

Awareness of Hmong Religious Practices and Rituals

In Regards to Counseling Hmong Students

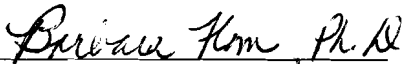
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ABSTRACT

This literature review is the final product required for the Guidance and Counseling Masters program at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. The following three chapters will include a qualitative review of the literature on traditional Hmong and Hmong Christians, Hmong religions (specifically animism/ancestral worship and Christianity), how these religions impact the Hmong culture, and ways to counsel Hmong students in both religions. This qualitative review provides information about the Hmong peoples' history, and it promotes an understanding of Hmong religion, Hmong culture, and how to counsel Hmong students in both religions. Such an understanding will help build an awareness of religions the Hmong practice and what techniques and tools are important to properly counsel Hmong students.

This review will also address the differences and similarities of the two dominating religions and how the Hmong have incorporated it into their lives. Overall,

this review advocates for an awareness of the Hmong religion and the appropriate counseling required to best meet the needs of the Hmong students in both religions.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

The Hmong are mountain people who lived in small villages in Laos. The earliest recorded homeland of the Hmong was in China (Yang, 2002). The Chinese referred to the Hmong as *Miao*. This term was also used by Laotian and Vietnamese people as well, but the spelling of the name may vary amongst them. According to Yang (2002), *miao* means “tender blades of grass or sprout” (p. 31). Yang (2002) also discussed the Chinese character for the Hmong people, 𠵼, and how it has two meanings. The first character, 𠵼, refers to a farm or field. The second character, 𠵼, refers to the rice sprouts that emerged from the farm. Yang (2002) went even further with these characters to make this picture, 𠵼, which clearly shows a rice field. Hmong in Southwestern China and those in Southeast Asia still use the phrase *tub liaj tub teb*, which means “the sons of the farm and the land” (Yang, 2002). Historically, the Hmong are associated with agriculture, most importantly rice (Yang, 2002).

Hmong researchers Lee and Pfeifer (2005) explained that during the Han Chinese expansion in 300 B.C., Han Chinese forced the Hmong southward into the forested areas of China. Their homes and lands were taken by the Han Chinese and their government was demolished as well. Then, in the 1800-1820, the Han Chinese forced the Hmong even further south towards Laos, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and South and North Vietnam. Laos was the nation that most of the Hmong people settled due to the richness of resources and the adaptability of the land.

From 1963-1975 the Vietnam War relocated a lot of the Hmong. The U.S. Secret Army helped the Hmong people flee to Laos and Thailand as refugees. The most well-known Hmong veteran during this time was General Vang Pao. He was the first

American-recruited Hmong CIA personnel officer who led and guided Hmong soldiers in many military regions. The Hmong were supportive of this war because of the arrangement General Vang Pao helped make between the Hmong people and the American CIA. When Hmong soldiers were recruited, they patrolled the local villages and the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

From 1976 to the present, Hmong refugees emigrated from Asia to many countries such as the U.S., France, Australia, and more. However, some remained in refugee camps, such as Wat Tham Krabok. After residing in these camps for years, many Hmong Americans began to wonder what was happening. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2007, federal prosecutors arrested General Vang Pao and nine others for purchasing an estimated 10million dollars worth of guns, missiles and explosives to overthrow the Laotian government (Not-so-secret war, 2007, p. 1). This is currently a major topic of concern, because there are still Hmong refugees living in the jungles of Laos fighting against the Laotian government. The war for the Hmong has never ended, even though it has been over thirty-years.

The Hmong people went through tragic events such as persecution and war. The Hmong culture is oral where written documents cannot be found historically (Cha, 2003). Being overrun by other ethnic groups consistently, they never had a homeland to feel safe. A tragic time period such as the Vietnam War changed many lives. War stories were told by Hmong elders about how they had to poison their infant during the war to avoid being heard by the Vietcong soldiers. The Vietnam War changed many things for the Hmong people, such as immigrating to other countries to avoid persecution, experiencing broken and lost family members, and suffering in terms of overall mental

health of many families. Times such as these challenged the survival of the Hmong group and their faith to live. There must have been some support or some form of motivation that pushed and motivated the Hmong survivors to continue living and to continue to move forward. The Hmong people are a surviving group. Whether it is praying to ancestors or to a god, relying on a religion, the Hmong held onto something.

Hmong researcher, Thao (1999) stated that traditional Hmong are animists when it comes to their practice of religion. Animism refers to a belief in souls (Wikipedia, 2007). This religion believes that there are individual souls in all living matter, from plants to animals. When the plant or animal is dead, their soul leaves the physical body form it inhabited. This religion also believes in the involvement of spirits in the real-world.

With animism, Vang (1998) added onto this understanding that the Hmong also practice ancestral worship. There are Hmong shamans who practice ancestral worship, but not all Hmong people do. A shaman practices shamanism. Often times, the Hmong may be misunderstood as practicing shamanism as a religion. The distinction here is that only shamans can practice shamanism, and traditional Hmong practice animism and ancestral worship.

Shamanism is a practice of communicating with the spirit from within the shaman and the spirits in the spirit world. Shamans also have the abilities to heal the sick and predict the future. Thao (1999) stated that within the Hmong, shamanism may have originated in Mongolia. Traditional Hmong believe that ancestral spirits will come and ask the living family members for things such as money, food, and direction. Since the

living cannot directly contact or communicate with the spirits, shamans are used to form this connection between the spiritual world and the living world.

