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Interview with Keith Vang

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Keith Vang

Interviewer/Transcriber/Editor: Paul Hillmer

(0:00) What is your name?

I'm Keith Vang. My Hmong name is pronounced *Ge*.

(00:14) What are your parents' names?

My father's name is—the exact pronunciation is Za Thao. And my mother's name is Txong Lor. She's still living with us here in Minnesota.

(00:28) Do you know where they lived before they moved to Long Cheng?

Yeah. My father grew up in a tiny little village in Laos called *Tha Sa. It's a very tiny little town. [He was the oldest of four siblings—three brothers and one sister. His youngest brother is now living in Albemarle, NC. His sister is still in Laos.] My mother grew up in *Nong Het, which is in Vietnam. And that was [during] the French and Vietnam War. [Her parents died during that conflict. She was raised by her uncle and his family. She still has relatives in *Nong Het.]

(1:03) So you were born in Long Cheng. What are your earliest memories?

My earliest memories are, I would say—in *Long Cheng I remember how the village was in a valley, sort of like that [forms a valley with his hands]. And then the next thing I remember was we were in Vientiane, which is a different city—the capital of Laos.

(1:29) And you mentioned that you had an uncle who was a T-28 pilot.

Yes.

What was his name?

His name was Vaj Tsuj.

And so he put your family in a plane and evacuated them from Long Cheng?

Yes.

(1:47) What do you remember about your life in Vientiane?

Life was good there. We lived in a little home next to a huge, nice lake. As kids growing up there you have all the things that you want. You've got fruits, you've got friends, and we had—we enjoyed the city life. We were able to see the carnivals and that was something that—most kids never had that opportunity.

(2:21) What was the carnival like?

You know, we didn't have all the nice rides like Valley Fair, but it was the typical merry-go-round, it was nice and always packed. I remember people coming to our village—or I should say house—selling stuff to us.

(2:43) So you have said that your father was a shaman.

Yes.

Talk to me like I know nothing about shamanism and Hmong spirituality. What would you say your father's role was, and what are some of the ideas or vocabulary words that we need to know to understand about shamanism and animism?

My father became a shaman at a very young age. I would say—back in the days they didn't really track age, but he had recalled being just a child. I would say—I would probably guess maybe less than ten or around ten. And his role as a shaman is a spiritual leader, especially in his clan, someone that has the—someone that can actually see beyond the reality but into the spiritual world. And there's—especially the Hmong people, they—hospitals are not that accessible to them, so a shaman would play a big part in their village whenever there's a person that is sick, he would be the spiritual healer. So that was his role, and also marriage counseling. In any sort of dispute he was considered a person to go to. Someone that could—I would say more wise about life because he has some—I would say the role he played is—he wore many hats. They are not the richest, but they are considered very humble.

(4:43) What kind of access does the shaman have to the spirit world? How does a shaman gain access to the spirit world?

A shaman gains access to the spiritual world through their shaman spirit. And when a person becomes a shaman they have to submit to the shaman spirit once that takes place. And they can channel the spiritual world by having special chants. Every shaman has a little different chant that they do. And these are sort of like speaking in tongues. So they always require someone to interpret.

(5:32) Would you say that there are different kinds of spirits or different groups of spirits that shamans would try to communicate with?

Well, to communicate with the spirit the shaman does see it as—there are evil spirits and then there are good spirits. And they feel the shaman spirit is a good spirit that allows them to enter into the spiritual world to find the lost soul or souls in that sense. And from there they encounter the other spirit that may torment this soul. And they either intervene in that process by chanting—by calling on their shaman spirit to intervene and bring back the souls to the persons, or by making a negotiation with the spirits that are tormenting these souls. And that does require the sacrificial—sort of animal. But it really depends on what the spirit and the shaman have agreed to. You are submissive to what they want.

(6:52) So a shaman's role is to interpret what a spirit wants from the person who's being afflicted or who has some kind of problem and providing an interpretation of what the person has to do.

There are actually two different roles in that. There are those that are sick or harmed because there are certain needs that need to be fulfilled. Especially something like that are—that require some sacrificial sorts of things. And then yes, there are sometimes more of an oppression of evil spirits upon the person's soul. So there are two different types of torments.

(7:40) If I remember correctly, you once said that Hmong animism teaches that a person has more than one soul. Is that correct?

According to their beliefs, they do. And I wanted to explain that a little bit. They believe that a person—I guess the different terminology, if you're going to explain it like a soul or a spirit—but they do believe that, and they do believe that the soul has the—can actually have an out-of-body experience or the soul may be able to actually leave the body and go somewhere else and get lost or feel—the soul may be hurt because of the person wanting to die or something like that and that causes the soul to grieve over that.

(8:39) You mentioned that your father shared many stories with you about spiritual battles that he endured. Would he come home after a ceremony and tell you about it, or are you referring to something else?

My father was a very open person and liked to tell stories. He liked to educate people. And he had talked about this to me at a very early age when he and my uncle probably were on some sort of journey

and came across this valley that had a river that went through it and they stopped there and—[pause] let me backtrack a bit.

Prior to coming to that valley he had performed some shaman ritual for this sick person and drove out the demon that had possessed this person. And so when they came across this valley, that demon appeared and wanted to confront him. And it appeared in the form of a fox. And this demon and he started a battle. They fought more of a physical fight. My uncle, on the other hand, could not see the demon, so he [my father] had called for help, the uncle could not see, and could not help him. Then my father had summoned the shaman spirit, and, as I said to you some time ago, they can summon the shaman spirit any time they want to. And he did that, and he sort of like spit some form of water into my uncle's eyes so that he could see—sort of like a holy water, like, 'Here! See it now!' And after that my uncle started seeing this creature and they battled. And the creature obviously left them, and that night came into a dream to let him know that this was not the last that he would see of this creature. And he became sick afterward, had some diarrhea, problems like that, but he was OK.

(11:10) So it's possible that the shaman spirit has a sort of rival evil spirit that will torment the shaman?

They are sort of like if you—I would say that they [shamans] are like a warrior for the good and they will go against these evil spirits. And the shaman spirit allows this person to travel into that spiritual world and does the battle there.

(11:40) I've read about different rituals. For instance, before battle or after meeting and making an agreement with an important French or American soldier, Touby Lyfong or General Vang Pao would engage in a ceremony of protection where strings were tied around the wrists of the participants. Can you shed any light on this ceremony?

Normally there are two types of a shaman ritual. One is sort of like if you—I will put it in a computer sense. Let's say you only want to read it. You don't do any writing or changes or anything. You're just observing to make sure that everything's OK. That's a ritual where they just perform or look into the person's soul and make sure everything's OK, and if it's OK they'll say it's OK. The other ritual where you see the tying of string is more of—actually writing to something, like in a computer you're making some changes, fixing something, break's fixed, so the shaman goes into the spiritual world, does the shaman fixing. If he finds anything that may need fixing he would fix it, make negotiation, things like that. The strings are a symbolic form of blessing and when someone ties a string around someone's hand they are making a blessing. Usually they say all sorts of nice things about the person—you know, safety, longevity, everything else.

