Proposal

Background
The Hmong began their journey to America right after the Vietnam War. After living in various refugee camps in Thailand, they were then sent to various parts of the United States, including the Central Valley of California. Religion constitutes an important element in their community. Shamans still perform ceremonies for all major events in family life, marriages, births, funerals, and health related problems. Unfortunately, many of these rituals have been approached with suspicion by local authorities because most do not understand these practices from their cultural perspective. The fact that shamans perform animal sacrifices as part of their rituals further aggravates misunderstandings. Social pressure has forced the Hmong to carry their religious practices in private settings rather than in public, as they would have in their homeland. Furthermore, other communities of faith have begun an aggressive campaign of proselytism and have created divisions between families.

Projected Outcome
This project will highlight the prevalence of shamanism in America, as well as the socio-religious importance of cultural preservation. In addition, the projected outcome will present important information about the struggles of a community to retain their religious beliefs in spite of social stigmatization and policies that prevent ritual ceremonies from being performed in public settings.

Significance
This research will provide current information about the Hmong as a religious community. The fact that Hmong people in Merced practice their religious ceremonies at home rather than in a temple or a special worship center conveys essential information about the structure of their religious beliefs within an Animist tradition. Similarly, the perception of America’s religious plurality in the public setting is fundamentally challenged when Hmong shamans find it difficult to perform their rituals in hospitals or funeral homes. This project will provide useful information for future research and changes in public policies that can provide initiatives to include religious education in cultural competency forums in the work setting.

Research Schedule
The research will take ten weeks starting June 18th of the current year. The first three weeks will provide time for community network, interviews with local leaders, and time to develop a questionnaire, a confidentiality form and other materials I may find useful. The next five weeks of the project will be used to conduct ethnographic research through observations and interviews. Finally, the last two weeks will be used to gather final notes, and prepare a report of the findings.
Methodology
The research will take place in Merced, California where a large Hmong community resides. The city of Merced has over six thousand Hmong. Some of them work with local clinics and other public facilities serving as cultural brokers and Hmong healthcare interpreters. With the assistance of Healthy House, a local agency dedicated to train local shamans on western medicine, as well as doctors and others about shamans through their "Partners in Healing Project," I will begin to scope the community and local leaders and will start interviews thereafter. In order to facilitate communication, I will enlist a competent Hmong interpreter and will conduct oral interviews to minimize miscommunication due to literacy levels. The goal is to attend at least one ceremony and interview five or more shamans from this community.

Ethical Concerns
The confidentiality of those who wish to participate in the interviews is of extreme importance. Names or anything else that could identify any individual will not appear in the final report, and this will be clearly stated before conducting any interviews.

Research Findings

Introduction
The scope of this research was ambitious. The information yield once field research was conducted was significantly less than initially expected due to the short duration of this project. Nonetheless, the following report reflects some of the major goals of this project. 1) It addresses the difficulties encountered by the Hmong community in Merced to preserve their culture and religious traditions. 2) It inquires how the Hmong have responded to proselytism, while creating ways to preserve their traditions, and how their religious rituals have changed to adjust to American culture. In addition, this report supports the importance of shamanism for the Hmong living in the diaspora. Nonetheless, the results are based on a very small segment of the population. This research needs more time in order to offer a solid account of the Hmong in Merced, California. Thus the information gathered is rather a sample of the challenges that the Hmong as a community continue to endure in the city of Merced, California. It is general and by no means pretends to offer the reader a complete assessment of the entire Hmong experience in the US nor in Merced. Most certainly, the accounts reflect the views of the individuals, who allowed me to interview them, and from the present undertaking of community agencies such as Healthy House, which in an effort to make western medicine more accessible to multi-ethnic communities in the county of Merced have created innovative social spaces for traditional healers (shamans) to express their concerns and learn about western healthcare.
Furthermore, the timing for the research was reduced to eight weeks instead of ten due to managerial reasons. And, lastly, I was unable to attend a shaman ceremony. My contact had arranged for me to attend a ceremony two weeks before departing, but the family changed their mind. I was told that since they were sacrificing a pig during the ritual, they felt uncomfortable with an outsider being present fearing outside scrutiny. With this said, the following account is the final report for this project. However, a short historical synopsis is
Background
Much has been written about the Hmong since their arrival in the United States. For years now, academicians and other professionals have gathered information about the newcomers in various parts of the US, including Merced, California. Though some more successful than others, these professionals in their own fields and interests have learned something about Hmong culture and beliefs. Undoubtedly the range of motivations varies according to the profession. Some anthropologist for instance have documented shamanism and Hmong cosmology, while others in healthcare professions have sharpen their cultural awareness skills in order to provide better care to this community. Even though my own research follows similar guidelines, my interest is not merely professional. My interest in the Hmong derives from my own experience as a person living in the diaspora. Within this familiar relation I find the experience of the Hmong community in Merced to reflect in more than one way, the capacity that human beings have to endure adversity, to comply with new challenges and to seek forms to hold-on to cultural ways of understanding life (and death). The Hmong in Merced offers a compelling testimony of the dynamics of life in the diaspora, which can be difficult at times and rewarding at others. The Hmong are a heterogeneous ethnic group that lived in the mountains of Laos since the 19th century. Anthropologists have traced their origins to China; in fact some Hmong groups still remain in remote regions of that vast country (1). During the Vietnam War, Hmong living in remote villages were recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight along with US soldiers. Thousands died during the war and many thousands more would die when the war was over as they fled persecution from the countryside to their closet neighbor, Thailand.