Although animism and ancestral worship are important to the Hmong, so is Christianity. For this paper, this group of Hmong people will be referred to as the Hmong Christians. Christianity is another religion that many Hmong have learned to practice. The Hmong were exposed to Christianity in 1950 through Rev. and Mrs. Ted Andrianoff (Hmong District, 2007). They arrived in Xieng Khouang, Laos, where they led the first Hmong person in the town to accept Christ. The name of the first Hmong Christian was not mentioned, but he began to evangelize to his people. Thao (1999) stated that most Hmong Christians continue to practice some form of traditional Hmong practices due to respect to elders and to honor the elders who had not converted. This shows the traditional Hmong traits of ancestral worship while questioning the rules of another religion.

The practice of a religion is part of Hmong families. The family religion is passed down from ancestors and elders to the younger generations; however, religious practice can change. Clan and lineage variations can influence religious practices and rituals. For example, imagine the Hmong daughter from a Christian family marrying into a non-Christian family. A traditional Hmong daughter should leave her immediate family and everything they practice when she marries her husband. Both families have different practices and both families have rituals that are vital to their identity and family heritage. The daughter has to follow and abide by the practices and rituals of her new family because she is part of their clan. When she is part of her husband's clan, her original clan has to be given up. This is where the differences in both religions can become sensitive.

In the school setting, counselors working with Hmong students may encounter situations such as this where family can impact the decisions of Hmong students. This may influence their academic achievement and behaviors in the school, causing problems with classmates, friends, family, and teachers.

Researchers commonly state that the success of Hmong students living in America experiencing mainstream education and the balancing of cultures will depend on their parents and how much support they will provide for their children (Lor, 1998; Vang, 1992; Vang, 2004-05; Xiong, 1999). This theme in research implies that Hmong parents need to support their children in obtaining an education. Hmong children are the foundation for the future of the Hmong living in the United States and in other countries. When Hmong parents started to arrive in the U.S., limited information was noted on how well prepared and educated they were in regards to American values, languages, customs and expectations. With this, schools needed to take action in learning about the Hmong culture, the religions and cultures they practice, the roles and responsibilities of child to parent relationships, and how to communicate properly with Hmong students and their parents (Crevier, 2002). Hmong students may encounter more difficulty and problems in mainstream schools than most other immigrant groups due having a culture that historically did not depend on written documents (Cha, 2003; Crevier, 2002).

Religion is a sensitive topic when it comes to working with students in a public school. The separation of church and state is a controversial subject. Public schools are allowed to teach about religions and varying world views about it; however, public schools are not allowed to place an emphasis on just one religion and exclude the rest. School counselors should always be aware of their ethics. Based on the American School

Counselor Association (2004) Ethical Standard E.2. *Diversity*, the professional counselor acquires the education and consultation to increase their effectiveness in working with students regarding the topic of religion. If the counselor does not know how to help a Hmong student from a Christian or from traditional family, the counselor should refer the student to another source or consult with other professionals who could benefit the student more. Counselors should do some research to better meet the needs of the student, but continue to be aware of the limits of their ethical obligations.

### *Statement of the Problem*

There are differences between traditional Hmong and Hmong Christians. Both groups are divided by religion, which causes them both to practice different sub-cultures within the Hmong culture. This may cause cultural and religious challenges for both groups. Knowing these similarities and differences between the two groups may help counselors better assist and understand Hmong students from either group.

This research is intended to add to the research on Hmong studies, specifically traditional Hmong and Hmong Christians. The research is also intended to compile continuing research on assisting Hmong student in education. The purpose of this qualitative literature review is to increase school counselors' awareness of religion for Hmong students whose beliefs are either Christian or traditional and to understand how to best meet the needs of Hmong students who believe in either faith. After analyzing the literature, the researcher will make recommendations for counselors to work more effectively with Hmong students in both groups. The review will consist of viewing the literature on Hmong history to find similarities and differences between the two religious

groups, the adjustment of Hmong students in K-12 and beyond, and appropriate ways to meet the needs of Hmong students in both religions.

### *Research Objectives*

This qualitative review has the following objectives:

1. To increase counselors' awareness of both Hmong culture and Hmong religions.
2. To compile and critique the current research about Hmong Christians and traditional Hmong.
3. To compile and critique onto the research on counseling Hmong students in educational settings.

### *Definition of Terms*

The following terms have been defined for clarity of understanding:

*Culture.* How individuals and groups look at how the world function. The patterns of behaviors and common traits, the portrayal of arts, the practices of religious beliefs, and all the other ways of how the world is viewed.

*Dab Pog.* Grandparent couple. Also known as, *Puj Saub Yawm Saub.*

*General Vang Pao.* Hmong leader.

*Ntxwj Nyooog.* Creator of death. Devil.

*Puj Saub Yawm Saub.* Beings who are believed to have created the world and the universe. This male and female pair is the Hmong gods. They are the gods of the world of light. Grandparent couple. Also known as *Dab Pog.*

*Shamanism.* A practice of communicating with the spirit world along with the abilities to heal the sick.

*Siv Yis.* A powerful Hmong Shaman.

*Yajceeb.* World of Light.

*Yeebceeb.* World of Darkness.

