

# The Hmong in the Twin Cities; Generational and Gender Differences in the Perception of Kinship, Marriage and Prestige



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*To Oliver,  
who brought hope and determination*



# Summary

This thesis is based on information gathered throughout a six months long fieldwork within the Hmong community in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, USA, in 2002-2003. The Hmong are a clan based and pastoral refugee population from Laos and Thailand who started arriving in the U.S. in the mid 1970s after the communists consolidated power in Laos and made life there unbearable for the Hmong who had been fighting with the U.S. against the communist Pathet Lao. My aim has been to combine a processual approach to the field, which means seeing and describing the social scene as both being and becoming (Moore 1994), with a theoretical perspective describing a dialectical movement between structure and agency (Williams 1977; Ortner 1984; Giddens 1986; Barth 1993). I have also portrayed how the Hmong organize, produce and reproduce sexuality and gender views through systems of kinship and marriage and how this is tied to a male prestige structure (Rubin 1975; Ortner and Whitehead 1981). The first generation Hmong, and the men in particular, are eager to continue the Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige system brought from Laos and Thailand and the age and gender hierarchy that this system conveys. The second generation Hmong, and women in particular, who in a greater extent are influenced by the American society and its values, feel constrained within this system. The generational and gender conflict that occurs has been analyzed by looking at the different perceptions and use of elements within the kinship, marriage and prestige system. Since the majority of young Hmong girls in the Twin Cities get married and have children at a very early age, it might seem they are reproducing the cultural patterns they are exposed to through the pressures from their parents and the Hmong community. My analysis shows that this is not the case. Instead, cultural patterns and social structures are being used and changed at the same time by the young girls who infuse new meanings and intentions into old categories

and place them in new contexts, giving them new actionable references (Sahlins 1981; Moore 1994). These transformational moves are sometimes successful and sometimes misunderstood, they might empower the woman who made the move or they might retain her within the structure she was trying to escape. In any event, these moves illustrate the link between gender views and social organization. They illustrate the dialectical relationship between structure and agency and show how cultural patterns are given shifting nuances of meaning (Moore 1994) in relation to a changed context and how it influences the people who live by them.

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Hilde Foss

Oslo, January 31, 2007



*We Women*  
of the Hmong culture

We women of the Hmong culture  
may now clean the plates  
of what the men have left,  
eat the remains while they pick  
their teeth with wooden toothpicks.

They call this a privilege,  
to be seated at the table  
of those who were seated before.  
To partake in this feast of remains

is a blessing beyond all measures.  
Yet some she-witched women  
“possessed by this newfound knowledge  
of excessive freedom” are weary

of participating in such patriarchal  
rituals of the old motherland.  
They stare at the remains of half-eaten  
meat - the imprints of a beloved uncle's

teeth still cut upon them - littered  
among the cuisine grown cold  
from hours of neglect.  
Does no one wish to sit and taste?

The host and hostess invite  
all us women to partake in the feast  
of *laab* - ground beef,

half-cooked tendons - and chicken

boiled with withered herbs.

Biting our lips and our tongues,  
we sit. With each bite into the feast  
at hand, we remember

we are women.

By Mayli Vang (with permission)

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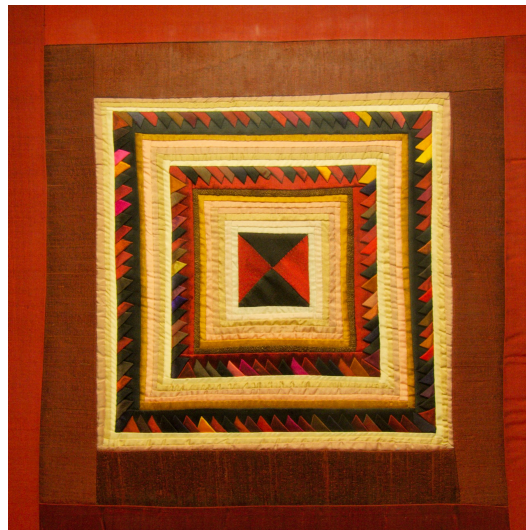
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# Chapter 1

## Introduction



I always visit the bookstore Barnes & Nobel when I am in the U.S. I love books and walking around in this book heaven with the smell of warm tea and fresh cakes tingling in my nose is my favorite thing to do when I have some me-time on my hands. This time, the Christmas of 2000, my eyes were drawn toward a book with the picture of a beautiful child decorated in a unique, colorful costume. The title of the book was *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman. It was my first meeting with the Hmong, and I was captivated. The book deals mainly with the struggles of a Hmong family through their cultural clash with the American hospital culture in an effort to give their daughter, who has epilepsy, the best care they can think of. But the book also gives an overview of the Hmong culture and history, something I knew nothing about before I started reading this book. As my ‘discovery’ of the Hmong came parallel to my

first year of study for 'hovedfag' in social anthropology at the University of Oslo I decided it was the perfect opportunity to learn more about this group of people.

## **Who are the Hmong?**

There are several theories about where the Hmong came from originally. Some suggest that they came to China from Eurasia and through Siberia (Fadiman 1998); others suggest that they came from India, Burma or Tonkin (Geddes 1976:6). The Hmong are first mentioned in Chinese records around the twenty-seventh century B.C. when they lived in the basin of the Yellow River. They were driven away by the Chinese, both from the plains of the Yellow River and the Yangtze River, where they had also settled, sometime between 2700 and 2300 B.C. (Geddes 1976:3 and 5-6). This move allegedly came after several Hmong rebellions against Chinese oppression when a probably mythical Chinese emperor, Huang-ti, decided that the barbaric Hmong would be subject to a special criminal code; "Instead of being imprisoned like other offenders, the Hmong who were not executed outright were to have their noses, ears, or testicles sliced off" (Fadiman 1998:14-15). The Hmong then dispersed into the mountainous regions of all the southern provinces, where they split into several smaller groups and were surrounded by different alien peoples. They still managed to preserve their ethnic identity as a result, it has been suggested, of living in remote areas and enforcing a strict rule of marrying within the group (Geddes 1976:9-12). Around A.D. 400 there were several violent clashes between the Hmong and the Chinese, since the Hmong refused to adjust to Chinese customs, instead "preferring to keep to themselves, marry each other, speak their own language, wear their own tribal dress, play their own musical instruments, and practice their own religion" (Fadiman 1998:14). In the sixteenth century, when many Hmong lived in the province of Kweichow, the Ming dynasty constructed the Hmong Wall, which was a smaller version of the Great Wall of China, so as to keep the Hmong from venturing outside the province. This strategy failed, and violent battles followed. After great losses on the Chinese side this eventually led to the slaughter of the Hmong king of greater Kintchuen and his family (Fadiman 1998:15-16). A combination of the turbulent upheavals and the lack of fertile land made



half a million Hmong migrate<sup>1</sup> to Indochina during the nineteenth century, and they settled in what is today Vietnam, Laos and Thailand (Fadiman 1998; Geddes 1976).

In Laos and Thailand the Hmong again settled in the mountains where they lived in mostly self-sufficient villages, practiced swidden agriculture and grew dry rice and opium poppy, kept livestock, hunted and fished; thereby avoiding assimilation to and friction with the dominant, and often hostile, lowland culture (Fadiman 1998; Symonds 2004). The Hmong society is framed around the rule of patrilineality, dividing the group into various unranked exogamous surname clans which relate to the same beliefs, but who are segmentary and geographically widespread (Symonds 2004). Clans are divided into sub-clans and further into lineages, and clan membership defines one's identity as well as being the basis for social interaction (Symonds 2004). In marriage the Hmong are clan exogamous and the new alliances create unions between clans and lineages through an intricate system of exchange of women, goods and social relationships (Symonds 2004:xxvi). The Hmong had strong relationships with the mountains where they lived, and their economy and their culture, their way of life, folklore, religion, songs, costumes and interrelationships were developed in relation to the mountain environment (Geddes 1976). Since the Hmong did not have a written language themselves and since they did not know how to read, everything the next generation needed to know about Hmong customs and way of life was passed on orally and by example (Fadiman 1998:121).

In the 1890s, when the French took control of Indochina, the Hmong once again found themselves in a time of revolt, this time against the unfair tax system introduced by the French (Fadiman 1998), but the Hmong, who were discriminated against by the ethnic lowland Lao and the Vietnamese, soon found their relationship with the French to be to their advantage and hoped it would improve their status in Laos (Hamilton-Merritt 1999). Following these revolts came a more peaceful time for the Hmong, and they could go back to their undisturbed lives in the mountains (Fadiman 1998).

