement.

In order to explore the impetus and groundwork for the expansions of my research, we can return to the description of Ka Gua's situation from the introductory chapter. As we saw, the desires and pressure of Ka Gua's husband, his family, and her own family placed her in a position whereby her own desires and views of herself, having a child, and starting a family became contested. These mounting pressures were drawn from traditional notions of family and expectations for the couple to reproduce. In contrast to these views and expectations, Ka Gua's own understanding and control of her body, use of her body, what it means to be a woman, and what it means to be a Hmong woman, were drawn into question. To compound this further, when she acquiesced to their relentless requests and accepted the idea of becoming a mother and having a family of her own, she began traditional fertility treatments where approaches to spiritual matters revealed different understandings of health, the body, functions within the body, and keys to successful reproduction; namely ensuring that the soul and the body are in a copacetic state relative to one another. All the while, her mother and mother in law continued to offer their prayers through a traditional shaman as well as her mother offering Christian prayers. As these events continued, further questions were asked. Would traditional medicine and preparation be enough or would she need to see a Western doctor? If so, what kind of treatments would she need and how could she best be prepared for these treatments to ensure a pregnancy? What would the families do if the couple could not conceive? In the end, everything worked out for Ka Gua and Paul and with the arrival of their child, both families seemed to shed an immeasurable load of stress and worry and shifted their focus to generating a loving and caring environment for the new family.

Within this sphere of immense pressure, uncertainty, want, fear, expectation, and the competing ontologies of the traditional and Christian worlds, we can see forms of reproduction that encompass and draw attention to the sympathetic and reciprocal nature of the social, the spiritual and symbolic and the biological. These domains contain within them intense pressures, complexities of connection, and

points of disconnection and contestation that mark the Hmong experience and which lend a further shaping and broadening of the disposition of reproduction. Moreover these overlapping complexities and points further attest to the deeply seated entanglements of Hmong life and raise further questions about various perceptions and marshaling of what community and family are and should be, generational and gendered relationships, differing spiritual views and practices, and how traditional life and the Hmong life cycle are understood and experienced. Recognizing these points greatly aids in the unpacking of the complex and interwoven milieu that comprises the reproduction of Hmong life while accounting for a somewhat flexible, yet critical stewardship of a Hmong continuity.

Ka Gua's involved situation, and those of others throughout the different chapters, address numerous anthropological issues while also addressing critical perspectives of Hmong life in the US. In order to account for nuanced and pronounced matters of entanglement and to complement the theoretical views surrounding these subjects, the ethnographic descriptions have been presented in a manner which highlights the entangled nature of a vivid and flourishing cultural and ethnic identity that is marked by numerous expressions and views of what it means to belong and to be Hmong and Hmong American. That said, the events depicted within this thesis have revealed degrees of diversity that are at once something held in common by many Hmong throughout the US, but are also characterized by diverse and subtle nuances of practice and understanding between generations that challenge notions of homogeneity.

Furthermore, what we have examined within these chapters represents the dynamic changes of family, community, and perspectives of being Hmong that comprise the foundations of Hmong life. While contemporary Hmong social structure is a derivative of traditional Hmong communal and familial strategies, such as those of the imagined and despatialised village, *hais plaub*, and networks of mutual dependence, generational experiences and changing attitudes towards family, belonging, spirituality, and identity challenge and stress these traditional strategies, thereby permitting different expressions of being Hmong to come about. That said, a Hmong habitus which emphasises family and the production of family as a key constituent of being Hmong, is being reproduced in a way which reflects the

entanglement of the attitudes and influences of the older generations, and the experiences and perspectives of those in the younger generation who continue to produce families of their own and who maintain connections to their families, community, and to their past.

To better demonstrate the culmination of these themes and factors that comprise a Hmong entanglement which further exhibits the reciprocal reproductive qualities we have examined, I now wish to turn to a baby's one month blessing, their *puv hli*, and the name changing ceremony, *tis npe laus*, of the baby's parents. The difference between this *puv hli* and the one in Chapter 4, is that the previous ceremony was largely centered around traditional spiritual perspectives and practice and the deacons and Christians in attendance who prayed over the child and offered their blessings were in the minority. In contrast, this *puv hli* was held in a church where the majority of those in attendance were members of the congregation. Moreover, how the *puv hli* and the *tis npe laus* unfolded bear distinct marks of a Christian understanding of spirituality and ontology.

