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Interview with Dr. Dia Cha

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Dr. Dia Cha

Interviewer/Transcriber/Editor: Paul Hillmer

5 October, 2005



Dr. Dia Cha left Laos with her family in 1975 and lived in a Thai refugee camp until coming to the US in 1979. She commenced formal classroom studies in ninth grade, graduating four years later from Abraham Lincoln High School in Denver, Colorado. After earning her Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology in 1989 from Metropolitan State College in Denver, Colorado, she went on to receive her Master of Arts in Applied Anthropology from Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona in 1992. In 2000, she received a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Colorado in Boulder. She is currently Associate Professor of Anthropology and Ethnic Studies at St. Cloud State University (SCSU), St. Cloud, Minnesota, and is a Research Associate with the Science Museum of Minnesota, in St. Paul. She is widely published (works include Hmong American Concepts of Health, Healing, and Conventional Medicine and Dia's Story Cloth: The Hmong People's Journey to Freedom) and has been honored with more than fifteen awards from academic and social groups all across the United States in recognition of the high caliber of her research and her teaching, her service to the community, and her tireless work as a champion of gender and ethnic equality. She participated in a convocation at Concordia University and graciously agreed to be interviewed. Because of the brief time we had together, our conversation focused on Hmong cosmology and spirituality. I am grateful to Dr. Cha not only for the interview, but for her review of this transcript.

(0:09) Could you give us a brief overview of your early life from the time of living in Laos to being in the refugee camps to living in the United States?

I was born in Laos and raised, grew up, during the Vietnam War. I have two sisters and three brothers, and my father was recruited by the American CIA? and he was a soldier; he was gone most of the time. When I remember him, he was never home for more than three days. So I don't really have a good picture of him. But he was declared Missing in Action in 1972. He went to fight in a battle and just never came back, so we don't know what happened to him. Then when Laos became a communist country, we fled to Thailand and became refugees, and we lived there for almost five years and came to this country in 1979. At the time [still in Laos and Thailand] I was a teenager, and

because of the war in Laos we constantly moved from place to place all the time, and I did not get to go to school, so I had no formal education. When we got to the refugee camp, the first year there was no school, but the second year that we stayed in the camp there was some elementary school: first grade through sixth grade. And at the time I was big, so I went to elementary school—first grade, with the little kids, and I was always teased and made fun of because I was considered too old for elementary school, but I had to start somewhere. And at the school, every day, the little kids would tease me that I didn't belong there, so I quit and I went to study with the adults—they had an adult literacy program there. The older people went to study for two or three hours a day, and I went to study with the adults, and then they would always tease me that I was too childish, that I didn't belong with them because I was not mature enough. And so I was always in the middle and had a very hard time. And I studied Thai—learned to read and write Hmong with the Roman alphabet in Thailand, so when I got to this country I knew how to write a little Thai and how to read and write Hmong. And so we first arrived in California, in Santa Anna, Orange County, and I was in the middle again. I had one younger brother and one younger sister who went to middle school, and then I had an older brother and an older sister who were over 18, and they went to adult school. And I was 16 going on 17 and I didn't belong anywhere because I didn't have any formal education, so my family did not know what to do with me. So they put me—I stayed home for a month, and then after a while they decided that because I didn't have any formal education I wouldn't make it in high school, so they took me to an adult school. And we went to the adult school to register, and they wouldn't accept me, either. They said that I was too young, so I came back home, stayed home for another month, and then they finally took me to a high school that had an ESL [English as a Second Language] program. So I started high school in ninth grade, and that's how I began my education in this country. Then I finished my high school in four years. Then I went to my college, so I got my Bachelor's degree. I worked for a year or two and then went back. And that's how I earned my education.

(4:19) I've spoken to a lot of Hmong students here at Concordia who say their parents wanted them to be 'practical.' They want them to go into business or to be a doctor. Did your family support your decision to study Hmong culture—or was that not your original plan? If not, how did your interest in Hmong cosmology and culture develop?