(13:20) A shaman, I assume, also has a special place at funerals, or perhaps at the New Year festival?

The funeral isn't a role of the shaman. The shaman takes care of more of a ritual before someone passes away. But the shaman—because the shaman is in tune with the spiritual world, the shaman usually knows more about the spiritual side and the shaman may have some skills that allow them to participate in the funeral. But not all shamans learn that skill. Not all shamans may want to participate in things like that. My father had a special skill with a very—I would say he was a professional flute, bamboo flute player. And because he was also a shaman he learned a lot about rituals in terms of—there are rituals for the living, rituals for the dead, things like that. And so he had served in both places, but not all shamans are like that. When someone passes away, there is that special person who does the flute, who does the guiding through the passage, the journey home.

[More about this later in the interview]

(14:52) What about the New Year?

[In the] New Year a shaman plays the role of making sacrificial—usually the chicken—they take the chicken out and they say, ‘This is the chicken,’ and the blessing there, and then everybody will go ‘round and round in circles and for the old year and for the new year they go in the opposite direction, things like that. A shaman plays in that, but pretty much anyone that knows about spiritual, knows about ritual—this is more of a ritual. It doesn’t require that you have to have a shaman spirit. It’s a learned thing.

(15:32) Now you fled to Vientiane and lived there for a time until the Americans pulled out...
Yes.

Was your father just as busy being a shaman in Vientiane as he had been in Long Cheng?

Shamans, I guess being a shaman is almost like you’re a doctor for life. So when there is a need someone will come to you and say, ‘I have a need,’ and we made a—what they do is they sort of like make a lottery choice: ‘Who can help us out?’ And when they do that and it landed on you, obviously they will come and do anything possible to have you come and do the performance as a shaman. The shaman can choose to refuse or not, but normally they give in because they feel it’s their calling. So they go and help

(16:39) So the Americans left and you said you had to leave Long Cheng then.

When the Americans left in 1975 we actually flew to Vientiane in 1972. Like I said, I was just born, and a little after that we flew there. We stayed there until 1975. We came back to the north, the northern part of Laos. [Keith had said before the tape recorder started that his uncle had been shot down and killed before his family fled to the north in 1975.]

(17:04) Do you remember where you were?

Yes, we were in this town called *Ba Hia, which is near more of a larger town called *Muang Oun, which is more popular [populous]? I would say if you were to fly by plane or just travel by car from *Muong Oun to Long Cheng, it’s probably not that far—maybe eight hours or something like that. But people walked.

(17:40) What was your life like in the north? You had a reasonably settled life in Vientiane and then the Americans left. You had an uncle who was a pilot and a father who lived in Long Cheng. On some level you must have been targets.

Yes. The lifestyle in the north is very much based on agriculture. During the time when the war was going on, the Hmong people had been exposed to farming opium, and that was a form of—they used it as medication, used it for...anything else. So it was more of a farm life. We lived on the farm, people weren’t educated. Lifestyle was more of—I’d wake up in the morning and I’ve gotta go do my farming. Because if I don’t do that, at the end of the year I’m not going to have anything to eat. So we had that type of lifestyle—always waking up and going to the farm. That’s how I saw my parents. They were very busy, and would work ‘til sunset. They worked very hard just to feed their family. Basically it was a means—it was not for profit, it was just to feed the family.

(18:57) So was this a seven-day-a-week, sunrise-to-sunset kind of job?

Yes. Sunrise to sunset, seven days a week. Hmong people didn’t really have a day of rest unless they had to stay home due to some ritual that was performed on them. And the shaman would say to them, ‘You cannot go anywhere for this many days,’ and to them that would be considered—‘I can’t go anywhere.’

(19:23) And what was your role at that age?

I was the youngest. My brothers were soldiers. My oldest brother was a commander in the army and he was trying to escape and cross to Thailand. My older brothers were—I would say they were probably just lieutenants. And my second-oldest brother came back and took care of us, because my parents were—you know, my father wasn't that old, but as a son he had to come back and take care of us. My other brothers were trying to escape and go across to Thailand. My role as a kid was just to be a good kid.

(20:13) Did you work in the fields with your parents?

I tried to help, but I'd get in the way. But my job was—yeah, I'd go with my parents all the time 'cause there was no one to baby sit me. I'd go with them

(20:26) Were there times during this period when you had to hide or to flee or to try to escape from those who were looking for your father?

Yes. I would say—roughly around 1977. Because in 1975 the communists penetrated into Laos—I shouldn't say penetrated, because there were some that were already in Laos, but they actually took over, and they said, 'You know what? There's not going to be anything wrong. It's the Americans that we don't like. You guys are OK. You continue your daily living and nothing's going to happen to you.' Around 1977 they started passing out some flyers using some small planes, and dropping flyers out and that's when you started noticing that life was going to change. And they started the fight, they started the war against the Hmong people during 1977 and we had to escape our village. We couldn't live there because of the bombs and these cannons—they called them the cannons—75, 65 [millimeter shells?], these long-shot cannons were shooting at our village. We had to escape to the mountains and hide there for days. And then we couldn't come back, and then there was more of a running away from these cannons. Soldiers were coming after us. And at the end we came back and we surrendered. Surrender means to, first of all, admit defeat. I don't see why there was a war in the first place. (***) But to admit defeat, to surrender any form of weapons you have—guns or anything you have. And then you can't really—you don't really have the freedom to go anywhere. You can't go or do what you wish, especially hunting. And the Hmong people are known to hunt for food. You can't go to places to farm. It's much harder. So we did that. I would say during 1978 we just came back and surrendered.

(22:52) So this is almost like house arrest? You have to stay in your village?

Yeah, there are soldiers in the village now. And if you want—let's say for an example, you got a bunch of guys with you and you feel like, 'Let's go hunting somewhere,' you can't just go, because any form of—you can't just carry guns. Maybe if the village is lucky enough they will allow you to have one gun—those old antique guns, you know. Nothing special about it. You have to get permission to go. Not that you have permission to hunt, but permission to go, so that if anything should happen, you are liable for it. And I experienced a lot of tragedy in my life, and in my clan. I lost many house members because the communists framed them and shot them for no reason.

(23:46) Tell me more about that.

