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Shamanism: The Healing Tradition of Hmong People

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THE healing tradition that Hmong people follow includes crossing between their world and the spiritual world. Shamanism is the most well known practice from Hmong people and was carried throughout generations in order to heal their people. Shamans can assist and help families by communicating with spirits from the other world in order to find out the reason why the bodies of the people who are getting help from the shamans are sick. People go to shamans for a few reasons, however the largest reason is sickness. According to tradition, a person might be sick because either there is an evil spirit trying to take their body, or their soul may be lost to the spiritual world. To combat this, the shamans will have to perform soul callings in order for the soul to return home. The shamans will have to create a way for the person who is sick to outrun the evil spirits in order to get better again, and to live a life without any spirits trying to interfere. Because shamanism is a practice that is executed to make Hmong individuals feel healthy and happier again, families and generations should stay in contact with this tradition. Although new generations of Hmong claim that their lives are too busy to help keep the rituals and traditions going, the healing traditions of shamanism is beneficial to the entire community.

The majority of Hmong started their lives in the mountainous regions of Laos in southeast Asia. The lives of Hmong completely changed between the 1960s and 1970s when they were recruited to assist the United States' Central Intelligence Agency to fight against communism in Laos (Mote). During the Vietnam War, there was a smaller war known as the Secret War that occurred at the same time involving the people in Laos, the United States, and Hmong people. The United States was against communism spreading throughout the area. However, the Americans needed a safer way to get through the routes near Vietnam. The United States enlisted Hmong people to help them with the Ho

Chi Minh Trail, which goes from North Vietnam to South Vietnam and crosses Laos (Mote). Because the Hmong people knew more about the paths than the Americans, the CIA asked for the Hmong people's help to restrain communism from increasing by not only leading the United States through certain areas in Vietnam, but also having Hmong people fight with the Americans against communism.

Although the United States was aided by Hmong people, the soldiers of the United States and Hmong were still defeated. The Americans then fled back to their home country, leaving the Hmong people who helped fought with the United States in a situation where "more than one-tenth of those Hmong fighting in the war died – between 30,000 and 40,000" (Mote). Because Hmong people lived in Laos but fought against them, a genocide of Hmong families erupted. Laos killed every Hmong individual, whether they fought in the war or not. This genocide led the Hmong people to escape to the country of Thailand. From then on, the United States went back for those who helped them, and had sponsors take Hmong to safer countries like America. The Hmong people then spread across the United States and learned to live a different life while also continuing their traditions. Not only did they bring their families with them to the new country, they carried along their healing tradition and belief known as shamanism.

Shamanism is a traditional practice Hmong people kept throughout their immigration from Laos to other countries such as the United States. It is a practice where a Hmong shaman "becomes detached from his body during a séance in order to leave for the invisible world" and arrives to the other world as a spirit himself to negotiate or fight off other spirits (Mottin). This practice started with the belief that there was a deity of life who saw the deity of death "devouring humans one after the other with such rapacity that their race threatened to disappear for good" (Mottin). Because the deity of life was not able to take care of everyone, "he decided to choose a human being" that will fight against the evil with special powers given from the deity of life (Mottin). Throughout the history of shamanism in this community, the method of practice has evolved.

This practice includes several different types of ceremonies. Soul calling and soul searching are completed by one of the ceremonies called spiritual healing. The ceremony soul calling ritual happens before and after the shaman's trance, where the first calling is carried out "with a hen and live rooster at the threshold of the open household front door" (Capps). Whereas the second calling takes

place a few hours after, where the chickens are later cooked and are arranged with an egg in a basket. This basket will also be “placed at the threshold of the open front door with the chickens facing inward towards the house” to call to the souls and let them know that “they have a home to stay in and can enjoy life rather than wandering around in the open to be exposed to the rain and heat” (Capps). During the trance in between the two soul callings, the shaman is in a hypnotic state following the rhythmic sound of the gong playing in the background by his assistant, and is in the process of trying to negotiate with the spirits in the realm of the spirits to get the owner’s lost soul. In this time, the shaman bounces on top of a wooden bench in tune to the sound of his rattles he is holding in order to transport to the spiritual world. It may take hours for the negotiation to finish. After the ceremony, everyone gathers around and shares the traditional Hmong food in celebration of the shaman.