Well, because my mother was illiterate and didn't know what to advise us about our majors, we were left alone to choose whatever we want to study—she brought us here but she's a widow, she never have any formal education. My father was gone when we were little, so she was the only one who raised us and brought us up. We were very poor throughout my high school years. We were on welfare and I worked part-time to support myself, so my mother didn't really have any clue in terms of what I studied or how to help me. All she knew how to do was to do what she could do best in the home, like cook and clean, and help me when I had to study very hard, she would wash my clothes so I would have time to study. She would just say, 'You do what you think is best,' and so I could go to college, I could study whatever I wanted. And that was good, but also it was very hard that I had no guidance, so I was totally in the dark. I changed my major four times in undergraduate school because during that time I had no role model. There was no Hmong woman who had gone to college before me that I could consult with. When I went to college there were only six Hmong men and another Hmong woman who were in college in Colorado, so at that time I did not know what to major in. I had no idea, so I went and took an introduction course for each of the different disciplines. I took English and—it was so hard—I mean the literature, English literature. I loved it, but it was very hard for me to understand. And then I took accounting, I took graphic arts, I took finance, and I always fell asleep [Both laugh] So I know that that is not good for me! And then I

went to take Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, and I loved it! I just loved to read whatever I got my hands on. And so that's how I decided to major in Anthropology. But it was just by accident that I tried—no one told me, no one advised me, so I had that choice—I can go on to college or I don't go. No one really told me to go, and no one stopped me either. So that's my experience. It's very different from other Hmong students.

(7:18) Let's talk about the Hmong distinction between the visible [*Yaj Ceeb*] and invisible [*Yeeb Ceeb*] world. Can you talk a little bit more about the Hmong sensibility regarding that distinction?

The Hmong discussion about that is that the shaman is the one who uses that concept a lot when they perform the ceremony. They would say they are now going to the unseen world or they are back to the unseen world. And, again, the distinction is, in terms of ceremony, they do that, but in reality, in their daily lives we always have in the back of our minds, if you live in traditional Hmong society, that you must have respect for the others that we do not see. Even though you and I cannot see the other dimension, the spirits can see us. So we cannot say bad things about the other spirits or the other gods, or our ancestors who are long gone, because they are always with us. So that is one of the things, because the Hmong have this tendency that when they go to the forest or when they walk by a river or a lake, you see young people will throw rocks into the forest or into the water, and the parent will stop that. They say, 'Don't do that, because it's not good.' And usually the children won't understand, and will keep asking, 'Why? Why? I just threw the rock in the water! Why?' And they [the parents] say, 'No, you're going to harm the spirit who lives in the lake.' And so, in the practical [world] that's how they interpret it, but on the other hand, the Hmong will not want anyone to do anything harmful to the forest, like [leaving] trash or throwing a rock. They think that it's something that you shouldn't do, because there are other beings that you cannot see. So those are some of the practical things.

(9:22) So if you were to go into the forest and you wanted to cut wood or you wanted to hunt animals, would there be some ritual that you might perform to appease the wild spirits?

Usually when they will cut down an old trees, then they will ask for permission or inform the spirits who may occupy the tree that they would cut down the tree. There are certainly people who will not go into an area where people have not gone before. Usually, people who do not have any knowledge are not encouraged to go and explore a wild area, but only other people who have some knowledge and know how to ask for permission, are the ones who are willing to enter unexplored territories. When Hmong sacrifice an animal for different ceremonies, they always ask for permission. They always tell the chicken or the pig or the cow that, 'We sacrifice you because God created you to serve this purpose. We do it, and we know it is a life that we're taking, and we apologize for it. And so they have this kind of 'respect ritual' that reminds or tells the animal that they don't just make the sacrifice without a purpose.

(10:35) So there's a recognition of the role that this sacrificial animal is playing, and an apology!

Yeah, it's an apology. It's a way to recognize that their lives are precious and valuable as ours, that they are just as significant as we are.

(10:54) You mentioned that there are different classifications of gods, and that the chief god is really a married couple, and that titles for this couple entity would include 'Lord of the Sky,' 'Creator of the World,' 'King of Heaven,' 'Master of the Universe.'

Uh-huh. These are the different terms that the Hmong use to refer to that one god or couple.