I had an uncle that was roughly about 18; he was a very bright person. He led the village. Earlier you asked me about shamans and their roles. It was almost like the smart ones usually took the lead, and my uncle was a very bright person at a very young age. [He] got married in less than a year [before he died], and they had given him the title of—sort of the leader of the clan. So therefore they wanted to hunt for food. And they had asked the communist soldiers for permission, and they had said it was OK for them to go hunt. So roughly about 15 to 20 guys and children—myself, I was included, I was about five or something like that. I wanted to tag along, but I was small, so I didn't get a chance to go. But my uncles, along with my nephews, they went. And there was this mountain they needed to climb to go to the top of the mountain. What happened was that these communist soldiers had phoned a different party, a different communist party in a different town, and what they did was they went over the

mountain and encircled them, so when my uncle and them got to the top of the mountain they surrounded them and tied them together and shot them. And for the whole—they killed everybody, including little children, and it was a terrible thing to see at that very young age. You know, when I talk about it, it's so vivid, so vivid in my mind. I myself almost got involved, because I had this cousin of mine, and he was a—he liked to go hunting also. We were kids. So we woke up in the morning and we were a little late. We didn't get a chance to go with them. But I remember seeing one of the last persons to go up in the mountain. And he had talked to us and he said, 'You know, kids, if you really want to hunt, this isn't the place to hunt. You've got to with us to the mountain. That's where the big game is at.' And the reason why we went to the field was because we wanted to tag along. But I had missed—we had missed the uncles, because they had gone early. So this guy came along and he said that, and we started trotting with him for a couple of steps. And there was this thing about going that I started pondering about, and I said to my cousin, 'Let's not go. We haven't told our parents about it, and let's just...' It wasn't right. And we stepped back, so we came home. We tried coming home and before we even got to our home, we heard the gunshots. We didn't know what was going on, but we heard gunshots. And then later on that evening no one came home. And they waited. And they started calling out, asking people if they'd seen these people. No one came home. And we heard a very strange voice of my uncle—the uncle that was about 18 or 19—calling from the mountain, telling us that they had been shot, and they're all dead, and to come and help. To the surprise of these communist soldiers, they couldn't believe that they were hearing this voice. You could actually hear it right around the corner of homes, things like that. It was like it was on a loudspeaker. It was beyond scientific explanation. And they were surprised that someone was calling out, because they knew they had shot all these folks. So what happened was that they finally gave in and allowed my other cousins to go up into that mountain and retrieve them, and when they got there, everybody was tied up in a circle. The little ones were in the center, and everybody got shot, and no one had escaped, including my uncle. He had died at a very early age. Like I said, he got married less than a year [before], died, and when they did the ritual burial, he was crying. He was dead, but crying. It was a sad thing to see.

(28:26) You saw this?

I saw this—everything.

What was your uncle's name?

Oh boy [pause]. *Ge Bo. Ge Bo.* *Ge* stands for a rock, or like rocky. *Bo* is 'protection.' 'Protection from the rocky' is how you would translate it.

(28:50) So ultimately your family must have decided it wasn't safe to stay...

They wanted to leave because my older brother had already arrived in Thailand. My second brother stayed back just to be with us, and then I had this other brother that went with him also. So we knew that we couldn't stay in Laos anymore because they were torturing the Hmong people. We heard many stories about other villages being slaughtered...

(29:26) How did these stories come to you?

Well Hmong people live in a very—they live near each other, and when you hear something from one village, information travels easily to the next village. And the slaughter of people in our village was traveled to a different town. And then when we moved from that village to a different town later on, we heard that same group of soldiers did the same thing to this other village nearby, too.

(29:59) So which village were you living in originally, and which one did you move to?

We lived in...let's see [pauses to think] a little town called *Ba Hia and then we moved and we started running away, and we came back, and we decided that there was nowhere to go, so we surrendered and went back to *Ba Hia. And then when that all happened, they were going to ship us to a town called

*Muong Tia, which is past *Muong Oun—I would say maybe a couple hours past, but if you were sent to this place, it was much harder to escape to Thailand, because they were surrounded. So I had an uncle that was head of the clan, head of the village in this town called *Muong Oun, and he had talked to the soldiers about letting us stay there, so we stayed there, and in less than a year we went to a little countryside and we farmed there. And the only reason we went there was so that we could have a little freedom and so that we'd have a chance to come to Thailand.

(31:15) So when did this happen, and where did you end up in Thailand?

In 1979 we landed in Thailand. But it took that many years for us to plan things out. And we were fortunate that my brothers, who were in Thailand, said to the folks that were going back to Laos to help people to come to Thailand to come and get us. And that information got to us and we decided that it was time for us to leave, and we walked for over a month. And we got to the Mekong River, and we didn't know to swim—but my brother did (the one who stayed with us). So he was the one that pulled all of us. He had, I would say, probably three kids or four kids, along with my sister-in-law, my parents, and I. He was the one that swim...

(32:19) He just...

Yeah, he dragged everybody...

...put you under his arm and...

No, I had this tiny little raft jacket; it was almost like a plastic balloon. And I had that and I kind of like put that put on top of—underneath my stomach and—so what they did was they tied ropes to each other and he was the one who was swimming against the current, dragging all of us across. Many people did that, and some of the Thai, when they heard that people—they saw that people were swimming across, some came to help, others came to rob, others came to kill. So we finally made it across the river, stayed there until dawn, and we came out and went into the village and we were pretty much robbed. They stole everything we had. And the head of the village came out and apologized for what his villagers did, and asked if we had any money. [Laughs ironically.] And it was, like, 'Yeah, right! You stole everything!' But we were fortunate to have two silver bars, and he then ordered these two trucks, little pick-up trucks. He sent us to this—more of a modern village or modern town, near the coast—this is still near the coast of the river. And we stayed there, and the first time I saw the missionaries [they] came in their truck and they dropped off food—noodles, wai-wai noodles that were typical noodles that...

What kind of noodles?

Wai-wai. W-A-I, W-A-I noodles. The first time I ate noodles there, we didn't have any water; there was nothing to cook. We ate it raw. The first time I saw missionaries, they didn't say anything. They just dropped off the food. None of the Thai people did anything for us, other than the first [who] robbed us and took us there later on. The official said that they were going to ship us to Vinai. That was during—Ban Vinai. Have you heard of that?

Yes.

But before we got there we were shipped to this concentration, uh—sort of a concentration camp...

(34:46) A refugee camp?

Refugee camp. It was so awful! There was no bathrooms, nothing. It was terrible. So we got there, and I was sick and I spent two weeks in the hospital. Had a blood transfusion done on me. So I was kind of fortunate that the Lord blessed us like that. I was suffering. My parents didn't stay with me in the hospital. We were treated—hot, clean water and food there. And then we went straight to Ban Vinai.

(35:16) Do you remember the names of the village and the first refugee camp in Thailand?

When we got Shanghaied and got shipped that was just across [the Mekong River] we don't know what that village is called, but when we were sent to that camp, that refugee camp, they called that (***). I don't know what that stands for, but it was a terrible place, and everyone that came there, they would tell the same story. It is not the place you want to go.

(35:44) So from 1979 to 1981 you were in Ban Vinai?

Yes. In 1979 we came there. We celebrated our first—we celebrated that New Year there. In 1980 we came to—we were released to come to the United States. But the government was so corrupted that if you got some money and you paid the government they would allow someone else to come before you. So we missed that first trip, 'cause someone went in our place instead. So in 1981, around March, we landed in Lansing, Michigan.