In the 1960s the quiet life of the Hmong in Laos came to an end when many of them were recruited by the CIA, as special forces fighting on the American side against the communist regime, the Pathet Lao in Laos (Hein 1995). As a result, Hmong fleeing Laos, as refugees, started before and continued long after the communist takeover of

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<sup>1</sup>Today there are about five million Hmong in China (Fadiman 1998:16).

Laos in 1975, and after spending years in refugee camps in Thailand, many Hmong came to the U.S. to start a new life (Hamilton-Merritt 1999).

## **Why study the Hmong in the U.S?**

There are several reasons why I wanted to study the Hmong in the context of the American society; firstly, in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* Fadiman writes, perhaps exaggerated, that the history of the Hmong shows that they

... do not like to take orders; that they do not like to lose; that they would rather flee, fight, or die than surrender; that they are not intimidated by being outnumbered; that they are rarely persuaded that the customs of other cultures, even those more powerful than their own, are superior; and that they are capable of getting very angry (Fadiman 1998:17).

Even if this is an overstatement, others have pointed out the importance for the Hmong to preserve their ethnic identity, even when migrating great distances and suffering violent ordeals (Geddes 1976). I wanted to find out, therefore, how the Hmong were dealing with the cultural transformations, if there were any, in a society that favors assimilation and requires, implicitly if not explicitly, that immigrants shed their ethnic or cultural attributes and jump into the melting pot, thereby becoming and contributing to the ideal of the American nation's culturally indistinguishable identity (Sahlins 1993). Secondly, since I wanted to study the Hmong as a refugee population, it made sense to study them in the U.S., taking into consideration that the Hmong have a particular history and relationship with the U.S. and the U.S. also has the largest Hmong refugee population in the world. Thirdly, the American society is often associated with the idea of individual freedom and opportunity. In addition it is a modern society characterized by social and cultural pluralism related to globalization and transnational flows of people, ideas, values and merchandise - and it is allegedly the land of opportunity. I wanted to see how this setting had an effect on the relationships between the first and second generation Hmong and on their communication and negotiation of meaningful cultural values, having in mind that the Hmong first generation used to live in a rural environment, were mostly uneducated and valued family and kin relations more than

individual wishes, while the second generation grew up in between the Hmong and the American cultural and societal values.

## **Why the second generation, and why women?**

I do not believe culture, or cultural values or knowledge, to be an unchanged thing, nor that identity, passed down through generations and sustained through time, remains unaffected by anything surrounding it. Rather, I see it more like patterns which are idealized, and imagined stable through 'as if' structures, while in reality we speak of situational and relational configurations which are continually contested, temporal and emergent.

Since I wanted to study these processes of continuity and change within a refugee population, I believed it would be easier to see transformations in the second rather than in the first generation, simply because the second generation would be further removed from the first generation's cultural patterns and experiences, and would also, as a result of age and going to school, be exposed in a greater degree to American society. This means that the second generation acts and experiences life in a crossroad between two dominant and influential cultures or social structures - and I wanted to study the occurrences in such a crossroad.

In most, if not all, known societies there is an expressed asymmetry and differentiation in participation of men and women in social, economic, political, and religious institutions (Ortner and Whitehead 1981). The Hmong are patrilineal and patriarchal and men control all the institutions mentioned above, while American society, far from practicing gender equality, is more inclined towards such equality. I wanted to see how, and if, Hmong women, in particular, act and take advantage of their new settings, and how they define their female roles and statuses in relation to the contrasting Hmong and American cultures and societies. Since the Hmong culture appears to be more beneficial for the interests and prestige of men, will Hmong women after arriving to the U.S. follow in the footsteps of western women and rebel against what might be interpreted as gender or sexual oppression, or do they not interpret their situation in that direction? I

also wanted to study Hmong women and gender constructions, negotiation and transformation in relation to kinship and marriage, as these institutions often have specific roles for men and women, and since they are believed to be especially central in the continuation and maintenance of the Hmong culture. If second generation Hmong women in the U.S. are changing their values, how does this affect the conventional Hmong meaning of kinship and marriage?

## **The relevancy of this thesis**

In this thesis I address several issues of interest to current anthropological discussions and debates. Since the world is getting smaller and smaller through globalization and multiple transnational flows - migration, or the movement of people from one place to another is now more than ever a highly relevant and multifaceted research topic in practically any part of the world. My thesis addresses the difficulty of a rural, mostly uneducated refugee group, the Hmong, to adjust to life in a modern, industrial country, the U.S.; but more importantly, the thesis addresses how the different adjustment rates of two generations create a generational conflict and a cultural confrontation which is as hard to deal with as the newness of the American society. Therefore my interest lies not only in the social and cultural interaction and confrontation between groups, but also in the negotiations and transformations within groups; and I can relate many of my findings to similar processes within the Muslim community here in Norway.

When doing research on generational conflicts, I chose to view it through the institutions of marriage and kinship and in relation to gender differences. These are classical anthropological topics, which will, I believe, never lose their significance and relevance, and I hope my findings presented in this thesis will be an addition to current debates about how gender views, roles and statuses are created, maintained and transformed.

# The Twin Cities

Twin Cities is the often used nickname of Minneapolis and St. Paul, two Minnesotan cities separated by the Mississippi, but with downtowns only 9 miles apart. Even though the two cities are merged there are noticeable differences between them. Minneapolis is the largest city, with an area of 58.7 square miles and a population of 382,618 according to the 2000 census; the ethnic composition is 65.1 % White, 18.0 % Black, 7.6 % Hispanic, 6.2 % Asian and 3.1 % Other<sup>2</sup>. St. Paul is the state capitol of Minnesota and stretches out in an area of 55.44 square miles, with a population of 287,151 and an ethnic composition of 67.0 % White, 12.4 % Asians, 11.7 % Black and 8.9 % Other, again according to the 2000 census<sup>3</sup>. Together these two cities and the surrounding area is the most highly populated area in Minnesota and also forms the 16th largest metropolitan area in the U.S. according to the 2000 census<sup>4</sup>. The two cities also have different cultural backgrounds; while Minneapolis is characterized by a strong Scandinavian and Lutheran heritage and population, St. Paul is distinguished by an Irish and Catholic tradition, manifested by the yearly celebration of St. Patrick's day.

I experienced Minneapolis as a new-looking, clean, business-like, modern, high-rise city with a downtown and a main-street characterized by fancy shops, restaurants and people looking business-like and wearing suits. Just outside of the city core I found fancy neighborhoods, and beautiful lakes, and I loved the up-town area with a unique mix of slightly characteristic new age shops and more seemingly exclusive restaurants, grocery stores and fashion strips. During my six months of fieldwork I lived in Minneapolis, and although I met my informants in locations all over the Twin Cities, my main 'field' of research was in St. Paul, more specifically the last stretch of University Avenue, just before reaching the Capitol building and downtown St. Paul. I did not venture very often to downtown St. Paul, and when I did it was mostly to change busses so as to be able to meet my informants, but my impression was that the city was poorer, scarier, darker, dirtier and less interesting than its twin, Minneapolis. It is not a high-rise city, but is characterized by Victorian buildings and, to me, a more chaotic structure.

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<sup>2</sup>Source: <http://www.angelfire.com/mn/dragonfire/facts.html>

<sup>3</sup>Source: <http://www.angelfire.com/mn/dragonfire/facts.html>

<sup>4</sup>Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minneapolis-St.Paul>

When riding bus nr.16 from downtown Minneapolis to the Capitol building in St. Paul, I was eased into the changing layout of the two cities, and by looking at the different shops, restaurants and businesses situated by University Avenue, it was possible to get an idea of the difference in the ethnic groups populating the Twin Cities. The closer I got to the Capitol building, the more visible it became that St. Paul has a larger percentage of Asians, and particularly Hmong, than Minneapolis; this was manifested by Hmong and Asian restaurants, shops, bakeries, offices for lawyers, dentists and realtors, churches, organizations and so on. This made up my main field of research.

## **Outline of the thesis**

The next chapter, chapter two, is divided into two parts. In the first part I will present the theoretical perspectives I have used to interpret the information given to me throughout my fieldwork period in the Twin Cities. It will deal with the dialectical relationship between social structures or systems and individual action, how the hegemonic structure forces individuals to act within circumstances or conditions they have not themselves chosen, and how individuals through action can change the premises of the structure or system. I will also present my understanding of how the categories 'men' and 'women' are culturally constructed in connection with kinship and marriage organization and male prestige systems. The second part of chapter two will contain a description of my methods of operation; the bureaucratic challenges created by doing fieldwork in the U.S, the positive and negative sides of using a Hmong non-profit organization as a base of operation, the difficulty of meeting informants or finding arenas of participation in an urban setting, the ethical considerations towards my informants, related both to the policies of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota (IRB) and my own conscience and, lastly, my intentions of giving something back to the people and the community that hosted me so kindly for six months.