(11:17) So what—is this a god who is simply recognized as being all of those things, or are there roles in everyday life that this god plays?

Well, Hmong believe that there is one couple of gods who are in charge of the universe, the world that we live in, but you have different ones, too, who are under this bigger god. But because Hmong society is very egalitarian, some people do not necessarily see it the way we see in the Western world. Hmong have other gods or deities we can call on; it's similar to St. Peter, when a person dies and you go through this gate where there is a lady who washes you, and then after she washes you she erases all your memory of your life on earth, and that's why you totally forget about your past life. And then that's how you pass the gate and you move on. So the same thing—you have different levels and different gates that you journey to the other world.

(12:34) So this Master of the Universe doesn't have an everyday role to play, but is sort of transcendent, or above it all?

Yes, above it all.

(12:46) Well let's talk about some of these other categories (and category may not be a good word to use, I realize) of gods. You talked about Lords of the Otherworld, the [Hillmer doesn't try to pronounce them, but shows the words to Dr. Cha] *Ntxwg Yug*, or Devil, and the *Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem*, or Secretary who issues the 'mandate of life'.

Usually, Hmong perception of—I keep asking the Hmong shamans and also the ritualists how do they imagine *Ntxwg Yug* looks like, and they think there is a magnificent mountain where his center is located, and this is the area that he occupies, in a high mountain. *Ntxwg Yug*'s secretary is *Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem* who knows how to read and write, has a pen, sits behind a desk, and issues the visa, the 'mandate of life' [which dictates how long a person will live in this world during a particular incarnation].

(13:58) So he's sort of the Chief of Staff [for the 'Devil'].

Yes, he is the Chief of staff for *Ntxwg Nyug*. Prior to contact with Christian missionaries, Hmong didn't perceive *Ntxwg Nyug* as the "Devil". It's the missionaries who labeled him as such. He is just an important figure in the Other World. So that's how they perceive him. So each person has to go to his gate, his desk, and he will make judgment in terms of what form—either they will be born as animal, as human being, in terms of what morality—it's based on their previous life.

(14:24) Then there are these other beings you spoke of: 'guardian angels' [*Kab Yeeb*]. Do I have that right?

Yes.

So are these representatives of the Master of the Universe?

[Yes]

So life issues from the Chief God...

[Yes]

and you arrive in this world in your golden jacket [physically represented on this earth by the placenta¹] sent forth with your guardian spirit [who watches over you until you die and are sent back to the spirit world], but when you die you're sent to 'the Devil,' so to speak, or the judge and his administrator

(14:58) No, because when you die you have three souls. [In fact, Dr. Cha said earlier in her presentation, each person has a MINIMUM of three souls, but could have many more. The three 'main' souls occupy the head, the torso, and a leg]. And one of the souls goes and stays with your ancestors who live with the Lord of the Sky, and then the other soul is the one who goes to the *Nyuj Vaj Tuam Teem* to re-issue the visa to come back and be re-born.

(15:30) So what happens to the third soul?

The third soul is the one who stays at the grave and watches over the grave eternally. [In her presentation Dr. Cha mentioned that Hmong people will bring food to the grave site for the soul that resides there. Non-Hmong people might ask, 'When will the soul come to eat the food you have left?' A Hmong person might reply, 'When is your loved one coming to smell the flowers you have brought?']. And that's why Hmong people say that when a person dies and after you bury them, Hmong always go back and take care of the grave, because they know that a soul is there, to watch over the grave, so the living family members should take care of the grave and bring food for this soul to eat symbolically. From an anthropological perspective, such visits serve to maintain continuity or attachment between the living and the death. And also the Hmong are very worried about being buried far away from family members in this country and no one will come to visit their graves; they worry that the soul will have no food to eat at the grave, and then the soul will have no place to go.

(16:05) So going to visit the grave site is a common Hmong practice, because there is a soul that remains there. Sometimes when white Americans go to visit graves we're told we're just being silly, that it's just a dead body. The American Christian idea is that the soul is up in heaven somewhere [though the teaching is actually of a bodily resurrection that comes at the end of time], but the Hmong believe that, no, there is a soul that resides in this place for an eternity.