(36:28) Let's go back for just a second. What do you remember about the Ban Vinai experience? What was it like for you?

I went to school there for the first time. I wanted to learn. My brother, who was educated in a school in Laos, had talked about how we were going to get these opportunities to learn, when we go to Thailand or America. So I really wanted to go to school, and I had my chance to go to school there and study first grade. I went to second grade and then I came to America. So I had school, we had hot water—I guess I shouldn't say hot water. No hot water! You know, you were in a camp. You can't go outside without permission, but you had the freedom to walk around the camp. And you had your own little village there, so it was a lot nicer. Other than that, you don't have the freedom to go elsewhere.

(37:25) Were there other family members or village members—other people that you knew at Ban Vinai, or was it just your family?

Yes, I had two uncles. When we actually came from our village in Laos to Ban Vinai, we—you know, the whole village, I would say the whole clan—at least my clan—came. We left my uncle with my grandma, who was too old to come, so we left him to take care of her. It was more of a duty as a son. So my uncle was left behind. So when we got to Thailand we had two other uncles who had—who my father originally had stayed with when we were in Vientiane. And these were considered—during the war they were commanders-in-chief of the army. And we came there in—we came there to stay in their apartments. We had this little shack next to this huge complex. Everybody pretty much was jammed into this apartment complex.

(38:50) What do you remember—and I realize you were still very young—but you came from Laos and Thailand into this completely foreign environment.

Yes.

And obviously the clothing, the weather, the technology, the different kind of urban setting, all of these things must have been very puzzling. Do you remember having to struggle with this transition?

I would say my first experience in actually seeing a Caucasian in Ban Vinai was one of the missionaries folks there occasionally came and visited my uncle. I saw that. And then we had to learn English, because we—I knew that we were going to come to America, so my father paid for me to go study English for about two months. So I learned basic greetings like, 'Hello,' and 'How are you?' and then I first saw—I guess when we actually—when we were about to board the plane to come to America, we had to go through some sort of education, training. And they trained us like, 'Here in America it's going to be like this and like this.' And it was very strange to see these figures of elderly women that, as a child I thought 'they have these weird, long noses.' ...We arrived in San Francisco and we had people

greeting us in English, and we tried to greet them back in English, as much as we knew, you know it was like, 'Hello. How are you?' And then they said a few more words, and you said, 'I don't know!'

(41:01) Do you remember anything else about what they taught you at this orientation you received?

More of the how to take a shower, how to go to the bathroom, 'hello.' Pretty much it was nothing special. It was just very, very basic. Be sure to lock your door...you know, just very basic stuff. You're going to be traveling in cars, put shoes on [chuckles], because it was the normal thing not to have shoes in Laos. We were very poor. To have shoes you were very fortunate.

(41:43) So you arrived first in San Francisco and ended up in Lansing, Michigan.

Well, we—the plane landed in San Francisco. We stayed there for maybe a couple days. And from there we landed in Lansing, Michigan. And then our sponsor came—I think I mentioned that our sponsor was Ascension Lutheran Church. And they came and greeted us, and my brother also came and we settled in this one bedroom apartment.

(42:18) How many family members did you have in this one bedroom apartment?

I guess I was the youngest, so it was just me and my mom and my dad.

So you brothers did not come with you?

They had their own family and they actually came—they came, too, but they were lucky enough to come to Lansing in 1980, which we didn't, because somebody went ahead of us.

But you knew where your brothers were...

Yeah, so we came to Lansing. So my oldest brother that I talked about earlier that had already escaped to Thailand, my oldest brother had already come to Lansing, and then he sponsored—or the church also sponsored my other brother who had taken care of us, and he arrived in Lansing in 1980, and then we came in 1981.

(43:10) So here you are. Your father is a shaman, and you've been sponsored by a Lutheran church. That had to make for an interesting contrast. There had to be some questions about how this Hmong animist family would fit into this new environment.

When we got here in Lansing, Michigan, my brother, my oldest brother, as I mentioned, was also a shaman, but he had gone to church. I believe [he was] baptized also. And then when we came, we wanted to fit in. I remember my father talked about how—'fit in,' and wanted to leave the old ways. My father—being a shaman wasn't something that he had always enjoyed. It was a lot of responsibility, and he was growing old and he was tired of that kind of lifestyle. And so he had said to us that he didn't want to become a shaman anymore, and wanted to leave that world and one of the reasons that he had always feared doing that was because he felt the shaman spirit would not leave him. But now he felt that he had a higher power, and many Christians had mentioned about how they, too had similar experiences, and now they had accepted Christ, and their lives had changed. Father had heard those kinds of stories, and we accepted Jesus Christ. He—but due to the language barrier, more of a cultural shock, he didn't really know what to expect. And even though we had bible lessons in our home and I would be the one translating—that's how scary that was [laughs].

[End tape side one]

(00:02) So I would assume that in the beginning you're interpreting Christianity through your own culture, so there's kind of a mixing of animism and Christianity, at least to some degree. Do you remember anything like this?

Yeah. I started first grade when I got to Lansing, and I started learning the catechism and going to first grade, all the way to eighth grade, and, I guess, working at church as the acolyte. And to me, I feel that some—there was a greater power or greater being watching over me. Let me kind of briefly explain that. When we were in Laos, at a very young age, when we moved from Vientiane to *Ba Hia—my father also has another story. He was married to this other lady who had passed away and left my father with these three sons and a daughter. So when he married my mother, my mother's other husband was accidentally shot by one of the villagers, so she had a son, so when my father got married to my mother, I was the only one [the only child they had together]. And when I was very young, I remember going to visit the [family] of the previous wife. I saw these images—scary, ghostly images in the ceiling. I was frightened, because every time we'd go there I'd feel some sort of evil was watching me. And I was probably around three going on four, and I was very scared. So my father would, with him being a shaman, look into the spiritual world and said that it was his previous wife who came and just wanted to see me. That's pretty freaky! So my father had this very strange relationship with his previous wife. She had died, but yet spiritually he felt she was still tormenting him. And so he had many times battled or refused to go with her. And every time my mother and my father would talk about her something bad would happen. And I remember we went to the farm to do some farming, and they had talked about her—the previous wife—and all of a sudden these rocks came flying from the top of the mountain—came flying like people were throwing rocks at us. It was that strange—and one landed on my head! So my father went up there and started calling names and said, 'Who's responsible?' and there was no one there. So he came home and he did his shaman thing, and to him he found out that it was her again. So I had that type of experience. And then during the war, when we were running, I fell into this rushing river that was so strong! It was raining, my cousin and I were trying to cross this river, but the rain had just stopped, so the river was just gushing with everything—all these twigs and everything else. And it was the first time I tried to cross the river like that and I was afraid. So my cousin started crossing and we walked on this log, this huge tree that had fallen down. And for some reason I looked down and—there was a mirage—and I looked down and I saw that—whoa!—the tree was moving! And in my mind, I had to hold on to the tree, and the moment I started doing that, I was washed away. And for about, I would probably say for less than five minutes I was washed away. I drowned, and I felt this peacefulness come over me. And I saw my mother at home. I was at home now. I had this peacefulness that came over me and I saw my mother. As they say, my life was passing before my eyes. And all of a sudden I felt this enormous hand grab me, and when that happened, I grabbed the hand, and when I did that, I landed on this huge rock, the only—the greatest rock, the biggest rock in the river. And I was able to pull myself up and stood on top of this rock, and my cousin, who had witnessed this whole thing, could not believe what he saw. And that experience taught me a lesson that there were some greater beings watching over me. That was my first experience. The other time was during the time I talked earlier about—you know, my cousins being shot by the communist soldiers. I, too, could have been part of that group, but like I said, I felt that some being was watching over me, and had told me not to go. And I was saved again. And when we came to Thailand I was very sick, and I had that blood transfusion done on me, and we were very fortunate to spend the days in the hospital. We could have been in that camp, and I don't know how we would have survived. My parents were old, and it was just terrible. (***) There's nothing. Literally, people just go to the bathroom where they sit. It was just not a place where we wanted to be or should see. So when we came to America I was introduced to the Gospel and I had accepted openly. And to me it was more of a coming home. This is where I should have been. This is why I'm here. At that time I actually had that sense.