Once in Thailand, the Hmong were subsequently dispersed through out the world and today they are practically all over the globe. After their displacement from South East Asia (SEA), the Hmong have lived as political refugees in countries in Europe and Latin America. However, the United States became the primary recipient of Hmong refugees. Merced, California is included in the various states in the US that became the new home for displaced Hmong families (other cities include St. Paul and Minneapolis, Wisconsin, and Chicago) (2).

Needless to say, leaving refugee camps in Thailand to the United States was the beginning of a journey. Merced alone received close to ten thousand Hmong refugees from the late 1970’s to the middle of the 1980’s (3). Since then, their presence in Merced has shaped the cultural landscape of the Central Valley of California. Unfortunately resettlement of Hmong refugees in the area has not happened without controversy.

Before the war, most Americans had not heard the word Hmong, and in the humble opinion of the writer, during the years of refugee resettlement, local authorities were negligent in educating the locals about the status and reasons behind the arrival of the Hmong. The newcomers faced almost immediately the suspicion of the locals, who at best saw them with curiosity, and at worst as outsiders with lots of children (most Hmong families have at least five children), who took more than their share from social services-to put it mildly (4).
In the ensuing years, the unique cultural life of the Hmong created cultural/social misunderstandings eventually epitomized in the book by Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches you and you Fall down: A Hmong child, her American Doctors and the collision of two cultures.* In this widely circulating book, Fadiman takes the reader into the life of a Hmong family in Merced, their struggles dealing with western medical care, and the cultural misunderstandings that lead to the removal of Lia Lee from the care of her parents, and ultimately to the child’s tragic brain damage.

The tragedy of the Lee’s continues to be in the minds of many healthcare providers in Merced, particularly those that know them and were part of the child’s care. Preventing such tragedies has prompted the need to form partnerships and to develop strategies among social and health care agencies in Merced. Part of this process has included the incorporation of Hmong speakers into the staff of hospitals and clinics, who then are able to help their fellow community members navigate western healthcare. In addition, agencies like Healthy House, which support resourceful grants that help promote respectful and culturally sensitive healthcare services for the Hmong and other communities in Merced, has played a significant role in facilitating dialogue between healthcare providers and the Hmong community.

Furthermore, the formulation of strategies and partnerships has opened the opportunity of creating social spaces that give expression to cultural beliefs and practices. Also, these efforts have allowed various members of the Hmong community to be able to voice their concerns about the needs of the community, as well as to address the difficulties encountered in Hmong diaspora.

Since their arrival, adaptation to American culture and way of life has proven a challenge for many Hmong families. While some have adapted to an American way of life and are very successful others have experienced difficulties adapting to their new country, to learning a new language and a new set of social codes embodied in American culture. This is true particularly for elder Hmong.

Many have found it difficult to learn English and reports of frustration have led at least one person in California to commit suicide (5). The pressures of learning English is compounded by the fact that learning a new language means being useful and capable to survive in this society. When a person who could ensure the sustainability of his family or be able to explain a child’s ailment is no longer capable of doing that efficiently, feelings of isolation, frustration and depression are likely outcomes. Jeff Lindsay, a chemical engineer from Wisconsin, states,

Hmong refugees in the U.S. struggle with our unusual ways, though the rising generation of youth have melted in well with American culture, even at the risk of losing touch with their heritage. For the older generation, adopting the new ways has been painful. The language is a great barrier to the elderly, many of whom have had no schooling and had no reading skills prior to coming to the U.S. Simple things like going to a store or walking through town can be terrifying experiences for the elderly (6). Although the testimony of Lindsay focuses on the Hmong living in Wisconsin, the same can
be said about the Hmong in Merced.