Chapter three will present an array of relevant information for the understanding of my fieldwork setting: from background information related to the Hmong clanship structure, marriage and bride price customs and gender views in Laos and Thailand to the historical events that lead the Hmong to the U.S. as refugees. I will present the

continuing importance of Hmong clanship organization in the U.S, the challenges to Hmong customs by the American legal system and, finally, I will present what I understand to be the creed of the American society and how it came to create an inner tension between the freedom of the individual and the unity of a nation.

Chapter four is the first of the analytical chapters, and I will present how my young second generation informants felt trapped, restricted and controlled by an asymmetrical age and gender system and a male-dominated kinship, marriage, and prestige system which their parents forced on them, but which did not correlate with the life the second generation observed and wanted to be a part of in the American society. The gender differences between Hmong men and women and the effects of these differences will be prominent and will show that cultural patterns, although not stable and unchanging, have a powerful impact on individuals.

Chapter five, the second and last analytical chapter will deal with individual strategies within the hierarchical structure presented earlier: how young Hmong girls are negotiating and recreating the expressions of and their place within the male dominated cultural patterns. The conflict between the two generations will become even more evident than in chapter four, as will the dilemmas of living and acting in the cross-section of two very different cultures and cultural value systems. Again kinship and marriage will be the lenses through which I explore gender and age differences.

The final chapter, chapter six, is a short summary of the thesis. In addition I will widen the scope of the material presented here by asking whether the increased occurrence of rapes and domestic violence within the Hmong community in the Twin Cities can be seen in connection with the increased empowerment of women and the loss of power for Hmong men after their arrival in the U.S.





# Chapter 2

## Theory and Method



### Theoretical perspectives

The theory behind the analysis in this thesis covers several levels of interaction; one, there is a continual communication and adjustment process between the Hmong as a refugee group and the American society where they now live. Two, there is a continual negotiation about individual autonomy between Hmong men and women, resulting from their different interests in their new context - the American society and its values. Three, there is also a continual and situational negotiation of power between the first and second generation Hmong, as a result of their different degree of integration and

acculturation to, and acceptance and understanding of, American society, culture and language. I have chosen to look at these dynamics in relation to specific structures - marriage, kinship and prestige, and the theoretical framework will therefore mainly deal with the dialectical relationship between structure and agency, and with gender.

## **The system**

Ortner sums up the essence of practice theory by saying “that society is a system, that the system is powerfully constraining, and yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction” (Ortner 1984:159). It is much of the same essence Giddens communicates through his theory of the duality of structure, that “the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize... Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling” (Giddens 1986:25). This dualism or dialectical relationship between action and system will form the backbone of my thesis, as my aim is to show how Hmong girls are structured into a particular gender view by an asymmetrical and constraining marriage, kinship and prestige system. At the same time I want to show how the actions the girls take in opposition to this system are based on their own choices and strategies, again based on what they feel is in their best interest and what is possible within the structure. The actions of the Hmong girls both reproduce and change the system, or the meanings incorporated in the system. I will in the following refer to a unified Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige system, but I will also discuss the Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige systems separately. When doing so I will refer to them as systems, structures and cultural patterns, the meaning and reference being the same if nothing else is stated.

An important aspect of systems then, including the Hmong marriage, kinship and prestige system, is that their influential power is viewed as a type of constraint based on asymmetrical relations:

Whether it is a matter of focusing directly on interaction (even “struggle”) between asymmetrical related actors, or whether it is more broadly a matter of defining actors (whatever they are doing) in terms of roles and statuses derived from asymmetrical relations in which they participate, the approach

tends to highlight social asymmetry as the most important dimension of both action and structure (Ortner 1984:147).

In *Sexual Meanings* (1981) Ortner and Whitehead proposes that such asymmetrical relations, particularly gender relations, can be discovered by looking at prestige systems. A prestige structure can be defined as “The sets of prestige positions or levels that result from a particular line of social evaluation, the mechanisms by which individuals and groups arrive at given levels or positions, and the overall conditions of reproduction of the system of statuses” (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:13). In other words, a prestige structure is a system where people acquire or are ascribed a certain status based on whether or not they fulfill certain cultural expectations and where the means and conditions of how to arrive at and reproduce this status are prescribed by the system. Within the context of my thesis the Hmong marriage system, in particular, can be seen as such a prestige structure. At the same time we need to see this system as an integrated whole, as it “is at once a system of social relations, economic arrangements, political processes, cultural categories, norms, values, ideals, emotional patterns, and so on and so on” (Ortner 1984:148).

In a social system of asymmetrical relations there will always be a question of inequality. The concept of hegemony is one that is oriented towards cultural processes and practical relations, especially within asymmetrical systems or structures (Williams 1977). The term ‘hegemony’ has traditionally been used to describe political domination in relationships between states, or economic and political domination between classes (Williams 1977). Gramsci broke it down to include struggles on a smaller scale and separated the more static political ‘rule’ from the dynamic concept of ‘hegemony’ (Williams 1977). Hegemony, following Gramsci, describes either a complex interlocking of political, social and cultural forces or the active social and cultural energy behind this situation or state (Williams 1977:108). In my analysis I will see the Hmong marriage, kinship and prestige system as the type of hegemony just described. It is a small scale hegemony, since it is operating within yet another hegemony - that of the American state; still, it is a hegemony with real influence within the Hmong community. The hegemony I am describing is not an isolated island existing separate from everything else, but is, as defined above, an interlocking of *continually changing* political, social and

cultural forces. The fact that the Hmong now live in the U.S. has an effect on the implementation of the power relations expressed in the hegemonic marriage, kinship and prestige system. But in spite of its new context, the system is still powerfully constraining and it most definitely has an aspect of domination and subordination, although a processual one. This means that not everyone within a social system has the same possibility to realize themselves, not because of an ideological system of ideas and beliefs, but as a result of "...a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values - constitutive and constituting - which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming" (Williams 1977:110). Since a hegemonic order is often internalized, it naturally lays the premises for action, and also influences the interpretation of action. People do not choose their structural environment, and for some its limitations are greater than for others. Since a lived hegemony is a process consisting of experiences, relationships and activities, it never just passively exists as a form of dominance but is continually challenged by pressures both within and outside of the hegemony (Williams 1977:112). In this analysis I will focus on both the factual implementation of the hegemonic structure of the Hmong marriage, kinship and prestige system and the challenges to it.

Again, I feel it is important to make clear that when I use terms like hegemony, system or structure, I do not mean something static or stable, but rather something dynamic; it is a process, much like Moore's (1994) definition of culture as "contested, temporal, and emergent". This process includes individual and group experiences and activities, relationships with and between people, opposition, changing pressures and boundaries being made and unmade. When I write about hegemony, systems or structures I see them as analytical tools, much in the fashion Leach viewed the gumsa/gumlao system of the Kachins; they are idealized patterns, meaning social relations and behaviors which are generally understood to be correct and desirable, and maintained as such through certain verbal categories, but they do not necessarily correspond to the empirical reality (Leach 1954). To understand the dynamic aspect of it, and to understand social and structural change, it is essential to not only look at the ideal patterns, the "as if" structures, but to see what people actually do within these structures or systems. Leach further writes "the 'system on the ground' is not in equilibrium in the same way as the

‘system of ideas’” (Leach 1954:xiii). This is to say that the hegemony, systems and structures are in reality fragile; they will be tried resisted, limited, tested, altered and challenged, both in the relationships between the dominant and the subordinate groups and by forces outside<sup>1</sup> of the hegemony. In this process they will also be tried defended, renewed, recreated and modified continually (Williams 1977). There is a mutual dependency between the system, structure or the hegemony and the acting individual, since the individual would not know how to act were it not for the system, and the system, and the idea of the system, only exists through the reproducing actions of its members.

## Agency

Basically, the idea is very simple. People act upon circumstances according to their own cultural presuppositions, the socially given categories of persons and things (Sahlins 1981:67).

Agency refers to the actions of individuals or social groups (women, Hmong, teenagers), where the action is based on, and is in relation to, a meaningful system or structure. Agency refers to the fact that the individual has a will to act, and does act based on personal advantage, gain, or meaning - according to Leach (1954), people act to attain power. I believe that actions performed by dominant individuals or groups within the system will most often go in the direction of preserving the system, while actions performed by subordinate individuals or groups are more likely to be directed at changing the same system. But since the system or hegemony is so powerful and constraining, members of the inferior group might find it hard to act contradictory to it or they might buy into it, and in both cases end up reproducing it. Simultaneously there are both intended and unintended outcomes resulting from actions - and both might reproduce or change what they were not supposed to. Agency is a complex, contradictory and multifaceted process.