(7:08) You mentioned that you were essentially translating the bible for your parents when you were doing bible study at home.

Yes.

Was there no one from the church who worked with you? Were you simply left to do your own thing in your own way?

My pastor came and taught us bible lessons, and so my pastor and I were pretty close, because, you know, I was his own means of communication to my brothers, to my father and mother

(7:39) So it wasn't just you and your parents, it was your brothers also who came to this.

Yes, because we all went to the same church. And I knew the Bible better than they did, so I was translating what my pastor said. We did that for a while until we found this lay minister, a Hmong lay minister, to come there and do that part for us.

(8:15) You mentioned that about six years after your family was converted that they decided that Christianity wasn't for them.

I guess to make the story a little shorter...

Don't make it short on my account. We like long stories.

OK. My father had always been a shaman, so many people knew that he was a shaman. They did not know that he was converted to being a Christian, which he had found his new faith or new religion to be rewarding, because he was willing to leave all that behind and he had found peace in his life for once. As I mentioned earlier, he had tried—he wanted to leave that behind, to escape that torment that his previous wife—which he felt was still after him. But eventually when more Hmong people came to Lansing, and they knew that he was a shaman back in the days, they came and begged and begged him. I remember going to the Lutheran church, we each were given a cross, and we had worn our cross every day, and my father had a much bigger cross that he wore, and he had told the fellow that came—he had told him that he no longer performed the shaman ritual anymore, because he is a Christian now. Well, that fellow doesn't know anything about being a Christian, yet my father is also a newly converted Christian, and as the guy begged and begged, and—my father was always a kind person, he decided, 'Well, maybe one time will be OK. But maybe just this once.' And he went to perform the shaman ritual and he came back and he told us that he didn't feel the same anymore, that he felt the shaman spirit wasn't with him anymore. It was more of a fake. He couldn't really see how he saw, but he realized he had the cross with him. And he didn't—more people came and asked him to perform. And more and more people came. And as he got into that again, every time he went he took the cross off. And then he felt, 'OK, maybe this is becoming something that I can't just hide behind the church anymore. I need to do something. Because, according to the shamans, if you perform shamanism, you have to have an altar for the spirits to communicate. You have to have an altar to—not in terms of worship, but an altar looks like a home. And so we had an altar built in our apartment, and when we had bible study they would cover the altar. Later on my pastor—I don't know if he knew about shamanism, or at least Hmong shamanism, but my father had asked the pastor if it was OK for him to perform shamanism. Well, I guess the translation of what he was doing, when my pastor heard it, he had questioned, 'Are you doing something to harm someone or is it something good?' My father had replied that it was a good thing. And the pastor, without realizing what my father was doing, said, 'It's OK. If it's good, it's OK.' So later on when the lay minister came and ministered to us, that got across my pastor, and then that's when they said, 'I didn't know this. If I knew about this, I would have told him not to do this.' And then they took my parents to church and they talked to them about taking down the altar and really just being Christians, sticking to the word of God. And during this time there were a lot of Hmong people in Lansing already. A lot of people had a lot of expectations of my father and he decided with the pastor and also the lay minister by his side that—I felt he was pressured into taking down the altar. So I got home one day and saw the pastor and the lay minister, along with my father, and asked them what they were doing, and the pastor told me, 'Your father has decided that he wants to take down the altar.' And I—obviously my father was there, too, and I thought my father was happy. I was glad he wanted to do that, because like I said at the beginning, he wanted to escape that. I

was happy for him, and I took part in it. So I helped him take down the altar. And then later on my sister-in-law came and said, 'What are you guys doing? Do you guys know that if you do this the shaman spirit is going to attack my father?' And that—reality just hit him or something. And he was scared to death. And he experienced many—and he was traumatized, we should say. He experienced a lot of sickness, and then the—we didn't have the support from the church. They didn't come to pray for him. Also he was upset at the pastor, so the pastor had—you know, cut the communication between him[self] and my parents. And it was me—I would still go to church, but it was just me. That's that story.

(14:29) So you never really had a lot of support in the congregation for your father.

Because of the language barrier we did not get that kind of support.

(14:39) Now I would imagine it has to be somewhat difficult. I would assume that the majority of Hmong people in Lansing were not Christian.

Correct.

So what is it like to be essentially a religious minority within an ethnic or racial group in Lansing?

It was difficult, but it was something that the Hmong people were willing to accept. They knew that a lot of Hmong really were looking for some sort of higher power. And back in Laos a higher power was someone like a shaman who could perform a ritual. And now you can go to church and you can accept God into your life and you can—you know, you were free from that sort of bondage. You were free from the bondage that you had to do all sorts of things to please the spirit. And one day we were taught that, many were willing to accept that [Christianity], while others were—hesitated to accept that, because others felt the Hmong ritual was a tradition and it wasn't more a religion, but it was a tradition. They're so intertwined together that sometimes, for Hmong persons who say, "What's religion, what's culture?" it's hard for them to diagnose [distinguish?] the two.

(16:11) So while this religious piece is going on in your family, in your church, in your community, you're obviously also going to school, making friends, feeling more familiar with and more comfortable in American culture. Do you remember that process or any steps along the way that made you think, 'OK, I'm getting it. It's becoming easier or more comfortable'?

