

Why Study the Hmong Population?

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Many people in the United States have never heard of the ethnic group Hmong. Just recently I met a Cambodian girl from Long Beach, California. She asked me about my nationality. She was surprised to learn I was Hmong. She said she'd never heard of this ethnic group before and then asked me what country we are from. (We're from Laos, which borders Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, China, and Myanmar). Her question drew me back to a middle school memory when I had a pen pal from Maryland. He asked about my nationality and when I told him I was Hmong, he expressed surprise and confessed that he had never heard of this ethnic group before. Having assumed that the Hmong population was pretty well known, I suddenly realized there were probably many people in the world who have not heard of the Hmong population.

One reason why I thought our population is well known is because of why we are here in America. But because the circumstances surrounding our immigration were never written into American History books (including covert participation with the French in World War II and covert support for American troops during the "Secret War" component of the Vietnam War), many people have simply not heard of us. Strangely, I would have to admit that many people are not aware of why or how the Hmong people came to America. And now that I think about it, I grew up hearing and learning about American history but I have never really stopped to learn why the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Pakistan, Indian, and many other ethnic groups are here in America. I never thought about this until faced with the invisibility of my own origins. Why *are* they here? I am pretty sure they all have their own purposes and reasoning; I'm sure they all have their own stories to tell. To help us all begin to see the importance of understanding

these stories I will share a slice of my own story, the slice reflecting my ethnic/immigrant status, to help reveal why I am in the United States, and why the *Hmong people* are here.

The true matter behind why the Hmong people are here in the United States can be traced to the Secret War in World War II. The Hmong fought alongside the French in opposition to the Japanese invasion and occupation of Indochina. When the war was over, the French maintained their colonial rule of French Indochina. This led Vietnam to seek after independence, which produced two decades of war and bloodshed with the military and economic support of Communist China and the Soviet Union (Dirks, 1999). In the late 1950's, as the French withdrew from Vietnam, the United States government began fearing for other countries in the region that might fall into this communist system. "It was thought that if Vietnam became communist then other countries of the Indochina region would also fall to communism" (Dirks, 1999, p. 9). The Hmong soon became actively involved with the American CIA, due in large part to their acts of loyalty and the abilities they had shown fighting alongside the French in World War II. The United States decided to help support the Royal Lao military and began utilizing the Hmong in covert missions. With the onset of these collaborations organized by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the secret war begins in Laos in 1960.

The secret war lasted the entire decade, at which point the count of Hmong deaths exceeded the count of American deaths (Dirks, 1999). With the U.S. pullout from Vietnam, Laos quickly fell to the Communists and the Hmong had to flee for their lives. They had no alternative. Many escaped by crossing the Mekong River (a river that separates Laos and Thailand) only to spend years to follow living in Thai refugee camps.

Many lives were lost crossing the Mekong River. Over time, the refugee Hmong were dispersed to various countries. 75% of the Hmong chose to immigrate to France, Canada, or the U.S. (Dirks, 1999).

Before the war, Hmong people had been a farming people living up in the high mountains of Laos. Hmong daughters were generally required to do all the housework along with their normal field work. The sons were required to perform all the hard labor work along with taking care of the fields and live stock. There were only a few Hmong family who could afford to send their sons to school. Education was expensive, so many Hmong children were unable to attend school. There were never more than a few Hmong boys in Laotian schoolrooms; rarely did girls receive any formal education in Laos (Dirks, 1999). The language taught in school was Laotian, not Hmong. Therefore those who attended school, starting from the first grade level, had to be able to understand and comprehend the language used in school.

We can see that the Hmong population has come a long way in developing the ability to acquire a different language. Since Hmong immigrated here, they have been limited in English speaking. It seems like the Hmong are caught in a cycle of always having to learn and adapt to other cultures. In Laos, Hmong had to learn how to speak in Laos in order to attend school. Now here in the U.S. Hmong people must learn English. Yet, even though the Hmong are in this situation, they still try to maintain their cultural values and status.

At stake is the fate of Hmong language. As Hmong people have immigrated to the

U.S., they have adapted to American culture and language. English is now the dominant language in the world of Hmong children. They speak less and less Hmong. As a result, cultural values have started to shift: Hmong Americans are more likely to value education, not farming (like in the old days). But while I'm a reflection of these changes in culture, I'm still interested in knowing more about my parents' perceptions regarding their native language. For instance: How do immigrant Hmong parents feel about the changes they have witnessed as a result of moving to the U.S.? What does it mean that they speak to their child in Hmong while their child responds back in English? Why do Hmong parents still think it is important to maintain their native language? What will they do to help maintain their native language and values in the lives of their children?

These are important factors to consider, for, in the end, the Hmong will either lose or maintain their language. There is no alternative. I find it interesting that with all the hardships Hmong parents have endured -- in Laos, in the Thai refugee camps, and in the foreign world of America -- some still work to keep their native language alive. Although I myself speak very little Hmong, I do think it is important to keep our native language alive. This is why I think it would be interesting to study the perceptions of Hmong parents, especially with respect to their language and the values and culture sustained by its preservation. After all, only the parents can help their children maintain their native language. It has become a part of my story. Perhaps it's a small part of your story, as well.

References

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