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<sup>1</sup>The American society in general is such an outside influence on the Hmong marriage/prestige system. As this thesis has no room for an extensive analysis of the relationship between these two systems, I will only analyze the result of this impact in the communication and relationship between Hmong first and second generation. The influence from the American society is of great importance and should not be played down; we might even say that it has a hegemonic influence of its own. The actions the girls perform in opposition to the dominating influence of the marriage/prestige system, is often inspired both from the Hmong cultural repertoire and the possibilities within the American society.

But how does individual agency or action relate to the system and to the other people within it? What motivates action? Ortner (1984) writes that one way of seeing action is as short term “moves” within long term “projects”, and that the moves have to be understood in relation to the projects, which may or may not be more or less culturally provided. In this thesis I will portray this complex process, and how moves (the concrete action) *might* be understood across the two Hmong generations, but how the projects (the intentions behind the action) are most often not, since they are rooted in two different social worlds. Barth (1993) sees the individual as an intentional actor. In his generative process analysis he describes how intentions, based on a “cultural stock” of knowledge, concepts, values and concerns, are directing an individual’s behavior towards other people and how these situated actions happen as objective, perceptual events. This behavior is then interpreted as meaningful acts by the participants in the event, based again on a “cultural stock”. Interpreted acts are transformed into experience, and “The accretions of experience - molded by premises, tacit assumptions, and cultural imagery variably shared in a group - also play an essential role in reproducing and marginally changing the cultural stock of knowledge, and thereby in turn affect the purposes, plans, and intentions that actors embrace and employ to shape their behavior” (Barth 1993:160). Not only has the interpretation of events into meaningful acts and experiences an effect on how the individual again acts upon the world, but this dialectical process also materializes in particular patterns and strongly influences the form and occurrence of objective events (Barth 1993).

To add even more complexity to this we must acknowledge that actors do not meet as equals in a situation of interaction, as pointed out earlier; by this I do not just mean as individuals in an asymmetrical process of domination and subordination. Individuals do not walk into the same situation and see it the exact same way; “they also bring very different capacities to their encounters: they know, can do, and value different things” (Barth 1993:171). People sometimes have different ‘keys’ for how to interpret the same event. In the case of the Hmong first and second generations, who grew up in two different countries, with two very different ways of life, and with two different languages, the different keys they use to interpret situations and each other’s actions are easily visible - and it complicates communication and understanding between them greatly. Connerton writes that for a social system to be effective as a frame of reference and of

action it is important that the members or participants of the social structure share a social memory, since “images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order. To the extent that their memories of a society’s past diverge, to that extent its members can share neither experiences nor assumptions” (Connerton 1989:3). It is as a result of Hmong’s refugee history and movement from Laos to the U.S. that there is now a particular breach between the generations and their general perception of a particular social system.

In *Common Denominators* (1998), Hylland Eriksen writes about agency and structure and how communication between the two levels is situational and relational; how individuals, although ethnically diverse, share a common understanding of social and cultural rules, and use a variety of compromises and common denominators in their communication so as to uphold a peaceful, working society. Hylland Eriksen’s (1998) arguments are interesting and relevant to my analysis, even though the premises for my discussion are the opposite in that I’m looking at the general *lack* of common denominators between the first and second generation Hmong and the implications of a minimally shared acceptance of cultural and social structures. My thesis deals more with the communication of difference, and of restrictedness, than that of sameness, and I believe, as Hylland Eriksen writes, that culture is only shared to the degree it is made relevant by all participants in a situation of interaction (Hylland Eriksen 1998:24). But conflict and differentiation are not exclusively the focus of my interest; in the second and last analytical chapter I also look at the flexibility of Hmong kinship and marriage structures and illustrate that although the two Hmong generations are different, and although their shared culture might be limited, they still in some cases operate within the same symbolic universe, although their interpretation of it might be somewhat different (Hylland Eriksen 1998:23). In other words, in addition to illustrating how the two generations diverge, I’m also looking at what the two generations Hmong can simultaneously identify with and agree upon.

## The cultural construction of gender identity

It has long been recognized within the discipline of anthropology that men and women have different roles and statuses, and that they participate in different activities within a social context (Rosaldo 1974). What different trends within the field of anthropology do not agree upon is what these differences mean, what causes them and who can interpret them correctly. I am not going into this very interesting discussion here, but feel it necessary to clarify where on the biological-through-cultural-to-social scale of difference between men and women I feel my material fits in.

I believe, like Ortner and Whitehead (1981), that “What gender is, what men and women are, what sorts of relations do or should obtain between them - all of these notions do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological ‘givens’, but are largely products of social and cultural processes” (Ortner & Whitehead 1981:1). Ortner and Whitehead explains the difference and asymmetry between men and women as a result of prestige structures where men are considered superior to women by virtue of their more communal or public roles, and that female prestige must be seen in relation to men and male prestige. Rosaldo is not too far removed from this definition when she writes that there is a universal asymmetry in the cultural evaluation of the sexes, explained by the identification of women with childbirth and the domestic sphere and the identification of men with social relations and the public sphere (Rosaldo 1974:17-18). She elaborates on this difference and the division between the sexes and explores some of the consequences; namely that male activities are understood as more important, valuable and prestigious; that the dichotomy predicts male authority over women and women’s subordination to men; that women’s manners and activities are assumed natural and are ascribed while manhood is learned and achieved; and that women are often considered as anomalies - as a threat to the social order (Rosaldo 1974). In my analysis I agree with Ortner and Whitehead, and to a certain degree with Rosaldo and I will discuss many of the same consequences, mentioned above, that Rosaldo (1974) explores. With that said I will also show how Hmong cultural and social organization and structural patterns *create*, and do not rest upon, a realistic dichotomy of domestic and public spheres and the unequal value of men and women. I see the domestic/public opposition more as a result of certain processes and actions related to a male dominated



kinship, marriage and prestige system than as a cause for gender differences in itself. This means, perhaps more clearly, that I do not believe there is a universal, predisposed subordination of women to men as a result of physiological or biological traits, even though the fact is that women often are subordinate to men. Instead I believe that the ordering of a society, and the acceptance of such an order, related to time and place, might or might not create such asymmetrical relations.

In their Introduction and their contributions to *Sexual Meanings*, Ortner and Whitehead (1981) focus on the ordering of a society based on particular processes, that is, the ones pertaining to aspects of kinship, marriage and prestige organization. In my analysis I will focus on the same systems of organization. Within the Hmong community, gender, sexuality and identity are very much linked to the individual's place in the clan system. The individual's place in the clan system depends on his or her marital status and the marital status is very much linked to, or is actually the basis for, the prestige system. Collier and Yanagisako (1987) has criticized Ortner and Whitehead for equating this kind of asymmetrical ideology, and the processes included in it, with men's point of view, and for arguing that this point of view is shared among all men within a specific culture. Collier and Yanagisako (1987) also criticizes Ortner and Whitehead for portraying that the construction of gender identity is marked by the prestige concerns of a culture's dominant male actors. This means that men and women and the relationships between them are defined by how prestige is allocated, regulated and expressed in a particular culture or society (Ortner & Whitehead 1981:12). This criticism by Collier and Yanagisako might be read as dissatisfaction with the 'natural' masculine domination that Bourdieu (2000) writes about and that anthropology has been inclined to 'think with'. I expressed above that I do not believe in a 'natural' subordination of women; still I agree with Bourdieu when he writes that the division between the two genders in many societies is made to *seem* natural and that we through socialization are taught to think in gender specific ways. In many cultures and societies, including the westernized ones, men control or lead, to a great degree, the institutions that define socialization.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the Hmong it is the marriage and kinship system. This might explain why when we write about women, even as women, we see them in the light of men, and when women talk about themselves *they* see themselves in

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<sup>2</sup>Defined by Bourdieu (2000) as the school, the state and the church

the light of men and use concepts made by men. This is a difficult circle to break, but it must be an aim among anthropologists to understand all the nuances within the culture or society under investigation. Collier and Yanagisako (1987) is probably right in claiming that not all men understand the dominant ideology the same way, and that some men too feel restricted by it, and I will illustrate this point in my analysis. Still when talking to women during my fieldwork in the Twin Cities I experienced that they all had the same feeling and experience of male domination, and even though some of them knew of men, and I talked to men, who did not agree with the Hmong male dominated ideology, it was still so all-encompassing that it influenced everything they did and who they were. So the support of male domination may not be shared, but it is still, in the case of the Hmong, very much a lived experience.