My father, even though he had turned back and decided to do the practice of shamanism again, he had always encouraged me to continue to go to church. He felt that was a good thing for me. He would not perform the shaman ritual on me, because he felt I was protected by a higher power. He had that understanding until later on, when we moved away from the church, and it was more of that lifestyle where we were like in Laos, where he was in charge of pretty much the ritual—everything that was—we didn't go to church for a while, when we moved like that. So, you know, as a child growing up in that sense, I never really struggled with my Christian identity or anything. I had the free will to go worship. My mother took me, even though my mother also took care of my father. And I saw that a lot of other parents were not as open, and I think that my father was open [because] he understood the spiritual world. Yet he knew that I would be different. But he was willing to accept that.

(18:10) So there wasn't the same sort of stigma attached to being a Christian in the Hmong community that there might be in the Christian community for someone who becomes Muslim or something like that.

No. It wasn't like that. It was more of a higher power. The Hmong people understand the spiritual world as a—man versus the omnipotent beings. These are omnipotent beings, which means some beings—there's a level of power, and as a shaman you are one that can go into that spiritual world, but

yet you don't have the power to overcome all the spirits. Some spirits you may, with your shaman spirit, you're always going in there and making negotiations.

(19:12) What was school like for you?

It was hard. I went in my first day of school, I saw the principal standing outside, greeting the kids. I walked in, the principal greeted me, and—I think she must have said 'hello,' or 'good morning' or whatever, and I said 'yes' to her, and she looked at me, puzzled. She asked a few more questions that I didn't know how to answer, so I said, 'no,' so it was more of a 'yes, no.' And then she took me to my first grade teacher, and I studied there, and we had—the first grade was divided into first grade and second grade, and we had segregated (I don't know if that's the right word, but—) on the left side would be first grade, on the right side would be the second grade, so, yeah, sort of segregated like that, and I really wanted to be the second grader [PH laughs], because I felt, when I was in Thailand, I was going to second grade, so I really wanted to be the second grader, and also my cousin met this other new kid on the block who was also a cousin, and he was a second grader. And because he was a second grader and sat on the other side, I wanted to be a part of that group. So I studied really hard, learned my ABCs as fast as I could, and wanted to be a second-grader. And in less than a year I started picking up, thanks to those wonderful cartoons they had, I started picking up English. And fast as—then I became a second grader, and after second grade I stopped going to the ESL classes. And the teachers were very helpful. They knew that I was still trying so hard to learn, and sometimes they would test me by asking me a question—for me to grab something, so that I can actually understand what they were saying. Something as simple as, 'Can you go get me that chalk over there?' And you go over there and you're looking—'What is a chalk?' I want some chalk, but I can't find it! [And the teacher would say] 'There! Right over there!' (***)

(21:25) Do you think your classmates accepted you? Were there problems?

You know, I think—I don't know. I wasn't really aware of the racial tensions like nowadays. But growing up in that environment as kids, I think kids live in their own different world. I had a lot of friends who were Caucasian and a lot of friends who were African American, and I had other friends who were Hmong and Vietnamese. They'd come over and spend time with me and I'd go over and spend time with them. We didn't really see any racial tension until we started going our own ways, and that was in junior high. That was when I started seeing that I was different, and they started seeing that we were different, that they were different. We stopped hanging out with each other, and things like that. But other than that, you know, obviously kids are going to call each other names, and times change.

(23:04) So how do you see yourself as a Hmong Christian man living in the United States? What is your role or your identity in this time and in this society?

I see myself as a second generation Hmong, but also a Christian Hmong person, and I think there is a great calling I feel that the Lord has called me to. And as a Christian we have our responsibility to fulfill, to bring our family to know God, and to understand, to be a light and a salt to the world. And because I would say that I am maybe one per cent of my family, and 99% are the others who are still non-Christian or are curious about becoming a Christian. I don't separate myself from them, as Christ said, you know his commandment was to love your God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind, but [also] to love your neighbor as you love yourself. I would go and help them out as much as I can, and I do have the free time to do so. I don't perform what they do, but I will go and help them, and share with them. And there are times when I have been given the opportunity to witness or pray for my nieces or nephews, or my other cousins. And I see that more Hmong people are coming to where this traditional ritual can't go on any longer, because it's too difficult for one thing. The other thing is people don't live their lifestyle based on [plants? The agricultural cycle?] anymore, like in the ancient, the old days. These days it's like, wherever—the economy takes you wherever you want to go—

wherever you find a job, you go there. And a lot of the non-Christians are becoming aware of that, so especially younger generation, they don't know anything about the ritual practice, and because there's that huge gap between the elders and the younger generation, they don't have that tie with each other. So the younger generation are either left open to be dragged into practicing the old ways, because when something happens they consult with their parents, and their parents say, 'You know what? We don't know anything about this, but we have an uncle that knows about this, and then they consult with that person, and that person then does the ritual. Or else they're pretty much left in their world and they either are—they're free thinkers, you know? And that's pretty sad that it's harder to reach out to these folks than to someone who still is still spiritually in tune. Right now they're either—they believe in evolution more than believing that there are spiritual beings that (***)'. And I think that gives us—as a Christian that gives me a great joy to say that when I meet someone, I can be as open as I want to be, 'cause that person is willing to listen. I'm not forcing my way or being very preachy to anyone, but I want the opportunity to let them know that there is hope, that there is another way.

[End of Track 2]

(00:01) It sounds like you are very comfortable bringing together the Christian tradition and your own traditions. You don't see Christianity as a Western or an American religion.

Yeah. I don't see it like that, where the older folks and maybe the ones who are brought up differently see it as a Western religion. But if they really want to find out, the more they learn about it, they will realize it's not. And I see it, like I say to people, I see it as a relationship. It's like Jesus asked his disciples: 'Who do you say think that I am?' or 'What do people think that I am?' It's almost like, 'What am I to you? Do you think I'm some kind of crazy person, or your Lord and Savior?' So I see that as a relationship, and yet someone else, especially in the Hmong community, may see it as a ritual practice. And when they see it like that, they'll say, 'We have our own traditional ritual practice' or 'You're practicing a different ritual.' But I see it [as something] beyond ritual practice.

(1:19) You may not want to talk about this, so feel free to tell me that. Your father passed away not too many years ago—is that correct?

Yes. My father passed away in 1993. He had—he was a heavy smoker. He also drank a lot when he was in Thailand. He started drinking a lot when he was in Thailand, and then he came to Michigan and drank a lot there, too. When we were here in Minnesota he stopped drinking and smoking, but .in 1993 he had lung cancer—or was it gall bladder cancer? I can't remember...

(2:11) Was a traditional Hmong ritual performed for your father, or what ceremony took place after his death?