“A Spring Puv Hli”

A little over a year had passed since I had seen many of my informants in Denver during a brief trip from the UK to attend Grandma Va's funeral. Ka Gua and Paul had given birth to a baby girl and upon seeing them, I was quickly told about their daughter's *puv hli* and how much their lives had changed since her arrival nearly a year before. As I held the baby and played with the 4 *baht* gold chain around her neck that her grandmother had given her, Ka Gua explained to me that some people in the community had moved away, and several people from Minnesota, Texas, and California had moved to be closer to family in Denver. Many I had not seen since I had left the field a year and a half earlier. Soon after seeing Ka Gua and Paul and visiting my wife's family I was invited to attend a *puv hli* ceremony for one of the Baptist church families and at the same time, a naming ceremony, a *tis npe laus*, for the child's parents was to take place. While I knew the couple who were to be renamed, Tsawb and his wife Niam Tsawb, I was unfamiliar with their parents who would also be part of the blessing ceremony. Tsawb and his wife had always been very kind to me and so I agreed to attend the event to offer my

thanks and well wishes and to the new parents.

Since it had been so long since, I was a bit apprehensive in seeing everyone. However upon arriving, I found the church brimming with many familiar, smiling faces welcoming me back to Denver. The church had moved into a much larger facility since I had left. The size of the nave and scale of the property dwarfed the congregation and could easily accommodate three times or more of those in attendance. While I continued to shake hands and catch up with everyone, I was struck by the number of those I didn't know. When I pointed this out, one of my companions quickly quipped pessimistically, "Of course they are here, there's free food. That's what brings them out!"

After a few brief conversations upstairs, we moved downstairs only to find it crowded with even more people, young and old. Several rows of tables had been carefully placed and decorated with a dark blue confetti in the shapes of a pram, a baby's bottle, and the stamped out words "welcome" and "baby boy". Sitting in the folding metal chairs, my companions and I looked directly to the front and we could clearly see Tsawb and his father holding Tsawb's new baby. Handing the child back to his mother, the men began to form a more cohesive reception line. The men stood nearest to the door in order to be the first to greet those entering and the women formed the end of the line. For those around me, many of them belonged to the church but several others were extended family of the couple being celebrated and blessed. Turning around, I was again met with unfamiliar faces but this time, many of the faces belonged to smiling and curious infants that had been born while I had been away. In total there were seventeen children that clung to their mothers or walked unsteadily around the tables while holding on to the chairs or clenched tightly to the fingers of their parents as they lumbered around trying to walk. As we were asked to take our seats, many of the older men sat together while many of the grandmothers began to swarm the young mothers and their babies, taking them away and beginning to exchange them between themselves. Together they laughed and played with the bits of confetti and several small rubber ducks that had been placed in vases within the tables' centerpieces. When a child began to cry they were hurriedly returned to their mother or taken outside. This cycle repeated itself throughout the blessing and naming ceremonies and with each child exchanged, a

new round of entertainment was provided for the table.

When everyone had finished entering the basement, those within the reception line took their place along a table that had been set facing the crowd at the front of the room and the deacon, who would conduct the blessing and naming ceremonies, took his position behind a podium and began speaking into a microphone. He had been one of the deacons who had attended the *hu plig* and *puv hli* ceremony of Kalia's child. He began by commenting that it was a wonderful day for the young couple and for the young man's parents. Gesturing towards Tsawb and his wife who were seated next to their parents, the deacon remarked on how they had all been blessed by God with a healthy baby boy and how this would further strengthen their relationship and devotion to each other and to family. He went on to explain to everyone present the importance of having children and making families. Looking at the young couple, he remarked that he and his wife had spent a long time waiting for their family to grow and now the time had finally come. Tsawb's father then rose and spoke. He thanked several people in the audience and recalled life in Laos and in Thailand and specific times and events where people had helped one another. His address impressed upon everyone the importance of the bonds that exist through friendship, between family, and within the community. With a stronger voice, he punctuated his thoughts on family and again thanked many of them by name for all they had done and that God had blessed his family and his son and daughter in law with their first child and that God had seen to let his new grandson thrive in his first thirty days of life. With additional words of thanks, Tsawb's father returned to his seat and the deacon again situated himself at the podium.

When the naming ceremony began, the deacon picked up the microphone from its cradle and turned to face Tsawb at the end of the table. He first offered him congratulations on he and his wife attaining their adult, or elder, names. He recalled how Tsawb and his wife had been excited by the prospect of receiving their adult names and that the arrival of their child had finally let them come to this moment.

Tsawb's father then stood back up and along with the deacon, they were handed small glasses of clear, strong traditional Hmong rice liquor. The two men held their glasses towards one another with both hands slightly below eye level. After a few words from the deacon about the man becoming a grandfather, the two

men drank their liquor in a single gulp. The glasses were quickly refilled and the process repeated. After the third glass, the deacon turned back to those in the audience. Tsawb's father then quickly sat down while taking deep breaths. His face held a pleasant smile and was already beginning to show a deeply flushed color. Holding his empty glass, the deacon switched to English and spoke to everyone saying, "If you don't know, you see, this naming, this blessing, this is how we do it. This way, *not the old way*. We make it right in front of everyone. Right in the eyes of God. The old way, they have too many spirits, we believe in the one God, the living God. The others, they have the false Gods."