#### *Assumptions of the Study*

For the purpose of this qualitative review, the following assumptions are made: The published information is the most helpful, but it will not fully cover the objectives. Other information sources are credible even though they all may not be from a published peer-reviewed journal. The history information in particular is credible, with acknowledgement that the Hmong history is oral. Lastly, the studies that were explained rely on the accuracy of the interpreters.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

For the purpose of this qualitative review, the following limitations are made: The researcher may be biased regarding the information provided. Most of the information presented in this review is known within the Hmong community and the researcher is a member of this community. Also there are not many research studies done on proper counseling techniques for Hmong students overall. Finally, most of the Hmong history was oral; therefore there is less documentation on Hmong history of religion.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

This research will begin with a discussion about shamanism. After this, a history of how traditional Hmong have incorporated animism and ancestral worship will be discussed. Next, the researcher will discuss Christianity and how this religion is impacting the Hmong. Then the researcher will discuss the similarities and differences among the two religions within the Hmong. Lastly, the researcher will discuss the findings on academic achievement of Hmong students.

### *Shamanism*

Researcher Yang (2003) stated, "Traditional Hmong shamans are the world's oldest professionals" (p.9). Shamans are found in many aspects of the world. Yang (2003) mentioned that Native American, Chinese, and Korean shamanic practices all share the common practice of healing the sick and communicating with the spirit world. Similar to a medical doctor, a Hmong shaman can diagnose patients and can remove their sickness to heal them. Shamans recommend herbs, medicine, and spiritual practices that will improve the health of an individual. Hmong history researchers, Lee and Pfeifer (2005), estimated that 70% of the total Hmong population practice animism and ancestral worship, while the rest of the Hmong practice Christianity. Traditional Hmong believe that the spiritual world coexists with the physical world (Lee & Pfeifer, 2005). Shaman Es Yang stated that the shaman's purpose is to "help others," (Yang, personal communication, 2007).

Plotnikoff, Numerich, Wu, Yang, and Xiong (2002) compiled the following as shaman roles when it comes to healing practices:

- A traditional healer who can diagnose and treat spiritual illnesses,

- Called or chosen for this role by spiritual forces,
- Granted authority as a healer by the Traditional Hmong community,
- Selected by patients as the result of a shaman-calling ceremony,
- Receives all knowledge and wisdom for this role from the spiritual dimension,
- Conducts healing ceremonies at great risk of personal harm with no expectations of reimbursement,
- Serves people of all ages and both genders with wide-ranging symptoms perceived as spiritual illnesses including stress, depression, schizophrenia, fainting, breathing problems, and infertility,
- And refers to physicians and is open to partnerships with physicians in Hmong patient care (p. 30).

Shamanism is not a religion the Hmong practice. Shamans are selected and chosen by the spirits in the spirit world (Pfaff, 1995). Through discussion with Shaman Es, “shamanism is not a religious practice – you don’t worship it. The only person who practices shamanism is the shaman.” Es goes on to also state his definition of shamanism, “Loosely defined, Shamanism is merely some sort of practice that incorporates the spiritual world. You can further develop it or connect it to animists, but that too is a different thing...shamanism is a way of life that I need to live in order to help others who seek spiritual aide...It is not preached, it is not advertised, and so you don’t spread the word to others” (Yang, personal communication, 2007). From this discussion, it is important to acknowledge that not all traditional Hmong members practice shamanism. Only traditional Hmong members that are called to be shamans by their spirit or other spirits can be shamans and practice shamanism.

The traditional Hmong family may have specific needs from the shaman. The specific shaman rituals are: *Ua neej kos*, *Ua neej saib*, and *Ua neej koj ntuj plig*. A member of the traditional Hmong family has to take the initiative to ask the shaman for these shaman rituals.

*Ua neej kos* is one of the specific shaman practices. *Ua neej kos* is when the shaman goes into the spirit world to inspect the person's spirit to heal the person's physical body. There are two types of *ua neej kos*. The first type of *ua neej kos* is for minor healing. For example, if someone has been having bad back-aches, the shaman would perform this type of *ua neej*. The shaman can most likely perform this type of *ua neej* on the spot. This type of *ua neej* is not lengthy. The second type of *ua neej kos* is for major spiritual healing. A traditional Hmong family would need this type of *ua neej* for illnesses such as insomnia and depression. For this type, the shaman takes the spiritual body apart and rebuilds it spiritually. This type requires the traditional Hmong family to sacrifice a live pig. The purpose of sacrificing a pig is to use its spirit to protect and watch the person being healed. The spirit of the pig is then a guardian that watches over the spirit of the person being healed, making sure the spirit does not do anything bad in the spirit world. This type of *ua neej kos* usually takes half a day and more involvement of the family and friends. This type of *ua neej* clearly shows how animism is connected to shamanism and how religions can be misinterpreted. The spirit of the pig is believed to guard the ill-persons spirit.

*Ua neej saib* is when the shaman looks into the future, past, present of the patient for anything relating to spirits to heal the patient. Illness is also another component of this type of practice. The hood is symbolic to the shaman. This is part of the shaman's

uniform when he/she enters the spiritual world. Some shamans are strong enough where they do not need the hood. Some shamans are better than others. Some can look at the present moment, but cannot see the past or future. Some can see spirits while some cannot (Yang, personal communication, 2007).

*Ua neej coj ntuj plig* is the last of the specific shaman practices. *Ua neej coj ntuj plig* is usually performed at funerals. The purpose of this practice is to guide the spirit of the deceased. This type of shaman practice shows how ancestral worship is connected to shamanism. The shaman communicates with the spirit to help guide it.