Typically a Shaman has an altar in his house that is set up in a way that allows the two worlds to connect with one another. The setting “consists of a board resting on a support, or of a small table, on which are aligned from left to right are the bowl of dragon water, a basket of maize grain to feed the horses of cavalry, [and] an incense burner” that help guide the spirits (Lemoine). A bowl with rice and an egg on top of it, along with a couple of joss sticks that slowly light up, are to be used as incense (Lemoine). This setting is intended for those who are involved with the trance, such as the shaman and the spirit who guides him in the spiritual world. In addition to the symbolic setting, the shaman also has equipment in order to perform the ritual. He carries a circular handle with iron rings and disks while his assistant, who is not in trance, rings a gong in a rhythm which represents “the reins of the shaman’s horse, a magical sword to cut devils in twain, [and] a cast net to catch the souls” (Lemoine). With the accessories and setup of the altar, the shaman is able to travel between the two worlds to communicate with the spirits. With that being said, the shaman also looks for additional hands to support his trance to advance into the other world.

Shamans usually receive help and assistance from their children or close relatives. However, this is harder in the new generation as most families adopted American culture. Mymee Her explained how “[her] children who are born in the United States, far away from the killing fields [where the Secret War was held], are exposed to war through [her] experiences” (Mote). The new generation of Hmong children grew up in America, where dreams differed from their parents’ dreams. This led Hmong children to also change their views on the traditional healing performances from the shamans. On top of that, the older generation of

Hmong were struggling to live their own lives in the new country because they “are too overwhelmed coping with their own experiences of war” and “cannot be physically or psychologically available to their children, because they are drowned in their own experience” (Mote). The younger generation gradually focused on their new ideas that fit in the American culture and stopped carrying traditional practices. Therefore, there is a significant difference between the old Hmong tradition that includes shamanism, which was carried from Laos, and the new beliefs that began in the United States from recently emigrated Hmong people and the Hmong people who are born in America.

There is a huge difference between the process of healing someone. For Hmong people, they follow their traditional way of curing someone through trances and shamans while for Americans, they make their way to the hospital to get prescribed by doctors. Because Hmong families moved to the United States, their healing ways clashed with the American ways. For example, Lia Lee is a Hmong child who was diagnosed with severe epilepsy and encountered a disruption between her parents and her doctors (Fadiman). Hmong people tackle health differently from Americans, because they go to shamans to get their souls back through a trance traveling between two different worlds, whereas Americans go to hospitals to get medicine and to be examined by doctors to get treated. It was also hard for Hmong refugees to understand “the difference between curing and controlling” and when a study for Hmong people with chronic illness was created, it showed how there were not many Hmong aware of the different sickness a person can have (Helsel et al.). Hmong traditionally believe that illnesses could be treated with herbs and nonspiritual methods, but also have other cures that include spiritual practices. When a few Hmong were in a study, they learned that diabetes is not curable. This discovery shocked them, because their traditional beliefs would usually answer all of their health problems. All in all, the Hmong traditions have changed and have encountered problems as Hmong families started living their new lives outside of Laos.

In the new generation of Hmong people, there has been a decrease of people practicing Shamanism within the culture. Like other younger Hmong folks, Xue Thao explains why he does not continue the tradition anymore, “I have school, I have jobs and then I also have to keep a social life...I just don’t have time” (Siegel). He describes how the rituals for this practice get in the way of his life outside of the culture and he would like to get more space in trying to build his future rather than sitting around during rituals. On the contrary, individuals may have a lot of events going on in their life, but helping with ceremonies for

shaman practices does not consist of their everyday life since it only occurs when someone is in need of “healing illness or misfortune attributed to the actions of spirits” (Capps). These rituals are a traditional way to help Hmong people. If these customs are not performed, then the people in need would not be able to become cured.