Another toast was given and another round of liquor was drained. The deacon then invited the pastor of the church to the podium to offer his blessings. The pastor looked around the room and then thanked the deacon and the two couples. He went on to reiterate how long Tsawb and his wife had waited for their child and how happy they seemed now that their renaming ceremony was here. The pastor looked to Tsawb's mother in law and after addressing her he asked what name she had chosen to give Tsawb. In a soft voice she replied, "Nhia Tsawb." The pastor began laughing as he looked at Tsawb and said, "Its a good thing that your mother in law likes you!" at which point the room burst into laughter. As the laughter died down, the pastor again explained that while the act of changing a person's adult name was a traditional Hmong practice and rite of passage, an example could also be found in the Bible. Asking everyone to recall Genesis 17, he began to tell of how God had given Abraham his name, changing it from Abram. He remarked, "You see, by God, in front of God. This is why we do it." Reminding us further he said, "And the mother in law, she has the right to name you. Be good to her and her daughter so you make sure she likes you! Just like Tsawb."

As he finished, my companions whispered something to each other and nearly fell over laughing. When I asked, they explained that with the way things were Thoob was going to be named Paub Zab by his mother in law. Laughing again at the name, Thoob's wife said, "Yeah, based on your past relationship, I can see her naming you that. When I asked them to explain the name, they told me, "It means shit-talker. Someone who talks too much. It translates as Know How to Lie."

The pastor then invited everyone to stand and sing a song of praise and

salvation. The song was sung in Hmong and ushered in a feeling of tranquility across the entire hall. Even those who my companions had pointed out as not being particularly devout or belonging to the church seemed for a moment to be carried away in the spirit of the song. Only myself, and the man next to me mumbled through the words. He was more interested in checking the latest sports scores on his phone and shooing away a child who begged to play with it. A few others who elected not to sing continued to distract themselves with the clamoring and squealing children, and with the bits of paper and baubles from the tables.

With the last verse sung, the hall remained still and the pastor invited the young couple with their child to the front of the room to sit before him. With the women remaining standing behind their chairs, the four male relatives that had sat at the table then stood behind them with their open hands stretched out with their palms down, inches over the couple's heads. The pastor had positioned himself to do the same over the child. Closing his eyes, everyone bowed their heads and the pastor began to ask God and Christ to bless and protect the child. At the end of the blessing, Tsawb rose and thanked everyone for coming. He specifically thanked his wife and his immediate and extended family for their devotion, support, and love. When Tsawb had finished, his father rose and he called upon several in attendance by name who he had known in Laos to be thanked for their help and support over the years. He then turned and thanked his son and daughter in law for bringing his grandson into the world and for growing their family. Lastly he thanked everyone who had made everything that day possible by coming together by contributing their time, cooking food, and for attending to acknowledge this special occasion.

Stepping again to the front, the pastor introduced Tsawb as Nhia Tsawb and called on everyone to recognize his new name and that of his wife, Niam Nhia Tsawb. He then gestured towards the young mother with her son and asked everyone to welcome the boy as a member of the family and as a new member of the church and of the community. Finally the pastor bowed his head and everyone began to recite a prayer. When the prayer had finished, everyone remained standing with their heads bowed and the pastor offered a final blessing and prayer for the family and for everyone in the hall, ending with a call of remembrance for a woman in the church who had passed two weeks before in a tragic accident and asked that

people find the strength to help that family in their time of need over the coming weeks. And as the prayer ended, the hall was filled with the noise of shuffling chairs, people beginning conversations, offering their congratulations, laughing and smiling, passing children between them, and making their way to the long tables of food laid out as a celebratory feast at the far end.

This *puv hli* speaks directly to the numerous issues of entanglement that I have raised throughout this thesis. Returning to the feminist arguments surrounding reproduction discussed in the literature review, matters of reproduction extend well beyond the confines of the biological and encompass numerous overlapping and interconnected strands found throughout the social and cultural domains of societies. This thesis has examined the nature of Hmong sociality, religious life, and approaches to reproductive health and practices and the *puv hli* seen here speaks to these different subjects and issues therein.