Shamans have different spirits. Shamans train to be shamans by allowing their spirit to guide them. The shaman's spirit is limited by what type of practice the spirit practices. *Neej Siv Yis* is what most shamans' spirits are. Their main purpose is to heal. These shamans speak the Hmong language during their spiritual travels. Another type of spirit, the more rare type of spirit, is *Neej Sob*. *Neej Sob* means thunder. Shamans with this spirit are stronger in a sense of attacking other spirits. Shamans with this type of spirit have *khawvkoob* (magic). This type of shaman speaks the Hmong language during their spiritual travels. The last type of shaman spirit is *Neej Thawm Zeeb*. This type of spirit is a guide for other spirits in the spiritual world.

Hmong shamans can be asked to perform ceremonies to fulfill the wishes of the client's ancestors, since the Hmong believe that ancestors communicate to them through dreams and other physical signs such as health. The only way for traditional Hmong members to communicate to the spirits is through the shaman. Depending on the needs of the shaman in order to perform, the shaman may ask traditional Hmong members to

sacrifice animals and in order for the shaman to perform the rituals to meet the client's deceased ancestors wishes.

When Hmong shamans speak to spirits, it is usually to ask spirits to see why a person is ill, if other spirits are making the person ill, or if a spirit can guide the ill person's soul to better health. Traditional Hmong believers will wear red/white or red/white/black bracelets to ward off evil spirits provided by the parents of the ill or spouse of the ill which has been blessed by the shaman. When the shaman ties the bracelet onto the wrist of the ill person, it is to symbolize tying a spirit to the person. This spirit will help guide the ill person's soul and prevent other bad spirits from harming the person. This bracelet is similar to a personal bodyguard in that if another spirit makes an attempt at you spiritually, your personal bodyguard will protect you.

*Siv Yis*, the most well-known shaman in the Hmong community, was believed to be a man and also a savior sent from the sky. *Siv Yis* was a powerful shaman sent from the sky to help the Hmong. His duties were to heal the sick, counter evil spirits, guide spirits, and heal those in need spiritually. *Siv Yis* also went by the name was *Tooj Nchai Siv Yis* (Vang, 1998). When the village people were sick and death was prevalent, *Tooj Nchai Siv Yis* would be sent to heal the people since he studied in the land of sorcerers. Vang (1998) stated that *Tooj Nchai Siv Yis* spent a few years in the land of sorcerers and it was there he studied a magical skill. When he completed his studies, he was able to change/morph himself into anything even though he was a human. He possessed a crossbow made from gold and silver and his arrows were made from copper and iron (Vang, 1998). He used these weapons to fight with evil spirits. These evil spirits would eat human flesh and drink their blood.

Vang (1998) did a study on Hmong families and their usage of shamans or western medicine. The study found that "Hmong people do view shamanic practice and western medicine practices as both significant" (p. 48). Length of time residing in the U.S. may impact the use of shamans or western medicine. Vang (1998) found that Hmong people who have lived in the U.S. for a shorter period may tend to use shamans more than western medicine. Vang (1998) also mentioned that Hmong people who have been residing in the U.S. for more than seventeen-years may have more confidence using western medicine.

### *Hmong Christians*

Christianity was not always practiced by the Hmong. Vang (1998) documented a Bible school establishment in 1939 in the city of Vientiane. This attempt at a Bible school was soon closed due to conflicting views of the government. The school was mentioned to have opened again in Luang Prabang and maintained until 1941, but the Japanese invasion closed it again. Hmong District (2007) documented a short term Bible school that opened in January of 1951. There were many Hmong men who were chosen from the villages to be trained biblically. These Hmong men were then sent back to their towns to evangelize, educate and advocate Christianity to the residents in nearby villages. After ten years, this Bible school was closed in January of 1961 due to the fall of Xieng Khouang to the Pathet Lao (Hmong District, 2007).

Most Hmong Christians attend the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C & MA) churches. Hmong Christians focus on the trinity: God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. There is a growing number of traditional Hmong who converted to Christianity. Similar to other churches, Hmong Christians attend church every Sunday and they are involved

with community projects. They are an organization sought out to evangelize the word of God and they work for the good of God. The largest Hmong C & MA church is in Saint Paul, MN.

Due to the war, anything related to biblical studies was difficult. Means of preaching and teaching the Bible to the Hmong was possible through radio. However, this was not successful, since many families did not own a radio. This required many families to gather in a single area, which was also risky because of the war. By 1975, there were approximately 20,000 Christian members in Laos and 70% were Hmong (Hmong District, 2007). In 1978, C & MA gathered for a meeting in central California. There were twenty-five Hmong pastors and leaders from around the country who wanted to make a difference. This first meeting initiated the Hmong Field Conference, which later became known as Hmong District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (Hmong District, 2007). In 2003, Hmong District celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary with eighty-one total churches throughout the United States and approximately 29,500 members (Hmong District, 2007).

There are some factors that may have influenced the change from traditional Hmong teachings to Christianity. The Vietnam War may have influenced traditional Hmong to change to Christianity. The war might have limited access to practice traditional rituals. Since most shamans were men and since men were soldiers, this might have led to a decrease in shaman availability. The sufferings from the war might have lead traditional Hmong members to become desperate and view life in a different perspective, a Christian perspective. The vulnerability of the traditional Hmong during this time might have influenced their decision to change to Christianity.

Other influences on religion conversion of the Hmong could be the settlement of a new country. Most Hmong refugees that were allowed to come to the United States were sponsored by church affiliated services. This exposure might have influenced the Hmong to try and start a new religious practice.

### *Similarities and Differences*

There are some similarities and differences between the two dominant Hmong religions. The similarities show connectivity of all the Hmong in both religions. The differences show how distinct each group is.