Although Xue Thao argues that he does not believe in keeping the tradition of shamanism going because it takes up his time, I disagree because this tradition does not occupy much in my life and it significantly benefits me, as well as others. These ceremonies that include shamans and their practices only happen once every few months depending on how many sick individuals there are. Because these ceremonies are not constantly occurring or happening, Thao is wrong for using an excuse to stop the tradition of these ceremonies going. He claimed he was too busy with his life and could not reserve just one day for this practice to happen in order to make a family or person happier and healthier. I find him selfish and arrogant for only thinking about himself when he could not stop doing a certain thing in his life in order to help contribute to the ceremony.

Nonetheless, I strongly believe the traditional way Hmong people help others through shamanism should not be forgotten or lost because it is the way our ancestors have helped each other live healthy lives. Also, because I have benefited from shamans and similar ceremonies that consist of speaking to spirits, the Hmong traditional healing should continue on in generations even if people believe they are too busy for it. There was a time where I was too afraid to sleep in my own room because I did not feel comfortable in my own bed by myself, so my parents called in for a shaman to assure that our house was clear of evil spirits. He came in to perform his trance and practices for half a day, then spoke to my parents regarding our house afterwards to let them know what he stumbled across. Because I was young, they did not tell me what was wrong. However, since the shaman came to our house to help me, I was able to feel more comfortable in my room. A few months later, I started to sleep in my room by myself without any concerns and until this day, I have not been afraid to stay in my room alone. Despite some believing that these practices take too much time, Hmong people should continue this important cultural practice.

The act of shamanism helps heal people who are in need of help. For instance, Vang Xiong has had restless nights and was afraid to fall asleep because he felt like “he would die during the night, or that the spirit would make it so that he and his wife could never have another child” (Tobin and Friedman). Xiong experienced episodes of nights with no rest because of a spirit sitting on top of

his chest. These experiences led him to go see a shaman to help him. Thor, the shaman that Xiong visited, went into a trance in order to go to the spiritual world and talked to the spirits in order to get Xiong's health back in good condition. By going into a trance, she was able to understand and learn why the spirit, the one who takes away Xiong's nights, is acting badly towards him. Afterwards, she performed another deed that had Xiong wear a cultural paper. The shaman then burned it away to send "the spirits on their way with the smoke" and had Xiong go through a hoop and in between knives so it "would be very hard for spirits to follow" (Tobin and Friendman). The following year after his time with Thor, Vang Xiong stated he did not have further trouble with spirits or experienced any sleepless nights with difficulty of breathing.

Another instance where a Hmong person was saved through the practice of shamanism was with a child named Lia Lee. Because she was born and grew up in America compared to when her parents who grew up in Laos, she was conflicted between spiritual healing and medical healing. She was diagnosed with epilepsy and went to the hospital to receive treatment (Fadiman). She had gone through several treatments from the hospital, yet she was not getting better. Because of this, her family thought it would be best to get her treated and looked at by a shaman. Through this trance, the shaman calls for Lia's soul and lets it know that there is money and food for it in a safe spot. The shaman does this in front of the household with incense, a sacrificed chicken, rice, and an egg to call out for the spirits. With the help of the soul calling, Lia was able to get her soul back and become healthy again. As a result, shamanism is beneficial and should be kept as a tradition in the Hmong culture.

The traditional healing practice of Hmong people should be followed throughout the generations. This practice has come a long way with the Hmong people. This tradition allows shamans to go in a trance with the rhythm of the gong in the background as they jump on their bench to transport into the spiritual world. As the shaman goes into the other world, they are assisted by a spirit to negotiate with the evil spirits to get the bodies of the people that are sick in the real world back to their healthy state. Because this practice heals people and does not take up one's everyday life, it should stay vital to the Hmong people.

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