To begin with, the child being brought into the world and presented to the community displays a renewal of the Hmong life cycle. While this *puv hli* is within a Christian context, the child represents an opportunity for the continuation of a Christian Hmong perspective of the world. As part of the congregation, it is expected that the parents will raise the child within the community of the church and will pass on the Christian teachings that are at the foundation of the community. Moreover, through these teachings, the child will continue to develop their inner moral dialogues which will inform their understanding of the self and their self awareness while negotiating the expectations of social norms. As we have seen, these social norms are constructed through an understanding of traditional approaches to family, relatedness, and gender, but these perspectives are compounded by the experiences of those in the community and the changing nature of Hmong life through generational acculturation and a widening generational gap. However, the emphasis on these matters has remained crucial to shaping the contours of the Hmong experience.

Looking at the deacon's address, he notes how long the couple has waited to have a family of their own and how happy the couple's parents are now that the child has arrived. Within this, there are the anxieties of wanting family and the relief that family has been made. As Tsawb's father thanks the couple for expanding the

family, there are hints of the desire for continuity and a legacy for the family and their understanding of life that is distinctly informed by his Christian moral and ethical beliefs and by a Christian ontological understanding that he has accepted. To this point, his actions reiterate his expectations that through this new generation, a Hmong Christian ontological perspective and pattern of belief will continue, further distancing not only his new grandson, but the community from its roots of traditional practice.

Standing before all those in attendance, Tsawb and his family are proclaiming their devotion to a Christian God and are celebrating their identity as Christians for all to see. In doing so, there is a renewal of their identities through the acknowledgement of others and a symbolic reproduction of this identity through Tsawb's new son as he is presented as a new member of the family, the church, and its community. The deacon accusing those following traditional practices of worshipping false gods called for further acknowledgement and validation of their own Christian faith. The non-Christians shrugged the comment off and continued to celebrate the reason for being there, family. However, the point was made, there was a recitation, a renewal of identity at work that speaks to the contentious lines of spiritual practice and social division. Even so, the importance of family is evident as the traditional practitioners within Tsawb's extended family have been welcomed by Tsawb and have offered their own blessings and well wishes.

While some Hmong Christians have expressed a willingness to accept the traditional practices of others, some retain a vehement stance of disassociation from traditional life out of fear and also from a judgmental standpoint of what they feel is evil within their own understanding of Christian discourse. In the case of the *puv hli*, the traditional practitioners were there for family and spiritual debates remained secondary to the ceremony.

Had this been a traditional *puv hli*, such as the one in Chapter 4, it would have been understood that the child had made it through their first thirty days of life and that the soul of the child was firmly situated and it was time to give thanks to the spirits who had watched over the child and to the mythical couple who had delivered the child. In much the same way, the public displays of identity and practice would facilitate a renewal of traditional views and the potential for the reproduction of

practice through the new generation. Additionally, a child's soul calling, *hu plig*, and the *puv hli* represents the renewal of the Hmong life cycle in a very different way than that we see with the Christian *puv hli*. Here, a soul had been called from the spiritual beyond that had once been someone else. That person had lived their life and at death, had returned to the spirit world, only to be called back for this child. The cyclical nature of the traditional Hmong world is built around the idea of renewal and a perpetuation of being Hmong. These things are there to be reproduced in order to foster a Hmong continuity through future generations.

During the *puv hli* the pastor explained the reasons behind why Tsawb was changing his name. Tsawb and his wife had made the decision to ask for their adult names with the birth of their child and so while they celebrated their child's *puv hli*, they also had their own name changing ceremony, *tis npe laus*. Having the child represented a life changing transition for Tsawb and his wife as they would now be considered full adults by the rest of the community. The pastor's explanation explained the practice of *tis npe laus* through a biblical context that validates their understanding. It was an action sanctioned by God that gave them a new identity and a new role in the community. Through a traditional lens, the *tis npe laus* marked the transition to adulthood for the acknowledgement of the community and to give the person the right to be taken seriously as an adult member of the community. While both approaches stem from different understandings, the intent of the practice marks a transition to adulthood that renews their respective communities. For the Christian community, a justification for the practice offers further separation from traditional practices and supplements their own perspectives of life.

As we saw, social life within the Denver Hmong community incorporates a strategy of mutual dependence that encourages interaction among and between families and individuals and through *tis npe laus*, new adults who can contribute and maintain the networks of dependence are added, and through their children the population of the community is bolstered. While my companion's pessimistic view of many of those in attendance was meant to vent their frustration at perceiving people taking advantage of the community's resources, there was more to it than that. The village had come together through family networks and through clan associations in recognition of the couple and to bear witness to the child being

presented and accepted as part of the community. Most had either donated their time and resources, and others had given money and presents for the young couple while conveying their blessings.

This process of interconnection has been maintained and permeates Hmong life. It is a strategy that continues to manage risk and in so doing, new generations have been presented with educational and social opportunities not afforded to their predecessors. And for many, these strategies offer a means of increasing their economic and social affluence that stands in marked contrast to their parents and to their previous lives in the highlands of Laos and the refugee camps of Thailand.