Yeah.

(16:40) What about the household spirits and the wild or evil spirits

The household spirits, when the Hmong are going to build a house, they always do a ceremony to ask the spirit of the ancestor to see if this is a proper place to build a house. If the ceremony indicates that it is OK, then they will build a house. And when they build the house then they will have a ceremony to invite the ancestor to come and stay and live with them, and there's a belief that every Hmong house has a spirit who watches over the people, like I showed the *Xwm Kab*, the house spirit stays there and watches over the other members in terms of good health and prosperity. And so every year, at the New Year, the Hmong perform a ceremony and they clean out the altar for the household spirits and redecorated it with new ceremonial paper to start the new year...

(17:54) Clean out the altar?

¹ Back in Laos, the placenta of a child was buried after birth. Boy's placentas were buried under the main pole of the house, girls' placentas buried under the pole in the bedroom. It is believed that when a person dies, his/her soul that travels back to the other world must first travel back to the place where the placenta is buried.

Yeah, they move the old decoration and they put on the new ones, and they will thank the household spirit for protecting them over the year and they will ask him to continue to protect the family in the New Year.

(18:09) What do these new decorations signify? Why aren't the old ones good enough?

Because they use this joss paper to make a decoration, so it gets dusty and old after a year of hanging in the house. It's just like your Christmas decoration, you change it every year. It's the New Year, so everything needs to be renewed...

(18:20) I'm sorry to interrupt, but what is joss paper?

Well, the joss paper that you buy—traditionally the Hmong made it from bamboo. They made their own ceremonial paper. They used the young bamboo shoot and they pounded it and then they go through a process where they make their own paper, and they use it mostly for ceremonial purposes. They will carve and they will decorate it, and sometimes they will put chicken feathers [on it] if they're sacrificing chicken, put chicken feathers on it and on the paper, they may put a few drops of blood from the chicken on it to sparkle the paper. But today the Hmong cannot do that anymore, so they buy from the store, which are commercially made by Chinese company that makes this joss paper. So the papers are used for the household spirit, and they hang it up on the wall of the house. That symbolizes the altar for the house spirit to occupy, and then in that area you are not supposed to do anything to disturb it, like children should not be playing there. People should not go in and lean against it. It is considered very rude if you go into a Hmong home and you just go stand so close or to lean against it or to touch it. It is not OK to do that. And then they also use the joss paper money for the ceremony, like the shaman performing a healing ceremony—they cut it into different shapes, different designs, to symbolize different kinds of things, like a different form of payment. They make it into, like, they fold into a boat shape—that means a bar of silver.

(20:04) A bar of silver?

Yeah, uh-huh.

In a boat shape?

Yeah, they fold it like a little boat shape, and it symbolizes a bar of silver in the other world. And then they also—if you make it like a square, like this piece of paper, you just call that, it could be like a dollar, or whatever you call it, or whatever monetary value that you want it. It depends on if it is Laos or here. Here it is called a dollar, but in Thailand it's a baht. But it is the same paper [both laugh]. (20:36)

(20:36) The spirits don't care

Yeah, and so that's how they use it, but when you see at a funeral, they have this joss paper that they carve into a very, very elaborate branch, and it symbolizes silver and gold and jewels—everything, especially when an elder person dies. That's when you have this big paper that they carve into and they burn when they bury the person. It's sort of like to send the person to the other world so that they have money to spend, to use for the rest of their life on the other side.

(21:18) Do you have any sense of how old that practice is—of using joss paper to either pay the spirits or provide currency for ancestors? Does this go...

Yeah, it goes way back—centuries.

(21:33) You also said that there are medicinal spirits? Now are they another kind of household spirit, or...