Unfortunately, cultural isolation, the disruption of ways in which life once made sense, the dislocation of family members and familial roles are not the only challenges Hmong diaspora endure. The saga of survival in a new environment is further complicated by the appearance of one of the most alarming medical mysteries of the late twentieth century: Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death in Sleep or SUNDS.

This mysterious death occurrence among male Hmong continues to puzzle health workers in various parts of the country (7). Some have attributed SUNDS to severe sadness that results in death for no other apparent causes have been found in the men who’ve died so far. In Merced, one man died this summer under the same circumstances. Yet, despite all of these challenges, not all is grim for the Hmong in Merced.

Indeed the aforementioned challenges of adapting to a new country and the trauma of being a political refugee is very present in the lives of Hmong families in Merced. However, the Hmong have created social spaces in which to express and validate the beauty of their culture and celebrations as well as the intricacy of their animistic tradition. In particular, their traditional healing practices not only help the Hmong during physical sickness, these practices, embodied and carried through the Hmong shaman, also serve as the consolidation of Hmong beliefs and culture as experience in the diaspora. In light of this background, and my admiration and respect for the Hmong, I decided to undertake this summer research thanks to the support of the staff at Healthy House and the Partners in Healing Project (8).

**Traditional Healer Recognition Program**

My initial contact with the Hmong community was with Chanvang Her, who is one of the leaders of Partners in Healing. My interest was viewed with caution since, as I was told, there have been researchers who have gathered information about the Hmong and have used it against them. I explained that my purpose was to document how the Hmong are creating spaces to practice their spiritual traditions beyond the privacy of the household. That this research, aside from its academic goals, also may provide future understanding of healing as it is viewed by the Hmong and as it is pursued by the shaman. In addition, this information may support future concerns for the need to incorporate other means of healing, particularly for the Hmong patient.

Chanvang said he would think about it and also asked me to consult with Marilyn Mochel who oversees their program. I had previously spoken with her and she offered her support to this modest summer project. As stated earlier, the Hmong are included largely in Healthy House’s efforts to support cultural sensitivity in the health care setting. Healthy House sponsors various grants that incorporate cultural education, with the goal to create avenues for understanding and respecting Hmong beliefs, and eliminate/prevent any barriers to a good health outcome for patients. Their program, Partners in Healing, offered me the opportunity to sit for seven consecutive weeks and observe a class offered to eight Hmong shamans.

The class provides shamans with some insights into western medicine and the way in
which western doctors view illness and the human body. The goal is to train "30 traditional healers [shamans] in the Traditional Healer Recognition Program" (9). The Program also seeks to "provide cultural responsiveness training to 75 western medical providers" (10). This helps them understand the importance of the Hmong shaman for the well being of the patient and his/her family. Overall, Partners in Healing provides a recognized social space for the Hmong shaman to be recognized and accepted as an important element of Hmong culture and spirituality.

I attended the classes and observed how the participants engaged in the presentations given by various members of the community (11). The presentations varied from body parts as understood by western medicine to a physician bringing a telescope to show the shamans different body parts and their cells. Visits to hospitals complemented the class. Shamans were given the opportunity for a guided tour through two hospitals, visiting the emergency room and maternity departments.

During my first introduction to the group, I was told to introduce myself the Hmong way. That is, to start with my name, my parent’s names, how many family members I had, if I had children and was married and anything else that I could include about my life. I did as I was instructed and the audience took with great curiosity the fact that I was single. They all welcomed me and thanked me for my interest in the Hmong.

Six men and two women actively attended the classes. All expressed being ill as a result of the spirits calling them to become a shaman. Expanse of experience varied from 40 years to four. Interestingly, the dynamics of hierarchy were clear. The older and most knowledgeable shaman generally spoke for the rest. Demographics are as follows:

- woman in her sixty’s and shaman for twenty years
- woman in her forty’s and shaman for four years
- man in his seventy’s and shaman for sixty-three years
- man in his fifty’s and shaman for forty years
- man in his forty’s and shaman for twenty-four years
- man in his fifty’s and shaman for eight years
- man in his forty’s and shaman for six years

The man who has been a shaman for sixty-three years reported being a shaman since age seven (12). Also, all shamans in this class were an older generation and English was not their first language. Some understood very little English. When local healthcare representatives came to the class to present a topic, Chanvang Her or Gepao Lor interpreted. All the classes were conducted with an interpreter.