Through the life and death cycles of the Hmong, the support of the village and reliance on social and familial relationships plays a critical role within the processes of funerals, *puv hli*, and weddings. In doing so, an image of continuity emerges which further defines and marshals the contours of Hmong life so as to reproduce what it is to belong and to be Hmong. From a generational perspective, older generations these events mark a remembrance of previous traditions and ways of life that are then presented to the younger generations with the expectation and understanding that knowledge and practice is being passed on and reproduced. However, as we observed through the different ethnographic situations there are different interpretations of past ways and different associations with traditional viewpoints that represent differing ideals, different perceptions and associations of knowledge and practice, and differing spiritual and religious views that shape expectations and the relationship that people have with these matters. And while the detailed practices and occurrences within these events provide grounds for contesting views of what is right and what constitutes proper behavior and interaction, the core spirit of these practices continue to be maintained and reproduced in whole or in part by younger generations, influenced by their own experiences, and through those who still attempt to convey or understand meaning within the wider context of Hmong practices.

The extensive reliance on social networks of support come through in the *puv hli* as people pooled their resources to make the event possible. The carefree manner in which the grandmothers exchanged children speaks to the trust and to the bonds that exist within the imagined village. By setting an example of what they feel is

proper or acceptable interaction, they are telling others that this is how Hmong life is conducted and that matters of relatedness are broadened to show the importance of the extended families and the connections between other extended families, and to understand these connections as critical points which people can depend on. These continued practices of Hmong sociality represent the solidarity and cohesiveness of groups within the Hmong community and between those within the whole of the Hmong community.

The *puv hli* also addresses matters of gender. Over the course of the celebration, the deacon, the pastor, Tsawb, and Tsawb's father spoke while the women remained seated. This displays the emphasis on the continuance of the patriarchal household and the importance of men speaking for their families and projecting their masculinity. However, Tsawb's mother in law being called upon to rename Tsawb reveals a degree of power given to women. As the pastor pointed out, Tsawb was lucky that his mother in law liked him. Had there been issues between them, she held the right to mark him in the eyes of the community with whichever name satisfied her. In addition to this, within this dynamic, gender is being performed and replicated. The women have accepted the situation and the men have accepted the responsibilities of them. Tsawb's wife sat at the table cradling their child, displaying to everyone her understanding of motherhood and femininity.

As we have seen, ideas of gender are derived from traditional perspectives but have been further shaped and contested by generational experiences. In this case, Tsawb and his wife are devoted to their faith and have chosen to perform what they felt were proper displays of gender and reflect these choices through their identity within the community; Tsawb as the head of the household and Niam Tsawb as the dutiful wife and mother who gave Tsawb a son. For Tsawb's wife, the *puv hli* marked the end of her postpartum seclusion, further signifying her willingness to adhere to traditional practices regarding women's health.

That said, the *puv hli* touches on matters of health and wellbeing. As the pastor and the family laid their hands over the head of the child and prayed, their prayers asked for the child's continued protection and also for the child's spiritual protection. Going back to Hmong approaches to health and healing, the maintenance of the soul is of critical importance. The body and soul must be in a copacetic state

to ensure the overall health of the individual. While this is arguably more complex from a traditional standpoint, the Christian community has continued to accept the same symbiotic principle concerning health.

The purpose of this thesis has been to examine Hmong reproduction beyond matters of biological reproduction. Reaching again to the feminist perspectives of reproduction, through all of these matters resides an entanglement of principles, perspectives, and shared experiences. As spiritual and religious beliefs and views are reproduced, the meanings of family and community are also born out; as family is reproduced, so too are spiritual identities, understandings, divisions, and debates. Biologically speaking, new babies mean new chances for reproducing what matters. In addition to this, new life presents new opportunities to challenge what will be reproduced and who will reproduce what.

We have been able to observe and explore the foundations of the Hmong in the US through constructions of relatedness and community, the processes, emergence, and experience of family, and through the meanings and contexts of spiritual practices, wherein are found the construction and performance of the moral self. We have also explored the interplay of these forces, which guide Hmong attitudes towards health and healing, and which inform approaches to matters of biological reproduction. And from this apposition of forces, matters of gender and generation emerge to generate and shape new concepts of being Hmong while constructing and nurturing new visions of a Hmong continuity and meanings of community. Through all of this, insights into the Hmong community offer compelling evidence for anthropological debate and provide grounds for theoretical developments of entanglement.

In closing, the Hmong display the extensive and encompassing nature of reproduction through the overlapping and intertwined matters of the spiritual, the symbolic, and the social as they come together to make a child, to make the person. And through the making of that child, the very being of what it is to be Hmong found within the depths of these different conceptual fields, coalesces to reveal the makings of a village.