Yes, they are part of household spirits, but the medicinal spirits, only the herbalists and the shamans maintain it. So if you go to a Hmong house, you see the household altar, which is the joss paper, and then you see another altar, a smaller one, which is usually a medicinal spirit, and then you see the shaman altar. And so when you see all these three, then you know that in that house, the family still maintains the traditional animist religion, and they have someone who knows how to practice medicine, herbal medicine, and they also have a shaman. But if you only see a shaman altar, then only a shaman; if only a medicinal altar, then only the medicine. Usually you always have the house spirit and either the shaman altar or the medicine altar, not a lot of families will have all three altars

(22:38) OK. Now, as you mentioned earlier, there are many outsiders who think of a shaman as a healer, which is a very different concept. What kinds of herbs and what kinds of medicine would a healer prescribe, as opposed to a shaman who might analyze the soul(s), see what's wrong, and maybe prescribe some kind of ritual or some kind of intervention. Please help us distinguish between those two things.

Usually when someone has a cut, it's bleeding, and of course they know it's some kind of physical thing, so you have to use some kind of medicine or herbal medicine to stop the bleeding or swelling so that you will recover. So that's how they heal it. But when a person has not injured him- or herself, but just suddenly cannot sleep at night, has lost weight, or is depressed, and has started to feel weak, that's when they think it's been caused by spirits. That is —the person has not done anything physically to hurt himself. So that is how usually, you know that you can go consult a shaman and usually this is what Hmong do, they usually consult both of those, the herbalist and the spirit, because you never know which of those is the problem. So usually the herbalist will give you some medicine to boost your system, so that you feel more energized. And then the shamans or the other spiritual healers will try to diagnose, to see if everything is OK. Are all of your souls with you? [The Hmong believe that sickness is often caused when one or more of a person's souls leaves the body. The longer the soul is absent, and the more souls that have left, the sicker the person becomes. The shaman must try to lure or cajole the souls back into the body to restore health.] Have you been frightened recently, have you been put in a situation that might have frightened your spirit away, or might your soul be lost? Things like that...

(24:31) You mentioned earlier that a soul can be like a child; it can just get curious and wander off on its own.

Yes

So how is that distinguished from it being frightened off or sort of forced away in some way?

That why Hmong do not encourage people to go to frightening places, like riding a rollercoaster. Hmong say you shouldn't do it, because if you ride a rollercoaster you're going to scream, you're going to get scared, and you're going to scream at the top of your voice and you're going to frighten your spirit away. Also, there are certain places where Hmong are very careful. These are Hmong perceptions of prevention, like you must take care of your soul—you do not let your soul fall down. If you fall down you frighten them; I mean, your soul falls down when you fall down. So if you should happen to fall down accidentally, then when you get up, you need to call, say, 'Oh, come, get up, go, let's go, don't stay here! This is not a place for you to stay!' And usually, the other Hmong parents, or whoever, you are with always call like that. When they have babies or small children, when they go visit their in-laws or to other places that's not their home, when they come out they always call by saying, 'Let's go home, everybody! Let's go home, don't stay behind.' But usually, if

people don't understand they will ask, 'Why are they talking to themselves?' But it's really for the purpose of [summoning] the soul that you call. Sometimes young couples who are not used to—they don't know these things, and they have their first baby and they don't do that and they come back home and the child will cry all night, right? And they couldn't figure out why until they will bring a flashlight to the door, and they will say, 'Come! We forgot to call you! We are home, so now come back. We are home, so don't wander around.' So this is how it is practiced.

(26:32) Are there specific herbs you can discuss that herbalists use, that Hmong people see as most effective for treating certain physical ailments?

Lots of the herbs that Hmong use are very unique to the Hmong, and I don't see an American store where they brought [these herbs] with them. But the other thing, like the lemon grass. The Hmong use the lemon grass. They boil the lemon grass until it's very hot and they add some cold water to cool it a bit, then they use it to wash their body to reduce swelling. They also have so many different kinds of herbs that they use, sometimes they use one herb or one plant alone; sometimes they use in combination with two or three other independent units. And usually the herbalist is the one who has practiced, who has learned from someone who has practiced for a long time. And so they will just take on their knowledge, which is not written down. It's transmitted orally, so they usually do practice by observation. They're also training so that they have the same knowledge that has been practiced for centuries and that they still maintain. So—and again, that's disappearing now, because lots of young people are not interested, and because we don't know or have all the plants that we need. You might have one or two, but not three. So the herbalist may not be able to do his job well due to lack of herbal plants.