Ortner and Whitehead (1981) points to yet an important difference between men and women, namely that there is a "...general cultural tendency to define men in terms of status and role categories ('warrior,' 'hunter,' 'statesman,' 'elder,' and the like) that have little to do with men's relationship with women. Women, by contrast, tend to be defined almost entirely in relational terms - typically in terms pertaining to kin roles ('wife,' 'mother,' 'sister') - that, upon closer inspection, center around women's relationship with men" (Ortner & Whitehead 1981:8). This dominant category of relational roles influences how all women within the same cultural system are viewed. Which category they are ascribed to depends on how men acquire prestige, whether it is through marriage, sibling relations or filiation:

The prestige system, in other words, 'highlights' certain cross-sex bonds within the total range available in the society, insofar as they are central to generating or maintaining status... the marriage system in most societies is the cross-sex relational system that has the greatest implications for male prestige, and ultimately for cultural notions of gender, sex and reproduction (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:22).

This correlates with my own findings in that Hmong women, both in the first generation and second generation, not only define themselves and are defined by their kin role and marital status, but their identity and their actions are both restricted by and feed the male prestige system, which centers around acquiring a good reputation or a good name for the men and their respective clans. Since marriage and having a wife is so important

for male prestige in the Hmong community, women risk being seen and used as an economic and/or productive asset. They produce goods that men use in attaining prestige; they perform household activities that reflect on the husbands' prestige, and they produce children, sometimes the greatest symbol of male prestige - the symbol of the continuation of the male lineage, where the child may also be an economic and productive asset. Simultaneously, it is through marriage, through their actions and behaviors as a wife and through their relationship with men that women themselves can obtain a certain amount of prestige (Ortner and Whitehead 1981). That said, my thesis will explore how women, especially in the second generation, are trying to redefine these role and status categories, and how some are successful in doing so, and others are not.

Ortner (1981) describes how the Polynesian concept of woman is divided into 'wife' and 'sister' - 'sexual' and 'nonsexual'. In the Hmong community women were divided into the categories of 'wife' and 'daughter' - both defined as outsiders and both with an explicit sexual role. While Ortner noticed that sisters had greater cultural prominence, I learned the opposite about Hmong daughters. This might be explained by Ortner's findings, namely that "...where affinal role definitions, and emphasis on female sexuality, dominate a culture's notion of femininity, women in such cultures are generally viewed and treated with less respect than in those cultures in which women are construed largely as kin" (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:23). Within the Hmong community the lack of cultural prominence for women in general has, I believe, much to do with the kinship system, where daughters marry outside of their own clan and are considered to be 'other people's women' (Lee)<sup>3</sup>, or other people's wives. This means in practice that all women are considered to be outsiders or affinals, and their sexuality is seen both as an asset to be handled by men<sup>4</sup> and as a women's main prestige criteria - meaning that having children is what defines you as a women and which gives you respect in the community. The success or failure to control a daughter's sexuality *before* she gets married reflects on the reputation and the prestige of the father and all the men in her family and clan, and it will also affect the outcome of the prestigious marriage transaction. For reasons that I will discuss later on, this has become an especially big issue after the Hmong came to the U.S. The Hmong now therefore practice a strict

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<sup>3</sup>See also URL [www.garyyiale.com](http://www.garyyiale.com) or Lao Studies Review, No.2. 1994-95, pp 44-60.

<sup>4</sup>A transfer of a women's sexuality is symbolized with a bride price as part of the Hmong marriage ritual.

control of young girls' sexuality and public exposure.

Ortner and Whitehead (1981) leans a great deal to an essay written by Gayle Rubin (1975), who writes about the oppression and subordination of women from a Levi-Straussian and Freudian point of view. She writes that a specific culture's 'historical and moral elements,' as defined by Marx, determines the culture's 'sex/gender system,' which she defines as "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity..." (Rubin 1975:159). In other words, the asymmetrical relationship between women and men is not inevitable, but is a social product following from different cultures' needs to find order in the production and reproduction of sexual systems. Kinship systems, Rubin writes, are examples of observable and empirical forms of sex/gender systems in that they are both made up of and reproduce concrete forms of socially organized sexuality (Rubin 1975:169). I agree with Rubin, and I will show throughout this thesis how the Hmong kinship system in relation to the Hmong marriage system affects the gender view and sexual and public display of Hmong women. Simultaneously, and through the portrayal of generational and cultural conflicts, I will show how the functions of the Hmong kinship and marriage system, after the Hmong's arrival to the U.S., are in a process of becoming obsolete (Rubin 1975:199). Throughout my discussions I will take for granted some of Rubin's remarks: one, that gift giving, "the exchange of women" in the form of marriage being the most important one, expresses, affirms and creates a social link between the partners of an exchange and by that upholds a working and peaceful society (Rubin 1975:172). Two, that the practically universal incest taboo and obligatory heterosexuality are mechanisms created to make sure such transactions take place. Three, since women are what is being exchanged it means that men have certain rights in their kin women and that women do not have the same rights in their kin men, or in themselves; in practice this means that men and not women are the beneficiaries of such transactions (Rubin 1975:174-77). In anthropology the connection between property and marriage has long been recognized, and the focus within this field has been twofold: both seeing women as property, and considering their access to it (Moore 1988). I will focus on the first of the two; considering women as a type of property, particularly in relation to bride price transactions. This places the oppression and subordination of women not in biology, but within social systems built on the traffic of women - such as kinship and marriage

systems (Rubin 1975:175-177).

When studying women in a particular society or culture, Rubin (1975:177) stresses the importance of understanding the society's or culture's "political economy of sexual systems" - in other words the relationships and mechanisms by which gender and sexuality is organized, produced and maintained. Marriage and kinship systems, which are always parts of total social systems, incorporate, regulate and dictate political, economic and sexual arrangements in many societies. As Rubin (1975) writes, marriage might be a way to accumulate wealth; it might be a way of maintaining or getting access to political and economic resources or to build alliances. To understand how gender identities of women are created, valued and reproduced we need to see them in relation to politics and economy - and especially if and how women in the particular society are treated as a commodity by men. This might include an analysis of how daughters are turned into a financial resource, how female labor is turned into male wealth or prestige, the conversion of female lives into marriage alliances or the contribution of marriage to political power or an altered status (Rubin 1975:209-10). All of these aspects will be touched upon, implicit if not explicit, in the analytical chapters.

## **Methods of operation**

In this section I will present and discuss my methods of operation during the time before, throughout and after my fieldwork in the Twin Cities. I will begin with presenting some of the challenges brought by doing, or trying to do, 'correct' fieldwork in the U.S., which meant going through a lot of bureaucracy and paperwork both to be able to get into the country and to be able to gather information from informants under the age of eighteen. I will also offer some critical assessments of doing fieldwork through a Hmong mutual assistance association and having one in particular as a 'base of operation'; how it both helped me get in touch with people and other organizations and how it might have colored my analytical questions. Next I will discuss the methods I used in the field and the challenges of doing fieldwork within a city and within a community that had no seemingly natural, public arenas for me to participate in, in which to gather information - or to learn about the topic of my research. Finally I will discuss the ethical

implications of using informant-based information and to use information gathered in a friendly atmosphere; using friends and ‘co-workers’ as informants.

## **Challenges brought by doing fieldwork correctly; U.S. bureaucracy**

The first thing I did when I had decided to do my fieldwork in the Twin Cities was to visit the American embassy to get a visa for the six months I had planned to stay there; I decided to be honest about my plans of conducting fieldwork in a Hmong community, even though it would probably have been easier to claim student naivety and go over on a tourist visa, as I knew many had done before me.

The encounter with the U.S. embassy was not at all easy or pleasant; I was met with suspicion and hostility, and the fact that my husband is an American citizen worked against me in that the people I talked to at the embassy obviously thought I wanted to migrate to the U.S. on a permanent basis, which was of course not the case. I was told I could travel to the U.S. on a J-1 visa, which meant in practice that I had to get an invitation from a university in the U.S. which would be responsible for my research. The process of getting in touch with a person that could help me at the University of Minnesota was long and circular, and when I finally got through to, I wouldn't say the right person, but a person with knowledge of what I had to do to get invited, the process of sending in all the right paperwork started. Even though my project description had been approved by the faculty of anthropology at the University of Oslo, I had to send a translated version to the University of Minnesota for approval there, together with a letter of confirmation that I was a graduate student in anthropology and that fieldwork was normally included in the degree I was pursuing. When the invitation was in order, and since my research included interaction with Hmong minors, I had to go through the IRB: Human Subjects Committee to get my planned research approved; it included a big load of paperwork, describing my intentions and research methods in detail. I also had to send papers confirming that I had a specific amount of money, enough to keep me going for the six months my fieldwork would last. I was told that when I arrived in the Twin Cities, before I did anything else, I had to come by the IRB office for a talk.