In Vang's (1998) research, he noted that there is a similarity between the world of light and the world of dark. Traditional Hmong believe that there are two worlds that exist together (Vang, 1998). One is called *Yajceeb* (World of Light) and the other is called *Yeebceeb* (World of Darkness) (Vang, 1998). The world of light refers to the material world in which the living are, and the world of darkness is the spiritual world (Vang, 1998).

The traditional Hmong belief of *Yajceeb* and *Yeebceeb* is similar to the Hmong Christian belief of heaven and hell (Vang, 1998). Both *Yajceeb* and heaven are places described as a world of light that is the opposite of *Yeebceeb* and hell. *Yeebceeb* and hell are often described as dark places. The difference here is that traditional Hmong believe *Yeebceeb* is part of the spiritual world.

Traditional Hmong and Hmong Christians are similar in that they both believe in a creator of death or the devil (Vang, 1998). For the traditional Hmong, they believe in *Ntxwj Nyooog* and his assistant named *Nyuj Vag Teem* (Vang, 1998). Traditional Hmong believe that *Ntxwj Nyooog* is the creator of death. *Nyuj Vag Teem* is said to question any

spirit coming from earth. He passes out the papers for rebirth or life in the world of darkness. Hmong Christians believe in the devil who was originally an angel.

Traditional Hmong and Hmong Christians are similar in that they both believe in someone that was sent here to earth to save the people from evil (Vang, 1998). *Siv Yis* is the name of a powerful Hmong shaman who is believed to have been sent from the sky (Vang, 1998). He possessed powers to heal the sick and give the dead life. He also had the ability to fight with evil spirits using his weapons. Traditional Hmong believe that all Hmong shamans today are in service because of *Siv Yis*. Similar to *Siv Yis*, Hmong Christians believe in Jesus Christ, God's son was sent as atonement.

Hmong Christians believe that Jesus was as a sacrifice sent from God to pay for humans' sinful nature and ways. Throughout the Bible, Jesus was documented to be a healer of the ill and help those spiritually. Both *Siv Yis* and Jesus Christ are powerful influences on the Hmong religiously.

In the Old Testament Bible, people sacrificed animals as offerings to God (Vang, 1998). This practice is similar to traditional Hmong culture of animism. The intent of this was for repenting for our sins; however, God sent his only son Jesus to earth as his ultimate sacrifice for us humans. This is what lead to the New Testament, where sacrificing animals was not a ritual of practice anymore. Traditional Hmong sacrifice animals as offerings to ancestors and *Dab Pog* (Cha, 2003). The hope is for ancestors and *Dab Pog* to give them fortune, better health, and spiritual protection.

There are also some differences between the two religions. Hmong Christians believe God to be a male figure as and the one and only father (Vang, 1998). Cha (2003) studied traditional Hmong beliefs through an interview. Her study mentioned traditional

Hmong people believe that their God exists in both genders known together as *Dab Pog* (Cha, 2003). The couple created the world and everything that lives in it. They are viewed as a grandmother and a grandfather. Both are believed to have created the world, the universe, and they are the gods of the world of light. The grandmother and the grandfather are also known as *Puj Saub Yawm Saub* in Hmong (Vang, 1998).

Cha (2003) continued to discuss that with *Dab Pog*, traditional Hmong also believe in *Xwm Kab*, the house spirit. *Xwm Kab*, a couple, was sent to earth to watch over the homes of the Hmong and protect them spiritually from wandering evil spirits and from sickness (Cha, 2003). Traditional Hmong also believe in *Zaj Laug*, the old dragon, that lives in the water and controls how nature operates.

Traditional Hmong culture does not talk about spiritual and powerful things such as *Dab Pog*, *Xwm Kab* and *Siv Yis* as much. The name *Siv Yis* is not mentioned on a daily basis. Prayers are not made daily to *Siv Yis* to help. In prayers, Christians end their prayers in “Jesus’s name” and thank God for sending Jesus down as the sacrifice.

Traditional Hmong do not attend church. There is no formal place of practice for animism and ancestral worship. However, traditional Hmong create an altar where they worship ancestors, *Dab Pog*, and *Xwm Kab*. There is no specific day of rest for traditional Hmong. They only practice animism and ancestral worship along with hiring a shaman only when they need to communicate with spirits.

These differences allow us to see distinct practices and why leaders of each religion say certain names during rituals. The similarities allow us to understand how closely related the two religions are and how the Hmong are still unified religiously. These similarities and differences also show how Hmong students are living dual

cultures. Hmong students belonging to either traditional Hmong culture or Hmong Christian culture will need to learn to balance their home culture with the school culture. These Hmong students will try to find their identity with their home culture and the school culture. School culture problems will be dealt with the foundation of their home. This is where school counselors who plan to work more effectively with Hmong students need to understand the differences and similarities between these two Hmong groups.

### *Hmong Students*

Hmong students with immigrant parents are usually involved with their parents' problems along with encountering other difficulties (Shi, 2001). Culture shock may cause stress and challenges for the family. Thao (1999) stated several reasons for problems Hmong parents encounter when they arrive in the U.S.: their adjustment with the U.S., retaining of the native language and culture along with encountering a new language and culture, relationship and role changes between parent and children, misconceptions of teachers/school/school programs, no prior experience to share and pass information down to children, and lack of assistance and resources to help their family. These situations are still occurring today even with the current arrival of Hmong refugees continuing with the first and second generation Hmong students.