(28:07) And also shows why your work is so important in helping to record, to maintain these traditions, at least in our memory. It seems that there are also rituals that Hmong people participate in, not only to cure or diagnose but to prevent. In many of the stories about the Hmong fighting in Laos, there would be stories about a ritual in which strings were tied around people's wrists. Could you explain the significance of that ritual?

Yes. The blessing string is, for example, used for many purposes. It's a multi-purpose ceremony. The Hmong use [it] when you have a new baby, after three days, traditionally, after the baby is born, on the third day they have the naming ceremony. They give a name to the child and perform the ceremony, and so they usually prepare a meal and then everybody are invited to attend. The adult males, will tie a string onto the baby's wrist and bless him as the string is being tied, and will call the soul to come into the body, so like an invitation that you are now a member of the family. Not only the string, but the Hmong will have one of these necklaces made of silver that every child will have to wear, and that is what, in Hmong we call *xawv* or *kuaj toog*, which means a lock, you know, like a locker, that means 'to lock your soul in your body' so that the soul will not wander away but know that it belongs in this person, in this family.

(29:55) Is that [the power of the necklace] more of a function of its being silver, because of the way it's made, or that it has a certain ceremonial significance...

It has a symbolic meaning which serves the purpose of protecting the child's soul. The silver is a sign of wealth that provides comfort and security to the child. The necklace was made, back in the old day, in a particular style. It had to be round and silver, and they made it small because it was for a child. And then as the child gets older, they make a bigger one. But the child will always wear it. In my generation, when I was little I always had one. But then because of the war, eventually we got to the situation that we were so poor that we had nothing, so my mother had to trade for some money so we could buy food and clothes, and eventually we lost everything. But that's how it used

to be practiced in my generation. And then after that, now no one knows that this practice of wearing silver necklace during childhood had existed anymore. The war and the migration erased everything. But the string ceremony was used for naming a new baby, used for weddings when a couple just got married, they tie a blessing for each other. It's used when a person recovers from a long illness, used when a person is going to travel on a long journey, or when a soldier is going to go to war—usually the family does that as a blessing; for safety and protection. So it's used for many events, such as graduation, birthday, etc.—this is a way of showing love and gratitude.

(31:29) How much of what you have learned has come from Hmong people here in the United States and how much of it have you had to learn by traveling—you've been to Laos, to Thailand, to China?

I conducted most of my research on Hmong religion, cosmology, and healing practices in the U.S. However, when I travel to Laos, Thailand, and China, I also collected information related to my research interests to compare and contrast with various topics. These cultural beliefs and practices are similar across national boundaries.

How much of this have you picked up overseas?

I picked up a lot—I think the core exists everywhere, but there's a variation in terms of practice and belief, and so most of my research about the cosmologies and all the spiritual beings is my research in this country, so when I travel around, I check around and see what I can compare with the similar and different versions—and the change—there is a lot of change.

(32:22) What do you see as some of the most significant changes in Hmong cosmology that have taken place here in the United States since the Hmong have come here?

Right now we have lots of diffusion. There's lots of borrowing, and a lot of the ritual that—like some of the ceremonial tools or accessories. Back in a Hmong village they would make a hand-carved bamboo bowl, out of wood, but now we use whatever we can buy from the store that looks nice and we use whatever to decorate. And so—like I described in the presentation, they used to just use a lamp or a candle, but now they have this artificial light that the shaman puts on the altar to make it look nice, and also to symbolize this light that leads into the other world. And so I see a lot of physical change. The spiritual—it's just a little bit hard to tell now that that the shamans start to explain the illness and they perform the ceremony in terms of, in comparison to Western perceptions, in order to make sense of their experience or contemporary life.

(33:46) So more rationality...

Yeah, more rationality, where before it was more subtle. They just did it, they didn't really explain what it was. But now they've learned how to explain the meaning or purpose of the ritual.

(34:00) Have you seen certain individuals or families or communities where individuals have converted to Christianity, but there has still been a sort of blending of the old Hmong spirituality with the accepted or received form of Christianity?