The class concluded at the end of seven consecutive weeks. A dinner was organized to recognize the participation of the shamans (13). People from other community agencies were invited as well as the families of the "graduating" shamans. The event was joyful and has become a tradition since the creation of Partners in Healing. This particular class is the fourth offered by Healthy House. The shaman recognition dinner helps assert the presence of the shaman as an important community member and as a cultural icon of Hmong
The Hmong Shaman, Hmong Cosmology and Western Medicine

The world of the shaman can be described as simple as his/her existence, yet the journey into the world of the spirits is anything but easy. The journey is an elaborate web of ritual and skill that shamans learn to navigate through years of practice, of giving in to the call of the spirit world. A shaman Master, who teaches and gives advice to the novice, facilitates the process of learning (14).

In turn, Hmong Shamans in Merced County help their local Hmong fellows and even those who travel from other parts of the United States to attend a yearly ceremony or to request their help. According to Chanvang Her, Hmong people who live in the cities where the service of a shaman is not readily available travel to places where they can find one. The shamans do not have a particular place open to the public. The ceremonies are rather private, in the homes of the shamans themselves (15). Shamans also function as healers. Many know herbal remedies, which they make available to members of their families and communities. They are known through the community and people who need them look them up and request their help. Sometimes a shaman may refuse to help and will insist that the seekers find someone else (16). However, if the seekers insist, the shaman will then determine what to do.

The shaman's role is extremely important for a Hmong person who is ill. In a survey conducted by Partners in Healing, when asked, "how often do you practice or use spiritual healing ceremony"? Seventy-one percent of the respondents said "one to five," times per year (17). The ceremonies performed by the shaman help alleviate problems associated pernicious spirits, which are an important element of Hmong cosmology. Anthropologist Dwight Conquergood explains,

According to Hmong cosmology, the human body is the host an ensemble of life-souls. The number of souls believed to inhabit a human body depends on whom you consult. Some say seven, some nine, some twelve or even thirty-two. The point is that the body is a site for multiple souls, whereas according to American cosmology, the body is a site for a single soul. A human body is healthy when all the life-souls are centered in the body, cooperating interdependently and living together harmoniously as a group. Sickness is explained by the isolation and separation of one or more of these souls from the community of the body. Disease, depression and death result from diffusion, dispersal and loss of souls (18).

The disrupting effects of the spirits have physical as well as social consequences. When the disruption results in sickness, a shaman may hold the key to the betterment of the person afflicted. Although Hmong people seek the services of western medicine, many times, they also seek the help of a shaman, either before seeing a doctor or during treatment (19). Hmong cosmology is directly connected to shamanism and, since the arrival of the Hmong in Merced, to western medicine as well. This particular connection has created problems when doctors ignore the intricacies and meanings of Hmong rituals. To this day it would still be very difficult for a shaman to visit a Hmong patient in the hospital and perform a ceremony. However the distrust of Hmong patients and their families to western medicine
also adds to the problem.

A few years ago, the Merced Sun-Star reported in front-page headlines "Fears Frustrate Doctors." It quotes a local doctor saying, "most of the [Hmong] patients are walk-ins, and many come in the door too sick...that's the agonizing part. Last week I saw three people with cancer, one we had to send to Stanford, one we had to refer for surgery, one we sent home to die" (20). Now days, with the phenomenal work of Partners in Healing, most of these fears are dissipating, and the importance of the shaman in the process of helping Hmong patients regain their health, if not totally accepted, is becoming known, and in some circles, recognized.

**On Proselytism, Acceptance and Resistance**

One of the most compelling interviews I conducted had to do with proselytism and its effects on Hmong culture and cosmology. The interviewee is Dan (Dang) Moua. He is one of the interpreters mentioned in Anne Fadiman's book. The meeting with Dan was short but informative. His view on how other religions have affected Hmong way of life and beliefs was very descriptive. He spoke of how proselytism began before the war. Since the 1950's, Protestant, Catholic, Mormon and Jehovah Witnesses began to appear in the mountains of Laos to gain converts. Some Hmong converted and he was one of them. He is a Catholic. The aggressive campaign of some churches to get converts continues to this day. Dan remembered a recent incident, in which two Mormon missionaries approached him. He said they address themselves with a Hmong name, saying they belong to the Yang clan by association. To Dan they were using the name as a sign of brotherhood, to invite the Hmong into becoming Mormon. Dan asked them if the elders had approved their naming and they said no. For Dan this was offensive, since in his words, "people seeking to change the Hmong into their beliefs will go to anyone without authority and then will say that they have permission because they talked to that person. They don't understand that the elders have to approve that" (21).

Dan then described how his family has been affected by the influence of Western religions, particularly Protestantism. He explained that one of his brothers converted and now considers the family as sinners, especially for seeking shaman services. "Even the food that is eaten has been contested and condemned as such." Dan's concern over his family divisions due to religious differences troubles him. Family life in Hmong communities is an important center for Hmong life and culture. Thus, having different belief systems disrupts the harmony of the center pole that keeps everyone together.