They did a traditional ceremony for my father. It was sad to say that—and I want to say this—that as a son, as a youngest son who holds on to the Gospel, I tried very hard to minister to my father, but he was upset with the church, and wouldn't listen, or wouldn't listen or wasn't willing to come back to the church again. And when he was very sick, I had a talk with him about the spiritual world, and I had told him. I said, 'Dad, you know, when you were young and healthy, you had the shaman spirit with you, and you were able to drive out demons and heal people. And I've seen you do that. Where are your shaman spirits? Why are you lying here?' He said, 'They have left me.' And it was pretty sad thing to see. I thought to myself, 'When you needed them the most, when they know you're going to pass away, they have left you. So I saw it. I'm a biochemistry major, and I saw it as a symbiotic thing—sort of like that. You know, they needed you when you were healthy, and used you, and when you were no longer needed, they left. And he said (***) but I felt that in my heart. And I had to ask him if it was OK that I prayed for him, and he was very open to that. And yet, on the other hand we've got my mother, we've got other relatives that are trying to find ways to help him by asking other shamans to perform rituals. But I had talked to my father, and I said, 'Dad, if you don't mind, I would like to pray for you,' and I

prayed for him, and he was—I thought he had found peace when we had that communication. And I prayed for him, and I also asked—‘cause during this time, we didn’t go to church, yet I held on to the Word strong in my heart, and I was—I didn’t know who to call to come and pray for my father, but at the time I was dating this one girl who was a Christian, and I had asked her to see if she could ask her pastor and their elders to come and pray for my father. And they did, and they prayed for him, and I said to him that, ‘You know, the doctor told me to tell you that you’re not going to make it.’ It was very hard as a son. I was about 22 when I had this talk with my father. And then we parted. And from that moment on I feel that—I wish that I had that opportunity like I have today to witness to my father—to really teach him the Word of God, to really explain to him what it’s like to be a Christian. I feel like he didn’t know what it was like to be a Christian. So he didn’t know, and during a time of testing he succumbed to temptation, reverted to what he knew best. It was a spiritual struggle for him. And nowadays my mother is still living with us, and she was hurt by the church like that, and she feels like she doesn’t want to go to church anymore, and so we struggle pretty much every day about finding ways to reach out to her, just to let her know that we love her. But yet she understands that we will not practice the traditional ways, but she loves us and she wants to stay with us and help us out. So I kind of live in both worlds. You can say I love the sinners and hate the sin. I don’t practice what they practice. And when I say this, I’m not condemning anyone; I’m not condemning those that still practice that, but I want them to know that God loves them. (***)

[The time allotted for the interview had ended, though Keith agreed to sit down later to elaborate on a few things. Then he started talking about ‘the long journey home,’ the Hmong funeral ritual, so I turned the tape recorder on again]

I’d like to explain that part about when a person passes away. There are rituals that a person—that the dead will need to go through. Normally this would be done in three to four days. And relatives—it doesn’t matter where you are; if you can come, you want to come to see this person, to see your loved one, to say your last goodbyes. And this requires a lot of people to help out, because they kill a lot of cows, and they believe that the more cows you kill that shows the respect—that you love this person—and also they feel that these animals are going to be a part of this new journey home. It’s gonna be—it’s gonna go with this person to the spiritual world. And yet they give him all sorts of burnt offerings—they call it the money for hades world—money that needs to travel with this person so that in the next life, in the spiritual life, the person will not be a poor person. And this ritual requires a person that knows how to play a flute, a very special flute song that helps travel the soul to hades world, or, in the other sense, to the homeland, to the motherland where the person lived, to the ancestors that have gone before this person. And this special flute is played—you really can’t learn this flute anywhere else, because the Hmong people feel that this special flute song cannot be taught anywhere else—only at a funeral, because this is an omen—that if you should play this special flute somewhere else, it would bring a bad omen to the household or to the person. And so the flute players who learn this special flute only come and learn at the funeral, and then this flute, this flute song is played. And as the body gets pulled out and laid there, the flute player would play the song. And the translation of the song is to say that they are taking this person, starting from the present place, and going backwards to the place of birth. And the song—with the flute song they say a lot of jargon to try to trick the underworld spirit so that—the person who plays the song—his spirit doesn’t get trapped in the spiritual world. And they would say a lot of jargon like, ‘I came today, but I left yesterday’ – things like that. And when they’re done playing the song, and if you are one of the brave ones, you watch closely and you will see a color change in the dead person from a tan to black or blue. And that’s, to someone who has witnessed something like that, you feel the spirit has left the body or that that person is really gone—or you really see there is a corpse. Because I have witnessed this twice (one time was my uncle. As I mentioned earlier he had gotten shot and was crying [during] his burial ritual. But after playing the flute he had stopped crying, and his body color changed. [With] my father [it was] the same thing.)

(12:27) So you went to the ceremony.

Yes. As a son, we are required to go. In the ceremony they require that the relatives or the family of the dead pay close attention to the body, and also pay respect by bowing down or *ka tao*, and someone will give the blessing, and they feel that the blessing then will come to their loved one who has passed away. And then when this is done they start doing the drum thing and other flute playing and people can come and mourn. And this mourning will pretty much be open. The traditional ceremony will pretty much last 24 hours. It isn't like here in America where you turn and things will be closed. In Laos it was almost like three days straight out. And it's a torture [laughs] to the living! By the time you're done with that you're exhausted or sick. So for those that do not understand the Hmong ritual, when they see that they think that it's almost Satanic.

[Our time had REALLY come to an end by this point, so we made arrangements to finish the interview later. Keith had a few last words. Comments that reiterated what he said above have largely been omitted:]

I'd like to discuss a little bit [more] about the ritual of passing away, or "The Long Journey Home." With that in mind, many—it is a ritual that the Hmong people, as a cultural or ethnic group, look at as a very important aspect in life. That's why the culture is based on the clan system. In the traditional old days, everybody was around the same town, so it was easier to do things. But even in today's economy, you are spread out everywhere else in the world. But if you can be there, the family wants you to be there. So during this time it will be a time of family gathering. And when that happens, it's—the funeral actually takes place Friday normally these days because they use Fridays because people work. So it will be Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Traditionally it's three days. It really doesn't matter what day [you start], it's a three journey. And everybody from all over the world will come, if you can. When this happens, the dead person first gets dressed up in their traditional clothing, because they believe that the person will be returning to the ancestors' homeland, or wherever the person was born, considered traveling to their homeland.

Does this have anything to do with where their placenta was buried?

Well, it's really not about the placenta, but it's about where the ancestors actually originated, maybe the town where the person was born or originated in. And with that process, then, when they dress up the person, that's when the mourning starts. People start to mourn, cry, and then they start having the ritual afterward with the drum beat or the flute man playing the flute and all sorts of other rituals. People would do like a kowtow...

What is that?

Kind of like they kneel down with the essence. You know, there's a process where—there will be some sort of blessing. They take a person—someone highly who has prestige in the clan or... And the person will come and the person will give all these blessings, and the family members would be the ones kneeling down. And the blessings can be good or bad [Laughs]

Really?