Yeah, there are Hmong who are—again, it depends on, in Christianity, what denomination they are converted to—there are those who become very strict, who follow the new form of religion and abandon everything of Hmong traditional practices. There are lots of things in Hmong culture that have nothing to do with belief or the spiritual, and they still abandon that. And there are also Hmong who are able to isolate—you know, to separate what is culture from religion, and they will still maintain their culture. For example, a lot of Hmong Christians—who become Christian now, they don't use the shaman in terms of ceremony or healing practices anymore, but still use the

herbalist, because they consider that just a physical thing, and a lot of them still use them [herbal medicines]. And then there are some Hmong Christians who don't maintain either form of healing practices whether herbal medicine or shamanism. And then we have some Hmong Christians who use both the herbalist and the shaman, because they think that the shaman is not a religion. The shaman is just a healing practice, and so when you—and this is where you spot the change—is that whether you believe in Christ or you believe in shamans—in animism, we all know that a person has a soul. And we all know that the soul goes to heaven or goes to the other world to be with your ancestors. And the soul exists. So when people understand this way, they think that if the shaman's going to make you become better, then why not use it? Your faith is your faith. You don't question about your faith; you know there is a God. So you pray for God to help you, if you get better, then that's fine; if you don't, then ask the shaman to help you, and that's fine, because the shamans are God's children who are sent into this world to help people. So there's nothing wrong with that. And so you have this variation. And so today there is a lot of variation in Hmong behavior, belief, and value—It's very dangerous for me to make a statement that, 'This is the Hmong way...'

Of course...

because 'Hmong' represents a wide range of experiences.

(36:42) Let's talk about the role of the shaman. You mentioned an array of tools and accessories that are at the shaman's disposal to use for what I'm sure are a wide variety of purposes. I particularly enjoyed your description of the shaman as someone who not only communicates but who bargains with the spirits. You also mentioned that shamans sort of have the role of shaman thrust upon them, that it's not something they choose to do, but that they're almost tormented into becoming a shaman. Could you talk more about the calling of becoming the shaman, and about the tools and accessories the shaman uses and how they play into the different rituals that s/he might perform?

Well, like I said earlier, the shaman will usually be called into the profession, and they will get sick for a period of time, and they will continue to try and find medicine to cure it, and eventually nothing works. And then they will see other shamans, and other shamans, one after the other, will keep telling them that 'you're going to become a shaman. This is the shaman spirit that has come to you and calls you to join the profession.' And so some of the people accept readily and some people don't, especially if they are younger. But eventually they give in. And when they start to go and see a master shaman who is an established shaman. And then they start to get the training, initially the two persons will go to a place where no one is around, and they will start to teach about the way of the other world, the spiritual world, and how do you call your spiritual helper, and all those things. They go through those processes.

(38:47) So you kind of get a mentor who shows you the way.

Yeah, shows you the way...

[Interrupted]

So when they are first performing, they will sit at the same bench, and the master sits on one end and the apprentice sits on the other end, and they perform together. And so the master will lead the way, and the apprentice will follow. And they do that, at least the first time or a few times, until the new shaman feels comfortable to be on his or her own. And usually, even when they perform on their own, the master usually sits around, trying to make sure that everything will go all right

(39:29) Sort of ‘quality control.’

Yeah, uh-huh. So they do that. And usually when a shaman dies, then the altar will be destroyed, but some of the tools will be kept by the family. They will keep it, and if they have someone in the family who becomes a shaman, then they will use it. Otherwise they will keep it, but then during the war, the times that I remember, because we were constantly moving, it was very hard to do that. Sometimes we had to flee in the middle of the night, and the shaman would forget to pack his or her tools, so then you wouldn’t have anything. When you’re in a new place you just have to do with whatever you have. You have to buy new tools, things like that. But a new shaman will have a new tool that he will keep in a bag. And when they use it they take it out; when they don’t use it they put it back, so that children cannot come and play with it. And when they need to travel, like a doctor, they just grab their bag and go. And so it’s very routine that a shaman will go to a patient’s house to perform the ceremony, because the patient is too sick to come. [And] the family wants to go over there [to the sick person’s house]. Because when you have a ceremony, it involves animal sacrifice—chickens and pigs—and usually people feel better that they do it in their own house. So the shaman often goes and does that. There are times when, just for diagnostic purposes, the shaman may perform a healing ceremony for someone else, but another person can come and ask the shaman to do a diagnosis for another patient also. So he can do the same thing. He can diagnose three or four patients while performing a healing ceremony. So that’s how it works. But the tool I mentioned earlier, the little cloth that they put over their heads and that every shaman has to have—and again, that is to blind them from this world and makes it so they are now in the other world. Then they have the finger rattles that they put on their fingers, because they are constantly shaking. And when they shake, they create a momentum, a musical...It’s like a [pauses]