When I did I was told I needed to produce consent and assent forms, both for the minors and their parents, and these had to be signed by my informants before I could ask them any questions. In addition I had to make an interview guide, describing what kind of questions I would ask my informants, and these questions had to be approved by the IRB office. I was informed that throughout my fieldwork period I had to report to the IRB office if I changed my questions or the focus of my research, and I also had to inform them of any Hmong organizations I would contact during my fieldwork period.

I was perfectly aware that many of the processes I had to go through were created to protect both minors and the Hmong as a minority population, and I absolutely respected that; still, the process was quite intimidating, and I felt extremely limited in my actions when it came to conducting a meaningful fieldwork operation.

Anthropological fieldwork, when qualitative and not quantitative, is often impulsive and ‘in the moment’ and therefore not easily planned out beforehand. Therefore, I’m sorry to say, I was not able to comply with all the rules presented by the IRB office, but I followed them as closely as I could, but not so as to risk damaging all my opportunities to acquire information in a somewhat natural context.

As part of my fieldwork I attended several mom support groups and pregnancy prevention groups at different high schools, together with a representative for one of the organizations I worked with who led the different groups. After a while the girls got more accustomed to my appearance in the groups and I asked some of them if they would be willing to talk with me outside of the group and the school, if the school gave me permission to do so - some of the girls ignored my request, others said yes. Following the IRB rules I talked to the headmasters at two of the schools and explained to them that some of the girls had given me permission to talk with them outside of the school context, and that I wanted to pursue this window of opportunity with their permission. One of the headmasters said yes initially but changed his mind a couple of weeks later; the other told me that he did not want to make that decision and that I had to send in an official request to the St. Paul Public Schools; Office of Accountability. I did send in the paperwork, but my request was denied because some of my questions, like “Why did you get married and pregnant at an early age” might not be culturally sensitive enough, because the consent form (which was made following IRB guide lines) needed to be

simplified and because I needed to consult with Hmong community members about who would be the appropriate person to sign the consent forms for minors. The refusal of my request came with an invitation to apply again, but as my fieldwork period was moving towards the end I did not have enough time to follow it through. I regret not having started this process sooner, because I believe that I lost the chance to get to know these girls in a different and more natural context and to receive essential and more elaborate information from my youngest informants - information that could have enriched my analytical material.

## **A critical view of doing fieldwork connected to a Hmong organization**

Before I left Norway to start my fieldwork in the Twin Cities I had contacted one of the largest and most renowned Hmong non-profit organizations in the Twin Cities and asked if I could use their organization as an operating base for the first part of my fieldwork. My intentions were to learn more about the Hmong community in general and to have a platform on which to get in contact with the diverse group of people making up the Hmong community. The organization said yes, and will in this thesis go under the fictive name of Hmong Urban Village.

To begin with I spent a week with the different youth programs and followed caseworkers who went on home visits to clients, helping them with different social services. During this time I learned much about the different challenges and problems within the Hmong community, and at the same time I saw the challenges within a Hmong organization, both operational, towards clients and the internal conflicts between the young and the old, the men and the women, and the white and the Hmong working there. After a month or so my scheduled time was over, and I went to spend time in a new organization. Unfortunately this organization was so disorganized that I did not get much out of my stay there. At that time I had decided to narrow my focus of generational conflict to its relation to early pregnancy and marriage, and so I went back to the first organization I had stayed with and asked if I could follow a particular case worker on the weekly mom support groups and pregnancy prevention programs



that she was leading. The caseworker said that would not be a problem, and so for the last four months I attended several of these meetings every week.

This meant that my time in the organization lasted for almost the full six months of my fieldwork, and in addition to being my base of operation, I got to know many of the people working there; some became good friends and even informants. I will get into the ethical implications of this a little later. In addition to attending the mom support groups and pregnancy prevention groups, I was included in several of the organizations activities, which together gave me a fuller picture of community and individual issues. Through this organization I also came into contact with several other Hmong organizations and people working within the Hmong community, and these people again put me in contact with girls who would become my informants. I became very conscious of the knowledge immersed in the organizations and the different people working there resulting from their long experience within the Hmong community, and it became a conscious method to learn from this knowledge so as to get a wider and clearer understanding of my research project (Agozino 2000). The validity of the source was assured by cross-referencing the information given by several organizations.

The dilemma of using a Hmong organization as a base of operation was first and foremost that the organization's view of, and treatment of, issues and problems within the community influenced my way of thinking about the same issues. The concepts of 'problem' and 'victim' were introduced to me early, and teenage marriages and pregnancies were considered one of the biggest problems within the Hmong community, while young girls were considered 'victims of culture'. In the eyes of the organization this problem needed treatment, but the treatment was often superficial and connected to 'why' questions, and did not necessarily include an understanding of how the trend was connected to other spheres of the girls' lives. This way of thinking, I must say, influenced, but did not dominate, my questions to my informants throughout my fieldwork. The balance then, of the material presented in this thesis, lay in the combination of knowledge about general problems within the Hmong community and the unexpected and personal assessment of their situation by the young girls I came in contact with; such individual opinions, Agozino writes, "might be better indications of attitudes than of actual problems that may or may not be experienced by all" (Agozino

2000:10).

Secondly, I got in touch with most of my informants through people I knew from different organizations; this might have determined the type of people who became my informants, and so my informants probably do not represent all levels of the Hmong community. I would like to point out here that my main objective was to get the second generation girls' perception of their situation, and so this thesis is mostly based on information from girls between thirteen and twenty-three years old, but not exclusively, as second generation men and women are also represented by a few cases.

A particular benefit of hanging out in an organization was that often the premises of the organization served as host for community events, like celebrations and discussion forums of which I then received knowledge and sometimes attended. Someone at the organization once told me that the organization and the people working there were like a micro cosmos of the Hmong community, and that any issues found in the community could also be found within the organization; I believe this is true, and I learned a lot just observing the relationships and attitudes among the employees at the organization.

## **Doing fieldwork in an urban setting and its influence on my methods**

I chose to conduct my fieldwork in the Twin Cities for two main reasons: first, I knew that the Twin Cities has the largest congregated Hmong population in the U.S. and for that reason I thought it would be easier to find arenas of interaction where I could participate; Fresno also has a large Hmong population, but it is more spread out and more rural. Secondly, in the Twin Cities I had friends I could stay with, which simply made it easier - the drawback was that since they did not live in a Hmong populated area, I would be somewhat removed from the field.

While my hosts lived in an up-scale area in Minneapolis, my area of research was mainly the large stretch of University Avenue in St. Paul that had several Hmong businesses, organizations, churches, stores and restaurants. Since I did not have a driver's license, I had to take the bus back and forth and everywhere else I needed to go - it was a very

interesting way of getting to know the city and some of its people. Taking bus 16 from downtown Minneapolis to almost the end of University Avenue takes about an hour, depending on the traffic; the first time I rode the bus I sat looking anxiously out of the window, reading the numbers of the buildings to make sure I would get off at the right place. After crossing Lexington Avenue the names on the buildings started to change from English to Hmong, and I felt pulled into a slightly different world; but to my surprise I could hardly see any Hmong, neither young, nor old, in the streets, and during my whole six months of fieldwork I only twice saw an older Hmong couple on the bus. I quickly learned that despite of being in a Hmong area of the Twin Cities, I would not easily get access to, or be able to participate in settings of Hmong interaction - because the Hmong are not public at all; they are social, but they like keeping it within the bounds of the family.

I had hoped when I planned my fieldwork that I would be able to get to know a few Hmong families whom I could interact with naturally and on a regular basis - to experience participant observation in the true anthropological spirit, but this did not happen; instead I found myself picking up information in a variety of places and contexts.

During the six months I spent in the Twin Cities I spent time in two Hmong non-profit organizations, but I was in contact with all together sixteen different organizations working with a variety of issues within the Hmong community. Through these organizations I went on at least five home visits, mostly as an observer, but I was also invited home to five of my informants and these visits had a much larger social aspect including cooking and eating together. In addition I visited a Hmong funeral home and a Hmong night club; I regularly attended an after school group for Hmong teenagers and participated in games and activities with them, and I went to two community meetings; one about parenting and one about an incident where a Hmong man had been shot by a police officer. I volunteered at English evening classes with Hmong adults; I visited a Hmong church and went to a reading with Mai Neng Moua, the editor of the book *Bamboo Among the Oaks*. I also attended the Hmong New Year celebration, both in St. Paul, and in Minneapolis; these events last for three days each, and thousands of Hmong dress up in their beautiful costumes and play ball games, eat Hmong food, buy

everything from herbs to dvds and enjoy the shows and beauty pageants.