In recognizing the cultural significance of the Hmong diaspora, one has to wonder whether relatively new forces of change in religious affiliation or belief system will have an impact on the survival of Hmong culture and cosmology in the next twenty years. This is an opened ended question that I’m sure will come up again in future research. Dan embraces shamanism while also believing in a Catholic tradition, and sees a distinction between western religions and Hmong Animism. "Shamans never come to your door as other religious persons do-on the contrary, a family has to request his [her/ shaman] services actively for him [her] to go to the spirit world." However he also recognizes that there are other traditions that are inviting the Hmong to change and are not tolerant of Hmong
traditions. The future in this regard is uncertain, but whatever the outcome, it will be up to the Hmong to define and shape their destiny in America.

The fact that Hmong continue to use traditional spiritual healing ceremonies cannot be overlooked. In the survey conducted by Partners in Healing a total of 86% of the respondents agreed that "no matter how hard, we must continue to perform the ceremony," and only 4% considered it inconvenient (22). In addition, the celebration of Hmong New Year brings hundreds of friends and relatives to Merced every year. The festival is very rich in traditional Hmong music, dance and rituals. The shaman maintains a central role in these festivities. In this assertion of Hmong culture, one finds resistance to homogenization and to the forces of proselytism.

**Conclusion**
Borrowing the words of Conquergood, the Hmong shaman is, "more than a radiant cultural centerpiece; he or she is the active agent of cultural process, dynamically exercising and mobilizing the core beliefs of a culture" (23). In Merced, California, shamanism just has begun to be recognized as a salient element in Hmong culture. The project Partners in Healing is responsible for opening a window of possibilities into cross-cultural dialogue, respect and understanding between western medicine and Hmong beliefs. There is a lot to be done, a lot to inquire, and a lot to document.

This research hopes to provide a synopsis of the life of the Hmong in Merced. It can’t and does not provide an all-inclusive account of the Hmong as a community. It offers the reader a glimpse of the Hmong living in the diaspora, it addresses some of the difficulties encountered by the Hmong community in Merced to preserve their culture and religious traditions, and inquires on how, in the experience of a Hmong individual, the Hmong continuously respond to the forces of proselytism. This is a topic of its own and this research does not provide the tools to engage it appropriately.

While this research is limited, Healthy House Partners in Healing Project is not. Partners in Healing gives the shaman social acceptance, motivates healthcare providers to learn and respect Hmong culture, and among other things, supports the social, spiritual and physical health of the Hmong community in Merced.

**Acknowledgments**
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publication of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1986.


*Merced Sun-Star,* "Refugees give Merced a unique place in history" by Jeffrey McMahon, Thursday, April 30, 1987.


ICSD - International classification of sleep disorders: Diagnostic and coding manual.
www.uni-marburg.de/sleep/enn/database/asdadefs/def2d5.htm

**Endnotes**


2) The Hmong have also resettled in Minneapolis and Chicago. See *The Hmong in Transition.* New York: Center for Migration Studies.


4) This statement reflects my own experience as a former resident of Merced.

5) Testimony corroborated by Marilyn Mochel, RN and Program Manager for Healthy House. Other testimonies include:

6) Jeff Lindsay, http://www.jefflindsay.com/Hmong_tragedy.html

7) According to the ICSD - International classification of sleep disorders: Diagnostic and coding manual, "Over 100 cases have been reported [in the US]. The rates for different Southeast Asian groups with sudden unexplained nocturnal death syndrome among male refugees settled in the United States are as follows: A. Hmong Laotians: 92 per 100000, B. Other Laotians: 82 per 100000." For more information see Diagnostic Classification Steering Committee, Thorpy MJ, Chairman. Rochester, Minnesota: American Sleep Disorders Association, 1990.

8) *Partners in Healing Program* is a project directed by Healthy House and the California Health Collaborative. It is a program designed to assist western medical practitioners and Hmong shamans understand the way each other heals patients

9) Exert taken from flyer *Healthy House Partners in Healing* (see Appendix A)

10) Ibid

11) For a list of participants see the class schedule attached to this report (Appendix B)

12) See Appendix C

13) See Appendix D

14) Dwight Conquergood, pg. 49

15) See pictures

16) Exert taken from transcripts from Chanvang Her’s interview. See transcripts.

17) See Exerts from survey attached to report.

18) Conquergood, pg. 44

19) See Appendix E-survey of complaints and shaman recommendations.

21) Dan Moua Interview.
22) See survey attached at the end of this report.
23) Conquergood, pg. 47