(42:02) A rhythm.

A rhythm, [yes]. And then when they first begin the ceremony they have this gong that the shaman assistant, who sits next to the shaman, will just bang on. And he creates this loud noise. And they have the incense burning, and the rattle. And all of this creates a momentum that invites the spirit helper, that [says], ‘Oh, it is time to begin, to initiate a ceremony so we all should just go and help.’ And so that’s when the shaman will begin, just like I’m sitting down now, and he will just start shaking and shaking and shaking and they will be going into a trance, and that’s when they are ready and then they will go and travel to the other world and to carry out their mission. So that’s how they perform the ceremony. And then when a shaman goes into a deep trance, then he or she will be constantly chanting, and chanting. And lots of the chanting that they do will be in Hmong, and a lot is in words that we don’t understand. People will say, ‘That is Chinese,’ but then, because in China there are so many dialects, we don’t know if it is one of the Chinese dialects or is it more than one that they use? But then the shaman, when he or she comes out of the ceremony, they have no idea what they were saying. So it’s something where I keep wondering—it would be fascinating to record it and perhaps transcribe it and look into the different Chinese dialects to see which language or dialects they are, or is it a purely an spiritual or ceremonial language? That’s what we don’t know.

Track 2

(0:00) Would you say there’s a kind of patron spirit that works with the shaman, or does the he or she really have access to the whole variety of spirits?

No, the shamans have their own specific spirits and—again, there are two main ones the shaman works closely with, and these two are the ones who go, if they need help they call their assistants or soldiers to come and help them, to come in different troops. That’s how they see it, but then the shaman uses these spirits, and that’s why they have the altar, and they keep the water and the

incense, and sort like roasted rice, and they constantly change the roasted rice and water in the shaman altar—every time they perform their ceremony they change the roasted rice and water. So in a way it's like a feast for the spirit helpers, and then toward the end of the year, the shaman will send his or her spirit helpers on vacation, and then when the [New] Year comes, he will perform a ceremony and invite them back to his or her altar— [interrupted]

And so during the time that his spirit helpers are on vacation, the shaman won't perform any ceremonies, and then after the New Year, or when the New Year has arrived, the shaman will invite the spirit back, and that's when they will start to perform healing ceremony again. So every year, when they have the New Year and they invite the spirit helper back, that's when they redecorate the altar with the new design, decoration—new ceremonial paper.

(1:44) Now can there also be spirits that torment or work against a shaman?

Yes, they will—you know, evil spirits or wild spirits that are taking the soul, and so in the way the shaman goes is they look at the other world like in this world here, like you go to different counties and there's a mayor or a president or whatever. And so every time the shaman goes to this different space, they always have to talk with this leader and negotiate and go into their territory. So that's what happens—they will go to different places like that. That's what they have to work against. And then, especially when a person's soul has been lost for a long time and it's hard to bring back, maybe the soul has transformed to become another, reborn to become another human being, it's in the fetus of another, so that makes it very hard for the shaman. And so that becomes very complex. You have to take at least two or three complex ceremonies in order to bring the soul or spirit back—sometimes you're successful, sometimes you fail. So when the shamans do the diagnosis, he or she does their best. If they cannot bring [the soul] back they usually tell the family that it may not work. It's too late. And it just—and sometimes they explain that, because it's already taken another form, or maybe their spirits had already left, so it's impossible to bring back. There are times when the shaman can rescue the spirits and the sick person would recover. or their mandate of life have expired, and the shaman can't do much. And so people understand that, even though it's hard.