Lor (2003) did a study on Hmong students joining gangs. One result Lor (2003) indicated was that "Hmong students join gangs to fulfill their developmental needs that they lack at home, school, or in their communities" (p. 47). Somehow their needs are not met, therefore Hmong students from the same generation gather together without any proper guidance and support.

Secrist (2006) stated in his review that, "Identity issues and cultural practices of today's Hmong youth create conflict, not only within generations, but also between generations, especially between parents and their children" (p. 23). Secrist (2006) also went on to mention that cultural and value conflicts may impact students to create mental health and academic issues for Hmong students.

Mason-Chagil (1999) listed some common themes Hmong parents stated regarding why they feel helpless with their children. The first common theme was that Hmong children born in the United States behave differently than those born in Laos. Mason-Chagil (1999) stated, "It is doubtful that the country of birth affects children's intelligence quotients. Rather, the children born here know how to interact in this cultural context better than children who were born in Laos. Parents may interpret this as greater intelligence" (p.111-112). This statement visually depicts how immigrant Hmong parents may view their children.

Hmong parents may assume that teachers will teach and that their child will learn. Mason-Chagil (1999) shared this theme when she stated how Hmong parents do not know how to motivate their children. A Hmong father stated that in Laos the children knew that they can never win an argument with their parents. This point impacts how students balance two cultures, how Hmong parents teach their kids, and how the culture at school is different from the culture at home.

Immigrant Hmong parents struggle in dealing with their children. The chores may be more convenient here in the U.S. in comparison to the chores needed in Laos. Children are kept busy in Laos by doing work and investing in the family. Hmong children here are kept busy by attending school and playing, which all come to academic,

social/personal, and career building in developing ones self-identity. When the child is behaving badly, the parents fear their reputation, hence the child is responsible for it. Parents may feel less authority if they see that their children know more than the parents. Children may take advantage of this and disrespect their parents.

Shi (2001) did a study on Hmong students and their culture in how they adjust to the American school culture. Shi (2001) felt that, "researchers need to study Hmong culture, language, and the Hmong adaptation procedure, the difficulties in the school transition, and successful means of adjustment. In turn, social workers, professionals, teachers and all people who are in contact with Hmong can help the Hmong solve their problems and live in a positive way" (p. 35).

Shi (2001) also found the following:

- There is a relationship between social support and Hmong students' adjustment.

Shi (2001) recommended that those Hmong students who get support from the community along with help from their family, peers, and educators, adjust to American schools better.

- There is a relationship between Hmong students' sociability and their school adjustment. Hmong students exposed to both cultures and making friends with those of the mainstream culture can help Hmong students adjust better. This is to gain and be involved in the culture instead of seeing the culture differences.

Bondioli (2000) did a research study comparing the correlation between Hmong parents' education level and student grades. The parents' education level was measured by a survey and the students' grade was measured by the Standardized Test for Assessment in Reading (STAR). The research showed a positive correlation between the

level of parents' education and the students' scores on the STAR. The research also found that parents who have a higher degree such as an Associate degree or higher, usually had students with higher scores. Those students who communicate with English at home tend to score higher. Those parents who lived in the U.S. longer had children who scored higher. Lastly, those students that scored higher on the STAR also had more daily help on their homework. Lor (1998) found that there was a positive correlation between the parents' involvement in their students' education and the academic success of the student. The educational level of the parents affects the academic success of the student.

Lor (1998) also found similar results following the effects of Hmong parents on their child's education. The study focused on established immigrant Hmong families and the challenges the parents and their children face academically. Lor (1998) found that there was a positive correlation between parent involvement and the academic success their children. This implies that if parents are more involved with their children; their academic success will tend to increase. Another interesting finding from this study was the difference in the level of involvement between the parents and the children.

Sherman (2004) did a study on Hmong 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in regards to how beneficial counselors are to them. In regards to acculturation, the study reported that 88.6% of the students felt that their counselor could help them. The rest felt that counselors could not help them. Another important aspect of this study was the result of the five categories that Sherman (2004) noted Hmong students indicated were most problematic: 1) family expectation, 2) language barriers, 3) being different, 4) functions of the school, and 5) no problems. The study showed that family expectations in regards

to traditions and practices were a problem for students at home. Lor (2003) shared this finding as well. He found Hmong teens struggle to meet the needs and expectations of their family, yet they compromise the differences they experience within the mainstream school experience of what is accepted. Most first-generation Hmong students who attend American public schools have parents with little education and awareness of American public schools. Hmong students transfer these challenges to school, which prevents them from performing at their best potential.

Schulz (1998) did a study on the teaching strategies, beliefs and behaviors of Hmong students at a technical college. From each case study, the general finding in helping Hmong students was to focus on helpful teaching strategies, use language and encourage participation, and form interpersonal and sentimental teacher student relationships. Helpful strategies can allow Hmong students who have language barriers to understand the content in a step by step fashion. How the teacher portrays the information to the students, impacts their learning style. If the student is spending more time interpreting or trying to understand the language and vocabulary, learning is more focused on terminology and recognition versus content taught in a class. If a teacher is effective, this will tend to create comfortable relationships which can encourage the Hmong students to seek out answers and ask questions.

In another similar study, Crevier (2002) mentioned Hmong students may be lacking study skills and communication skills. For those Hmong parents do not have an education, they may not know how to suggest, refer or support their children with academic studying skills. Some Hmong parents may also lack the language to

communicate effectively with their parents, which could be transferred to the school setting with teachers.