Conclusion

As I noted at the end of the last chapter, the essence of the thesis has been to explore matters of reproduction in the Denver Hmong community. Through each chapter we have been able to observe the means by which the community has worked to reproduce being Hmong while confronting the struggle to maintain and ensure a Hmong continuity across multiple generations. As noted in the introduction's literature review, works by feminist scholars have sought to explore issues concerning reproduction well beyond the confines of the biological, and this thesis has followed the spirit of that work by examining the dynamic, and at times conflicting, reproduction of the social, the spiritual and symbolic, and the biological.

The different life stories presented in this work have been drawn from deep rooted histories and personal experiences that span time in Laos, Thailand, and the US. It is through these histories that we are able to observe the difficulties of transition and the triumphs and failings of adaptation by the Hmong in the US. In regards to reproducing the social, we can return to Chapters 1 and 2 wherein the Denver Hmong community drew upon traditional social frameworks. Here, the community had continued to rely on the networks of family, extended family and community, and through these networks was able to recreate social structures akin to the villages they had known in Laos and Thailand. Most importantly these systems of relation and connection facilitated the maintenance of a strategy of mutual reliance where individuals and families were able to call upon one another for assistance and support, socially, spiritually, and financially. Chapter 2 has explored these networks in greater detail by examining the structure and the role of family as it has been reproduced in Denver. Of particular note is the role of *hais plaub* which helps marshal the actions of family, community, and notions of belonging.

These themes of social reproduction carry over into subsequent chapters, notably Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3 the church has provided a space through which the idea of the despatialised village presented in Chapter 1 can be observed while the funeral in Chapter 4 reveals the importance of reproduced social structures and connections as family, extended family, and community come together spiritually, socially, and financially over the death of Niam Xyoob. And while these chapters touch on matters of social reproduction, they also further demonstrate the

means by which the community has worked to reproduce the symbolic. While in ontological conflict with one another, traditional practitioners and the Christian community contribute to the development and maintenance of each other's identities. This is readily observable through the *puv hli* ceremony in Chapter 6 wherein Hmong Christians assert their symbolic identity as Christians relative to traditional practices and perspectives. It is also through the *puv hli* that a reproduction and reinforcement of the social, as well as what it means to be Hmong, emerges through the gathering of the church and through the introduction of new life into the community.

Furthermore, in regards to biological reproduction, Chapter 5 draws on the preceding chapters in an effort to understand the construction of the self as it relates to the care of the self, health, and medicine. Despite their ontological and spiritual conflicts, both Christians and traditional practitioners draw on a rich history of Hmong approaches to health and healing that is influenced by their respective understandings of the symbiotic relationships of the body and soul. Through different perspectives of the body and their engagement with traditional medicine, the Hmong of Denver have addressed concerns of biological reproduction. Here we have been able to observe concerns over fertility and health, as well as a desire to understand the body and to reproduce a Hmong understanding of family.

Finally, while it is important to note the ongoing dynamics and presence of these forms of reproduction, it is equally critical that we acknowledge that the Hmong draw from experiences and practices of the past to inform the present, and that they are also influenced by outside forces in the wider cosmopolitan life of the US.

In sum we may conclude that the Hmong of Denver have exhibited an ongoing effort to reproduce the tenets of Hmong life as drawn from their understanding of the past, their personal experiences of the past and the present, and varying outlooks for the future. This has been facilitated through meticulous attention to matters of reproduction of the social, the symbolic and spiritual, and the biological which speak not only to the community's resilience and adaptation, but also to Hmong studies as a whole and to key theoretical issues involving feminist perspectives, the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of Christianity, medical anthropology,

and matters of gender and kinship.

Contributions to Existing Literature

While this work has explored the Denver Hmong community, as noted before there are themes and points throughout the thesis that offer potential contributions to existing bodies of literature. Most notably, this thesis speaks to studies of the Hmong in the US. As I put forth in my overview of transnational connections and in the literature review, the bulk of the literature pertaining to the Hmong has focused on the larger populations in the US. While these works are of great value to Hmong studies, they are written in a manner that is presumptive of life in marginal communities and attempt to speak for the totality of the Hmong American experience. This work provides a point of comparison through which future research will be able to reveal the nuances of difference and adaptation in sociality, spiritual life, and medicine that marks a wider reaching Hmong experience.

As I noted in the introduction of this conclusion, the issues of reproduction that we have been able to observe speak directly to the merits of key issues raised by feminist scholars such as those of Martin (1987), Strathern (1992), Reiter (1999), Franklin and Ragon (1998), Carsten (2000), Rapp (2001), and Inhorn (2006). Their arguments reveal that reproduction extends into other domains, such as the social, institutional, and the political, while also speaking to issues of family, belonging, and matters of identity. To this point, this thesis addresses and reinforces the idea of reproduction moving beyond the biological and demonstrates that reproduction is situated at the core of spiritual practices and ontological views, family, personhood, and the struggle of a Hmong continuity.