All of these and several other events gave me a broad spectrum of information about the Hmong community. Moore writes about the usefulness of using events as data:

... the most significant events are not generated by, nor elicited by, the inquiries of the anthropologist. They consequently have a kind of purity as spontaneous local information. The action or reaction is locally constituted and locally produced ... events involving a number of persons often are the crossroads where many different interests and visions of things intersect... They contain the possibility of learning something unexpected (Moore 1994:365).

Particular events during my fieldwork, like The Hmong New Year celebration, informed me of the connections between the past and the present. A community meeting about a Hmong man who was shot by the police informed me of the relationship between the Hmong community and the mainstream U.S. society. Elements in Hmong adaptation to U.S society and the contested, temporal and emergent elements in Hmong culture in the meeting with U.S. society were visible in Hmong English evening classes, the reading with Mai Neng Moua and again the Hmong New Year celebration. The events I observed and participated in during my fieldwork both underlined already observed patterns and helped me form new questions as a result of gaining new information; they also helped me see the processual and the dualistic aspects of the field and my data.

But learning about what goes on in the Hmong community, and its connection to the American mainstream society was not enough, I needed deeper and more specific information on the topic of my research, and, since I could not follow a few families closely to study the relationship within them, my main method became extensive but informal interviews.

Since I first and foremost interacted with Hmong men and women through the organizations and talked with them almost every day, several of them became my informants, without them, I think, realizing it. I also did informal interviews and had several informal conversations with three younger men, five younger women and two older men at the two different organizations I spent time with.

Because of the layout of the city and the strict control of young Hmong girls I had

difficulty meeting possible informants in a natural setting, and so I often asked the people I got in contact with if they knew of any girls between the age of thirteen and twenty-three who they thought would be willing to talk to me. This snowball procedure of getting informants was not approved by the IRB office, but I saw no other way. Through several contacts I got in touch with sixteen girls, two adult women, two adult men and a psychologist, working with violent Hmong teenagers, who were willing to meet me. I said I would meet them wherever they felt most comfortable; sometimes this was in their homes or at their workplace, but most often I met my informants in restaurants or coffee shops. I did use an interview guide for specific questions, but most often the interviews would turn into informal, friendly conversations in which I let the girls talk about what they felt was important; if I felt the conversation got off track completely I would lead it in the right direction with more direct questions. Often though, I learned more by letting the conversation go off track a little bit, because we then touched upon subjects I was not aware of or did not have much knowledge of, and so I got a much deeper understanding of my topic of interest. The interviews would last from one to three hours, and I recorded most of them with a minidisc. I always asked my informants if they were comfortable with me recording the conversation, and they all were; so I put the recorder on the table, and we both mostly forgot about it. I did not always record the conversations that took place in my informants' homes, if we were cooking or being social, as we moved around the house, and the recorder did not fit into the context. At these times I wrote down what I could remember of the conversations and events when I got back to my own place. In addition to my own interviews I also attended an organized interview setting at one of the Hmong non-profit organizations, arranged by someone else, where ten adults and ten teenagers represented by both males and females, and as two separate groups, were interviewed on a variety of topics.

Most Hmong, in my experience, are very polite, actually so polite that they say yes, even though they mean no, because they do not want to offend anyone; I learned this the hard way. It happened very often - I counted at least twelve times - that I had scheduled a time and a place to meet with a particular girl and she would not show up; when I called I would not get an answer, or I would be told that there had been a family emergency and she would not be able to come. Since the girl had decided the time and place to meet I would often find myself in an unfamiliar suburb, having changed busses

two or three times to get there and by the time I would be back home I had spent three to five hours with nothing to show for it.

I found that the interviews both gave me indications of general patterns within the population of Hmong girls between the age of thirteen and twenty-three, and concrete personal examples to illustrate these patterns.

In addition to using events and informal interviews as a way of gathering information, I also regularly visited the Hmong Cultural Center where I read articles and magazines written by and about Hmong, and I followed the news and community events in the Hmong Times. I also regularly logged onto Hmoob.com where Hmong teenagers discussed everything of interest to them and where I learned about their expressed attitudes, interests and concerns.

## **Language**

All of my young informants, whom I interviewed extensively, spoke English more or less perfectly. The older generation spoke broken English, but well enough for me to understand, and they understood English to such a degree that they comprehended my questions; therefore I did not need to use an interpreter. When I attended the mom support groups, pregnancy prevention groups and the after school group I sometimes had a hard time following the conversations, as the girls and boys in the after school group would speak a mixture of English and Hmong. Still, if I had any questions after the group meeting was over I could always ask the person leading it.

## **Ethical considerations**

The qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world. Rather, the researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied. A gendered, historical self is brought to this process. This self, as a set of shifting identities, has its own history with the situated practices that define and shape the public issues and private troubles being studied (Denzin 2001:3).

Denzin (2001) writes that there is no guarantee for methodological certainty, because the researcher will influence the inquiries with pre-conceived notions of theory and different values. Being a female anthropology student, I found it hard to stay objective when my female informants told me tragic, personal stories, and I found it hard to play a neutral role when they obviously needed friendly advice; I could not just be a researcher without also being myself, and this probably influenced my methods and the information I received. During my six months of fieldwork I played on a repertoire of several roles and statuses; I meant different things to different people and, in return, created various relations with varying degrees of trust and intimacy with the people I encountered - which ultimately, I believe, influenced the types of information I received and the questions I developed. It might be a dilemma when informants turn into friends and friends turn into informants, because in these situations there is an intimacy that might result in the giving of information that would not otherwise be disclosed. These relationships of trust, on the other hand, are essential when it comes to obtaining truthful information, and I had informants who told me that they had not told anyone else the things they told me. Agozino (2000) uses the concept 'data reception', instead of the more common concept 'data collection', and with it abandons the hierarchical way of thinking which the concept of gathering information entails; it ascribes the individual who gives information more autonomy. The relationships I formed during my six months of fieldwork and the information resulting from them can be compared to a type of gift-exchange (Mauss 1995), where sometimes the reciprocity was immediate, other times delayed. Agozino (2000:14) writes that it is essential to recognize and appreciate that the research subjects give us the gift of a voice, and in sharing our research results we are giving something back, we are giving them a voice in our presentation. It has been my aim, when doing fieldwork and when writing this thesis, to prevent that my informants feel used or misrepresented, but when presenting personal information there is always a risk that someone might feel offended.

During my fieldwork period I felt I had ethical responsibilities towards the rules the IRB office had given me, and I felt I had ethical responsibilities towards my informants; even though both the IRB office and I had the same objective, namely to protect a particular group of people, I felt we looked at ethical considerations somewhat differently. While the IRB office presented the ethical responsibilities in the form of static rules, I saw

ethical responsibilities as ongoing situational and contextual deliberations and choices I had to make.

I did my best to follow the rules of the IRB office as closely as I could, but I found it impossible to do so completely. One of the rules I decided to ignore was the rule of not attaining informants with help from an intermediary; using the snowball effect. Very often I met my informants by being introduced to them through people I knew, or people I knew would give me phone numbers of girls they had talked to and who were interested in talking with me; and this is how it worked, since there were few arenas where I could meet Hmong girls independently of others.

According to IRB rules I should always attain the participant's informed consent before asking any questions related to my research, and I always did. I explained to everyone I meet, in words and phrases suited to the individual, who I was and what I was doing as an anthropology student, and I was explicit when I told them that the information they gave me could be used in a written thesis. I did not, on the other hand, obtain a written consent from all the underage girls' parents before talking with them, especially the ones I only talked to briefly or those I would probably not meet again and therefore seized the presented opportunity to talk with. I never intentionally violated the girls' privacy, and I hope they did not feel that I did; I always told them that they did not have to answer my questions if they did not feel like it. In addition I have done my best to mask my informants so that they will not be recognized, especially so for the underaged girls.