Yeah. So you have to know that, okay, if it's a good blessing, you want to say 'I want it! I want it!' And you kneel down and do it a certain way. If we had a video tape it [would be easier] to explain how they motion it. They take the essence of their hand and it would be more of a—you know, kneeling down, bowing down and then trying—they take their hand, they do hand movement, like if they want it, what they would do is like [while making hand motions] they want it all to them.

So they put their open hands together, fingertip to fingertip... [and bring them in as if bringing smoke toward themselves]

But if it's something they don't want, it's almost like they're pushing it away [reverse of previous gesture, as if keeping smoke away]. It's strange. So if you have never done it, and you're a new person and you see everybody's going down, you're probably doing the same thing, pulling to you, pulling to you, 'cause that's what you think it is. So for the Hmong people, it's either good or bad. But you have to listen...

Let me make sure I'm understanding this correctly. So an important person from a clan comes before the body of the dead person and provides either blessings or—would you say a curse? When you say 'bad,' what do you mean?

Well, the person would say all sorts of blessings, more of a—it's hard to say, but it's more of a, sort of like a sermon, and in that sermon there are things where the person would talk about the good things, and then things that the person would mention about that may not be pertaining to good that you may not—that you may want or you may not want. If it's something you don't want or you feel it's not something good for you, you don't—you know...

And so who's making the hand gestures? The members of the [dead person's] family?
Yes. Correct.

And are they making them on behalf of the person who has died, or for themselves?

They see it as the person—the person who is making the statement is sort of the like the middle guy, translating what the dead person is—kind of like giving the blessing through.

So he's passing on the deceased's last will and testament—spiritually—on to the family, and the family is saying either 'I want that' or 'I don't want that.'

You got it. Yes. It's sort of like that. You know, he's giving a blessing. It's not like he comes in and starts blessing the family based on his own knowledge, but more of it from the dead person's. Now they're on the transition of passing through the—to hades world, and they're giving that last sort of blessing back to the family.

Now when you say 'hades world' to a Christian, I would assume many of them would think 'hell,' but to the Hmong I'm sure it means something else...

Well, the world of the dead. To the Hmong people there's really no hell or heaven. It's the world of the dead. In the translation, in the English text, most of the time they refer to that as hades.

Like the ancient Greeks.

Right. So all of that would be taking place within the funeral. But before that, the flute man plays flute. [Here Keith reviews the same story he told above about how the flute songs can only be learned at funerals, how the flute player guides the dead person's soul but also resorts to trickery to keep his own soul from going into hades, etc.] This special person who plays the flute can be a relative, but normally they like to ask someone that's not a relative, because it's a time of saying goodbye and it's a time of walking with this person for their last journey. So if you are a relative, things can get a little complicated because there could be some emotional effect, that you may feel very lonely, or you may feel that it's hard to say goodbye. So they want someone who has that type of strength. And when this flute song gets played by the flute man [Keith then re-tells the story of how the color of the person's body changes as the flute song is played and as the spirit leaves the body]. When all that is done, then they will play more flutes and more drums, and the family continues to mourn and cry and things like that. And then there are people who are taking care of all of these other rituals and the funeral continues on for three days. And that's where the blessing starts to happen. People bring offerings or whatever they have for—to help out the family. And then they have special greetings or special thanksgiving ways of

honoring those who give gifts. And it's kind of weird, because it's a saying—it's a learned saying. So the person who gives, whether money, or whatever, they would say, 'Yeah, you don't have to give thanks to me,' and they have a very special way of saying that. While the other person—or there may be more than one person, because normally these are a group of—that are related to the deceased's family, would be saying, 'Thank you for the gifts and everything else,' and they talk about how they will continue to remember their blessings and their kindness in life, that they can't meet up to the life standards and all these blessings that the person has given them today, and it is going to be sort of like a waste. So 'thank you' and things like that. It's a saying. So both of them are saying it at the same time. So you hear a bunch of mumbo-jumbo.

So the family is saying 'thank you' for what they have received and the other family is saying— 'You don't have to thank me, because there's a debt. You have a lost loved one,' and things like that. And the other thing about the long journey home is—this is a term when traditionally—the Hmong people have a different plan. And in the old traditional way there are funerals where it is conducted outside the home, and nowadays everything's in the funeral home. But based on the clan system, some would do it outside of the home, some would leave the deceased sort of like on a stand outside the home throughout the whole funeral. Others would do it in their house. In my clan the funeral would be taking place in the house. Other clans, they would take the deceased and dress the deceased up in a—sort of like a basket, and let the deceased sit on top of the basket, dress the deceased up based on clan rituals and religious sects, things like that. Nowadays everything's done [makes a noise like something is rushing by fast] so all of that's kind of gone away. But if you go to Laos or somewhere else that's in a Third World country and there's no funeral home, it is still being practiced.

Do you have anyone in your close family who you think has had a harder time making the adjustment to life here than other members of your family?

Well, in terms of—do mean like ritual practice?

Just in general. Maybe they're more unhappy than other members of the family because they don't live in Laos or they don't like this culture or they're unhappy with the way their kids have grown up in the culture...

Yeah. My older brother—he's also a shaman and he—I guess when he and I were growing up in Laos and coming here trying to raise a family and still leading the clan in terms of the religious ritual, he would be the one the clan usually calls on. And he feels like all these kids, they don't know any of the rituals that he does, so it's almost like there's no bond in that area. The other thing is that it's much harder to do a ritual in America. You can't just go out there and bring a live animal into your home and do rituals like in a Third World country. So they've adjusted to that, but it's still harder to practice that kind of ritual. But I would say, in terms of my brother that his biggest concerns are his kids—you know, having a good life, and there is so much freedom, so the kids end up doing something else other than focusing on what to do to achieve a better life in America. And that's the biggest concern. Rather than having the kids to follow in his footsteps in terms of traditional Hmong ritual. To him, it's probably something he would prefer, but it's not the top priority.

[Recorder was turned off, but Keith had one more comment]

The Hmong people have a belief in animism, so they give objects the quality of being alive or having a spirit, so they're very superstitious. I remember growing up—you can't point fingers at the moon, and if you do, you would need to say some sort of phrase so that you don't get your ears cut. Or crossing a mountain or a river, so you don't displease the spirit, because you may encounter some spirit who may be upset because you're kind of like trespassing—so, things like that. They feel that if they go places they need to do some sort of ritual, and there will be a time where they're scared because, let's say

during the war, there were a lot of people were being killed and they need some sort of a blessing for their family. They would make a blessing and they would call upon the spirits of the—they consider the spirits who may have more power over the realm where they are at, and if those spirits have kept their family united and there is no harm that came upon their family, then they would make the offering as promised. They're very spiritual. Other people, like I said to you before, they know there is a Creator, yet they don't know or have a relationship to the Creator. To them it is—the Creator created things, and there are other spirits that—if we have offended certain spirits, we need to 'pay dues.' They still consider the Creator to be someone very powerful. They call on the Creator to bless or protect their family, but there is really no relationship, no personal relationship...