As much as this thesis has been concerned with reproduction, the work also addresses key topics in the anthropology of religion, most notably that of the anthropology of Christianity. Here I have engaged with current discussions surrounding the anthropology of Christianity and have specifically challenged the ideas involving conversion and issues of world making and world breaking as put forth by Robbins (2004a, 2004b, 2007a, 2011a, and 2011b). In doing so the processes by which communities experience conversion can be further examined through what Chua (2012) has posited as a native exegesis and which accounts for

community efforts to create their futures, maintain their identities, and their connections to the past. Additionally my examination of traditional Hmong spirituality offers a chance to contribute to the discourse of Hmong shamanic practice and ontology, as well as to central issues surrounding animism and shamanism in anthropology by speaking to discussions concerning ontological alterity and the experience of animistic perspectives. Furthermore, this research addresses the critical role spiritual and religious life plays in the formation of understanding the body and the self in relation to medical practices, health, and healing.

Medical Pluralism and Medical Synthesis

An additional body of literature of concern in this thesis is that of medical pluralist arguments. During the literature review in the introductory chapter and at the beginning of Chapter 5, I critiqued approaches to medical pluralism as applied to the Hmong American experience and I suggested an alternative means of understanding Hmong medical issues through a theoretical concept I termed medical synthesis. It is on this subject that I now wish to reflect. As I pointed out in the introduction and Chapter 5, the arguments put forth concerning medical pluralism were done so in a manner which positions traditional Hmong medicine against Western bio-medicine as a disparate practice. While this was certainly the case for newly arrived Hmong and has been an ongoing issue in the community, it is troublesome in that examinations of the Hmong and their interactions with Western bio-medicine remain rooted in the ethnographic present of these works and subsequent works have not attempted to address Hmong attitudes or experiences with medicine beyond these initial assessments, particularly given the 40 years of experience since their arrival.

With this in mind, the medical practices of the Hmong can indeed be categorised as pluralist in nature, as they draw from two traditions, and there are certainly tragic cases of misunderstanding with devastating results. However, I posit that the category and analysis of medical pluralism is itself a privilege of the clinic and of academics, and not something the Hmong would readily recognise. By a privileged perspective I mean to suggest that the works are constructed around an

understanding and acceptance of a Western bio-medical positivism and way of knowing and constructing knowledge that defines the nature of the clinic and which is pervasive in Western medical thinking. Within the essays that constitute The Normal and the Pathological, Canguilhem (1989) presents us with an image of the clinic as an institution which has moved to dehumanise and depersonalise medicine and its administration and practice by creating a unified, blanketed approach to addressing matters and categorisations of health and healing from within the clinic's own purview. Here I would argue that the clinic's position further draws forth an understanding that there is only one way, an empirical scientific biological way, of knowing the body.

Considering this, within the pluralistic theoretical stance from the view of the clinic, particularly evident in works involving the Hmong, disparate approaches to medical practices and health are seen as being in perpetual conflict, with traditional approaches at best being seen as pragmatic and wishful, and at worst deemed superstitious, nonsensical, combative, and at times dangerous to patients. To be more specific, while it acknowledges the existence of alternative approaches to health and healing, the clinic has provided us with what I perceive to be a top-down view of addressing medical pluralism, favouring the means by which the clinic constructs its knowledge and categorisation of diagnosis and treatment. In this, the clinic becomes the dominant voice of health and understanding health matters while in discourse and practice, alternative or traditional cultural approaches to health and healing come to be the subaltern.

My purpose is not to supplant Western bio-medical progress or scientific research, nor do I mean to discount issues of medical pluralism or pragmatism, rather I mean to suggest that greater understanding can be obtained through an appreciation of how notions of efficacy and understanding of treatment are formulated from the end user, or patient, up; A grassroots re-humanising of medical analysis that attempts to account for alternative compositions of the self, understandings of the body, and how the patient perceives health, healing, and wellbeing and which realises that the use of multiple medical practices is not always in conflict. To clarify further, an acknowledgement of the means by which people have made, or synthesised, their own understanding of treatment and efficacy as it is drawn from multiple systems

that are understood as being complimentary to one another rather than disparate, and which together comprise what can be understood as a medical practice unique to themselves or their group. Going back to the examples of Ka Gua and Fua in Chapter 5, there is evidence of synthesis in that they both accept the validity of traditional and Western bio-medicine. For them, there is no conflict, rather there is the formation of a medical approach which fully addresses their concerns and which fulfills their understanding of health, healing, and wellbeing.