Vang (2004-05) studied Hmong academic achievement by researching the literature on Hmong students. He found these characteristics in successful Hmong student. Successful Hmong students tend to have:

(1) a mutual relationship with their parents, (2) the ability to discuss educational situations with parents who listen to their stories, (3) parents who advise and guide them, (4) a goal and a plan for their immediate future after graduating from high school, (5) access to resources such as technology, teachers/counselors, extra activities, school programs, and role models, (6) positive self-esteem, and (7) coping skills for dealing with academic, social/personal, career, economic problems (p. 20-21).

Xiong (1998) found in his study that even though the Hmong culture is mostly patriarchal, there is still no difference in Hmong students' motivation to obtain an education. There is no difference between males or females. Both have strong motives for a higher education.

In summary, the literature may entail traditional Hmong students and Hmong Christian students encountering the same academic struggles and challenges. Hmong students are influenced by the school culture and the home culture. By understanding the home culture, hopefully school counselors can understand and adapt these needs to their needs at the school culture academically, socially/personally, and with their career goals.

### Chapter III: Critical Analysis

In this chapter, the literature will be summarized. Next, a critical analysis of the findings and final conclusions will be discussed. Finally, recommendations for school counselors and readers will be discussed in regards to assisting traditional Hmong and Hmong Christians.

#### *Summary*

The literature acknowledged that traditional Hmong practice animism and ancestral worship. Traditional Hmong members that practice shamanism are shamans only. Hmong Christians practice Christianity, hence a Christian culture. Both religions have some similarities and differences in their beliefs. Hmong students have different expectations at home and at school and there may be barriers that limit their academic achievement.

The literature stated common characteristics that successful Hmong students tend to possess. These Hmong students had parents with an education, greater parent support emotionally and academically, parents who spent more time with their children helping them with their homework, parents who actually understand their children's homework, counselors that understood the Hmong culture, and lastly, teachers that offered other helpful learning tools.

Hmong students tend to struggle in school due to the home culture and the school culture. The home culture may be difficult due to expectations from the parents, generation differences in roles and responsibilities, education of parents, encouragement and support of parents, and language and cultural barriers. The school culture may be

difficult due to lack of guidance and direction, teaching styles of teachers, and language and cultural barriers.

Through the literature, two types of Hmong parents are evident regardless of religion. These two types of Hmong parents were defined by their education level and the length of time they resided in the U.S. The literature stated that Hmong parents who are more educated with an American education or who have resided in the U.S. longer tend to have children that learn English better, faster, and they tend to be more successful in school. The literature implies these parents to invest more time in helping their children with their homework and they tend to understand their child's homework. These parents feel more confident in helping their children in school. Lastly, these parents can communicate more effectively and meet the needs of the teacher/school.

Hmong parents who have little education or have not resided in the U.S. for long, do support their children in school, but are limited mostly by language and the balance of two cultures. These parents tend to support their children by being there physically and encouraging their children. The literature implies that since these Hmong parents have less education, they lack the knowledge and sources to understand the American Education system.

The literature does not separate the two Hmong religious groups. Both groups of students share the same experience when it comes to cultural barriers such as: language, racial and ethnic differences, religious misunderstandings, and how well the Hmong as an ethnic group adjust to the mainstream culture (Crevier, 2002). However, religion impacts morals and decisions within the home culture. There are clear distinctions between the two religions, and understanding these religions can help a school counselor distinguish

how to help Hmong students in both domains. Hmong students experience a home culture and a school culture that requires different approaches. The home culture needs to be understood in order to understand the Hmong student better.

### *Critical Analysis*

Helping Hmong students in both domains is difficult due to the topic of religion. A school counselor should always remember the ethics they are working under. For example:

As stated in the ASCA ethical standards A.1. Responsibilities to Students, we are to treat all students with respect as a unique individual. We are to promote the academic, career, and personal/social domains of a student to allow them maximum development. A counselor could meet the students' needs based on the three domains, but lack the religious support. When they come in for counseling, counselors should treat all students as unique individuals and also be aware of the foundation of the students' life is. It is not proper practice for a counselor to give religious support, but at the minimum, refer the student to a source that could further meet their needs. Ethical standard A.5. Referrals, from ASCA states that a professional counselor should make referrals when necessary or appropriate.

Using the scenario above, it may be appropriate to refer the student to some faith based organization since this may benefit the student more. The counselor may be able to offer the three domains effectively to the student, but the students' needs are not met fully. From here the counselor may need to seek additional help. The counselor should also remember to inform the parents. (Vang, 2007).

Hmong students may not perform as well academically with other students in the same age cohort. I would further the Bondioli (2000) study by considering the amount of years Hmong parents have lived in the U.S. Lee & Pfeifer (2005) mentioned that young Hmong students may be developmentally delayed due to malnutrition. Miss Lor, a second grade teacher, shares this same experience as well in comparing her American Hmong students and her refugee Hmong students (Lor, personal communication, 2007).

Xiong (1998) suggested schools to develop a program to encourage parent involvement. Xiong (1998) took this further to explain that Hmong organizations should organize some parent programs to educate and inform them about the importance of being involved in their children's education. I wish to further this more and suggest school officials co-lead it with a well-known elder Hmong community leader. Most Hmong elders are very well-respected in the Hmong community especially if they have a positive reputation, high education, cultural awareness, and know the Hmong community they are speaking to (traditional or Christian).