What I have attempted to show in portions of this thesis, is that ultimately, in the case of the Hmong, understanding and engaging with medicine and health issues is drawn from their experiences and perceptions of the past and the present which is rooted in different traditions with different understandings of the self and body emerging through secular and spiritual ontological means, only to arrive at a synthesis of medical practice that directly informs their understanding of what is efficacious without the need of the clinic's input. In this, we can perhaps see the formation of something greater than one means of practice or the conflict of practice, and consider the implications of an emergent medical gestalt.

With that said, there is room to consider the deployment of such a view through academic discourse as well as through institutional discourse and practice. Additionally, what I have suggested is not without problems as the Hmong have at times displayed points of contradiction and inconsistencies in their understanding of spiritual life and matters of health. However, I feel this perspective warrants additional exploration and research to further substantiate these premises and to potentially contribute to our understanding of medical pluralism and to develop a greater appreciation of the medical other.

Issues of Gender

In addition to what I have discussed above, I also wish to address matters of gender as presented throughout this thesis. Within the study of human social and biological reproduction, gender and sex are undoubtedly situated as critical components. In the literature review I went on to highlight several works directed towards gender with the intent of addressing notions and constructions of gender throughout the thesis, most notably I remarked on the performative nature of gender

as seen through the works of Kapchan (1995) and Morris (1995) while also acknowledging the social constructions of gender brought forth by Butler (1999).

Upon reflection, while represented to some degree, the subject is deserving of deeper investigation and analysis. Of significant importance is the formation of gender as a concept within the Hmong community and how gendered identities, particularly those formed through the interactions of traditional notions of gender and the presence of contemporary US masculinities and emergent feminist voices and discourse, inform an understanding of present Hmong experience in relation to matters of reproduction as explored throughout the thesis, inclusive of reproducing the self. As a clear example, this thesis began with a situation where constructions and understandings of gender were critical elements at play in matters of reproduction, specifically seen in Ka Gua's situation as she was confronted with challenges to control her body and her reproductive choices. Here, further examination of gender constructions and issues would have allowed for greater explanation of matters of relatedness, family, spirituality, identity, personhood, and the motivations to reproduce or not reproduce.

Chapter 2 has attempted to address issues of gender within the Hmong family. However, the view of gender is one of a masculine perspective in that it takes into greater account the voices of male concern and expectation rather than addressing the underlying issues as seen from a female point of view. Moreover, this approach extends to other areas of the thesis in regards to understanding traditional points of view as they have been largely drawn from those who are accepting of an intense patrilineal social system and family structure. At other points, female perspectives on matters of reproduction, notably in Chapter 5, could have been strengthened through a more thorough examination and explanation of gender construction. Addressing these issues more directly would have allowed for an opportunity to openly speak to issues of access, inclusion and exclusion, as well as potentially offering more meaningful contributions to academic discourse, specifically in regards to gender operating as a driving force behind or against reproduction among Southeast Asian peoples in diaspora.

As a point of reflection, I also see ways in which this work can be used in future research as a point of reference. By this I mean to suggest that the central

issue of reproduction can be of value to future questions of what it means to be a contemporary Hmong woman or man and how these constructions speak to issues of traditional expectations involving family and society, as well as exploring the construction and care of the self. What I also see as significant is that issues of gender I have presented speak wholly to heteronormative expectations. From this stance there is clearly an opportunity to address matters of gender in the Hmong LGBT community and the formation of relationships and families beyond traditional expectations. Finally, it is a starting point from which to further question the contributions and impact of these dimensions of gender to the wider communities in the Hmong diaspora and within transnational domains.

Future Directions

This examination of the Hmong of Denver has revealed the means by which different domains of reproduction contribute to, and inform, an understanding and continuity of Hmong and Hmong American ways of living and being. This thesis marks an original contribution to discourse concerning the Hmong in that it has examined issues of reproduction within a marginal Hmong community. In this, this work provides a starting point from which to develop comparative studies of Hmong communities that challenge a homogenised view of the Hmong in the US as well as contributing to dialogue concerning transnational issues and the Hmong diaspora.

Additionally, this work has presented an opportunity to further explore issues of medical engagement, matters of gender, animism, and spirituality and religious life. Finally, while I intend to continue to explore matters of medical pluralism and synthesis, I am also intent on establishing future research concerned with investigating issues of *hais plaub* and its connections to matters of kinship, gender, and ethics, as well as its place in Hmong governance locally and in diaspora.

In closing we may conclude that while there is a generational struggle which exists between the young and old, both are concerned with ways of reproducing and defining what it means to be Hmong, what it will mean to be Hmong in the future, and how a Hmong continuity should be shaped, understood, expressed, and experienced.

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