Cha's (2003) study focused on one person's understanding of the traditional Hmong religion and culture in her Hmong culture study. The person being interviewed criticized other Hmong people for practicing traditional Hmong religion and culture incorrectly or modifying it to meet their needs. I find this to be accurate, but limited because of the lack of information about traditional Hmong culture. For example, in my personal experience, elders do not teach their children in a step by step fashion why certain rituals are practiced, besides indicating the rituals are to please the spirits. I grew up understanding these rituals as a gathering, party-type event. Cha (2003) also

mentioned that the Hmong history is oral; therefore traditional Hmong and Hmong Christians today alike may practice inappropriate Hmong culture.

Lor (2003) studied factors associated with Hmong students joining gangs. The study should consider a different approach to obtaining their participants. The subjects were collected through Hmong celebrations such as, the tournament, which is a gathering of many Hmong athletes and viewers/fans/other athletes. Other subjects were collected through parties, New Year celebration gatherings, and more. Lor (2003) continues on to mention that the subjects in the study comprised at-risk youth or actual gang members. Considering the places the subjects were obtained, this study may imply that all subjects, at the initial agreement of participating in the study, were either at at-risk youth members or established gang members already. Lor (2003) did not state other formal ways of confirming if the subjects were at-risk or actual established gang members.

Vang (1998) did a study on Hmong perception on shamanic practices and western medicine. The study neglected to ask the question of whether or not the family is Traditional Hmong or Hmong Christian. This religious foundation may influence the results due to the practices and usage of a Shaman. A Hmong Christian family will not rely on a shaman as much as a Traditional Hmong family unless the Hmong Christian family plans to continue to please the deceased relatives (Vang, 1998).

Crevier (2002) mentioned Hmong students may be lacking study skills. This may be misleading in that Hmong students may be lacking knowledge of words more than study skills. Adding onto this, educators and schools should be reminded that it may take a Hmong student twice the time to understand a paragraph if they have to define more words. A student does have the ability to understand, but may lack the vocabulary.

Hmong students are learning two languages by using them both, hence balancing two languages.

Crevier (2002) stated that one of the largest improvements the Hmong had to make was their communication skills (p. 14). This implies how much more change the Hmong will have to sacrifice as they try to adapt. I would suggest community services and school to take initiative to continue to meet the Hmong as they strive to adapt. They have lost many of their original beliefs in education, religion, cultural practices, and family relationships.

There are some topics that can improve the literature on Hmong studies. More studies are needed about counselors and their influence on Hmong students grades K-12. School counselors also need awareness of traditional Hmong and Hmong Christian religion and culture and their impact on academic achievement. Finally, studies are needed that demonstrate techniques and strategies that were successful in counseling Hmong students of both religious faiths.

#### *Recommendations for Counselors*

It is clear from the literature review that there is not much information on counseling Hmong students specifically from traditional Hmong or Hmong Christian religions. As with any student need, a school counselor can refer the student to community services that will best meet the needs of the student and their family. However, during this referral process of the student sharing their views on education and how religion, family relationships, and friends have affected him/her with the school counselor, cultural awareness, religious growth, and educational understanding are things the school counselor is learning in return.

To understand more about traditional Hmong families, the school counselor should seek the nearest Hmong organization. The organization may at times be aware of Hmong families that may be open to an observer to sit in or watch an actual shaman ritual being practiced in a traditional Hmong home. The counselor could also speak with the shaman to question his/her beliefs to get a better understanding of it and how education relates to them. If the school has Hmong students, the school counselor can simply gather a meeting with the students and ask them to share about their culture and religion.

For Hmong Christians, counselors can attend the nearest Hmong Christian church. There, they can speak to the youth pastor and senior pastor to get better acquainted with ways to work with Hmong youth. As stated before, if the school has Hmong students, the school counselor should gather a meeting with the students and ask them to share about their culture and religion and ways they can be better assisted.

School counselors should implement parent programs that allow Hmong parents the chance to talk and discuss the education program at their child's school. Hmong interpreters (i.e. Hmong college students) should be there to assist. The students themselves should be encouraged to attend the program with their parents so they both can have a mutual understanding of the education program. Teachers from the school should be present to answer any questions and give examples about what they expect from their students. Activity directors should be available to present to the parents what forms of activities are occurring at school. Hmong parents should be encouraged to participate and attend events.

School counselors should continue to be aware that Hmong students do have strong attitudes towards their education (Xiong, 1998) and they should encourage parents

to continue supporting and encouraging their children to achieve academically. Schools need to continue building programs and creating lessons to address these needs. School counselors should invest more time in assisting Hmong students across K-12 about careers. High school counselors should introduce and expose school to work programs to students to gain work experience. High school counselors should also continue to encourage students to explore college (Xiong, 1998).

#### *Recommendations for Researchers*

Future researchers should study the influence of school counselors on Hmong students of both traditional and Christian backgrounds in grades K-12 and beyond. More research is also needed on how religion affects academic motivation in Hmong students. Additionally, researchers should examine the academic achievement differences between Hmong Christians and traditional Hmong. Finally, research is needed on effective techniques for educators to use with Hmong students of both backgrounds.

Schools and teachers should view all students objectively. Influences such as culture, ethnic, race, social class, and religious difference should not interfere with how school officials work with students.

#### *Conclusion*

A school counselor has the objective to help students in as many ways possible to allow them to perform at their best potential and be exposed to career, personal/social, and academic domains. The Hmong are another ethnic group in which not much research has been done to assess ways to best promote their strengths. The different religions the Hmong believe are also not documented or studied as much. If one takes the time to

study and become aware of how religion influences a family's decisions, a counselor can start to understand ways to best work with Hmong families more effectively.

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