Since I spent much time in Hmong non-profit organizations, I also spent much time talking to the men and women working there. I have also stayed in touch with some of them through e-mail correspondence after I returned to Norway. During my time there I would often write down our conversations, even though at the time I did not see it as essential data for my thesis, and I have saved e-mails. The employees at the organizations all knew that I was conducting fieldwork, and I did have informal interviews with some of them; still, at the time I did not consider them key informants, and I believe that they did not see themselves as such either. Sometimes in the field, I believe, the anthropologist can become blinded when it comes to what is essential information and not; and the importance of the information will first emerge afterwards when analyzing the material with a certain distance to the field. The writing of a thesis



is a circular experience with components of theory, data and definitions of concepts; it is much like doing fieldwork in the collected material where observations become data (Wadel 1991). I found that many of my informal conversations and e-mails received from previous 'co-workers' and friends at the organizations were highly relevant, and I contemplated if I should use this information or not. I have chosen to use some of the information given to me, since all of my informants in the organizations were educated adults and should have understood that I was conducting fieldwork twenty-four/seven, and since none of my informants work in the same organizations any longer. I have masked my 'co-workers' the same way I have masked my other informants, but there is always a possibility that others working in the organization at that time might recognize the particular person.

When studying and writing about minorities in the U.S. there is always a chance that the material presented might give the majority a reason to form negative stereotypes of the studied population (Bourgois 1996). When writing this thesis I have wanted to give an image of the continued structural force of the Hmong marriage, kinship and male prestige system after the Hmong's arrival in the U.S. and of individual action, balancing between two different social structures, the Hmong and the American. I look at continuity and change and negative dynamics, but I see it from the perspectives of young Hmong women; even though this presents a less sympathetic, male dominated cultural structure, I have not sought to balance out this picture, but instead stand by it as the reality of my informants. The presentation of Hmong social/cultural structural constraints and individual action, whether interpreted as failure or success, is not meant to portray the Hmong as victims of immigration; it is meant to present the dynamics present in the process of cultural transformation.

## **Giving something back to my informants and the Hmong community**

It is only natural, I think, to be grateful after six months of fieldwork where so many relations have been created and so much information has been given; and in my case, I met so many helpful, wonderful individuals - and so one feels indebted to give something

back in return. My way of giving back in the field was to give of myself, and while I stayed in the different organizations and learned about the Hmong culture, I also gave them a taste of Norway. I answered questions, I gave information and I brought Norwegian food samplings for both the employees and the youth in the after school group to taste: the sour cream porridge not being as popular as the Norwegian pancakes with jam and ice cream or the lefse with butter and Norwegian brown cheese. In the organizations I also attended, helped out and brought food to activities held by the organization for some of its clients.

My informants did not receive any benefits by giving me information; sometimes when I met them at restaurants or coffee shops I would treat them to something; but then again, some of them would treat me to something too. I know that for some of my informants the relationship we created helped them verbalize thoughts they had not dared to say out loud before; and the 'excuse' of going to see me gave them a break from the everyday routines, and they had a chance to get away from husband and in-laws. In writing this thesis in English I hope to give my findings back to the community, both the individuals living within it and the organizations working within it.

## Chapter 3

# Context and Historical Background



A short presentation of the Hmong was made in the introduction, including the reasons I chose to study this refugee population in the U.S. This chapter is meant to further ease the journey into the analytical chapters that follow and to give a broader view of the premises for the following discussion. I have chosen to present how Hmong origin stories, clanship structure, marriage and bride-price customs were understood in Laos and Thailand so as to get a better understanding of the social background of the first generation Hmong in the U.S. - and to show how a prominent Hmong gender view is present in all of them. I would like to point out that when I refer to Donnelly's descriptions of Hmong traditions, her data is based on stories told by first generation immigrants now living in the U.S, while Symond conducted her fieldwork in Thailand and her references are therefore based on interpretations made by Hmong living there.

Gary Yia Lee, who I will refer to repeatedly in my thesis, and in particular in the section about the clanship structure, is a Hmong anthropologist who was born in Laos but came to Australia in 1965 and obtained a doctorate degree in 1981- since then he has done research on Hmong from Laos and Thailand and on Indochinese refugees, and he is highly active within the Hmong community in Australia. I also find it important to establish the fact that Hmong in the U.S. came as refugees and to depict the differences between immigrants and refugees, as I feel that the reasons and the traumatic events behind the Hmong's arrival to the U.S. will partly explain their slow rate of adaptation to the American society, as will the statistics presented. Since the clanship structure is such a big part of the Hmong identity, it is essential to understand how powerful this kinship structure is even within the U.S. and how it has an effect on demographics, local conditions as well as gender differences. Finally, the morals of the U.S. form the background of my analytical chapters and influence both Hmong generations, but especially the second generation; I therefore present a short recap of how the American creed developed, namely the dialectical relationship between freedom for the individual and responsibility for the common good.

## **Hmong cultural patterns in Laos and Thailand**

Hmong social structure and gender and age hierarchy is depicted in Hmong folk tales and in particular in the two Hmong origin stories (Donnelly 1997). In the first, "The Beginning of the World", the universe is people-centered:

Only the earth and the low, dark sky exist before Lou Tou and his wife Ntsee Tyee are born out of a vein in a rock. It is a universe filled with human power. Lou Tou brings all the different grains with him. When his wife wants meat, he permits animals to be born out of the rock, and he rules their reproduction. His son Teng Cheu is even stronger than he, having the power to kill and to heal. Teng Cheu raises the sky with four corner posts and a center post (like a Hmong house) and creates sun and moon, day and night. He becomes ruler of the universe, superior to his younger brother who rules all living things, and by ruling his younger brother, he creates Hmong social structure. Only after this cosmic structure is in place is the world ready for the birth of the little 'people seeds' that become all the people of earth, gestated by Ntsee Tyee, then differentiated and given eyes by Lou Tou (Donnelly 1997:36-37).

In this story two active forces, the two males, create a social order for and by men with the assistance of a passive female; the men bring the grain and control the reproduction of animals and the female is only a container for the creations of men; her sons come out of her but do not need her as a mother - there is no feminized social structure for her to take part in. The men in the story create the sky and the universe in the image of a male centered Hmong house. When the female delivers the little people seeds, they are incomplete until they are given eyes, by the male figure, with which to understand the world (Donnelly 1997:37).

In the second origin story “The Flood and Hmong Clan Names: The World’s Second Beginning”:

... the world is flooded and everything is drowned excepting only a Hmong brother and sister, who float in a large wooden funeral drum. When the drum strikes the sky, sky people come out to pierce the earth with stiff metal lances. The waters recede, leaving nothing else alive. The brother wants to recreate the Hmong by marrying his sister, but she objects to such incest. However, she says, if two rocks which they roll down either side of a mountain join together overnight at the top, she will yield. That night, her brother brings the rocks together, and in the morning she acquiesces. From their union, a round mass of tissue is born which they cut in pieces and throw away. The pieces land here and there in places that sound like clan names. From each a clan is constituted, and so Hmong society survives (Donnelly 1997:37-38).

In this story, Donnelly writes, Hmong social forms are passed on in the actions of the two siblings, and the gender views become apparent with the sister’s unwillingness to break the incest taboo, and thereby tradition, and with the brother who pragmatically tricks her. The sister is compared with the earth, the brother to the sky; and the brother can act upon his sister just as the sky people acted upon the earth - she is forced to obey him. In this story the brother is portrayed as smart, pragmatic and longsighted; he thinks about the greater good. The sister on the other hand is portrayed as conservative, obedient and shortsighted; thinking about her own correctness. And so with his male qualities it is only appropriate, and essential for human survival, that he should rule her (Donnelly 1997:38).

There are several Hmong folk tales and they often contradict each other in respect of proper behavior, especially gendered behavior. Donnelly points out that even though a

woman is sometimes portrayed as the heroine, as the quicker, richer and more long sighted of the characters presented in the story, unless she uses her qualities to advance the fortunes of the male characters in the folk tale, she will eventually be presented as evil or stupid and will end up as the tricked rather than the trickster (Donnelly 1997:36 and 39-40). Hmong gender views will become even clearer through the presentation of Hmong clanship structure and marriage customs in Laos and Thailand.

## **The Hmong clanship structure**

The nuclear family, including parents and their children, is the procreative and nurturing institution of Hmong society (Geddes 1976:45), but it is not an isolated unit for very long, since sons when they get married bring their wives into their father's household making it an extended household (Lee). Geddes included marriage relationships in the category of parental and sibling relationships on the grounds that there are no intermediate links defining any of these relationships, and both relationships are immediate links to important second-degree relationships, relationships one degree removed from members of the nuclear family (Geddes 1976:45-46). Even though marriages might be more impermanent they are considered stable, as the institution of the bride price helps ensure their permanency. Despite the fact that affinal ties were sometimes used when deciding where to migrate and where to live, consanguine ties were seen as more important than affinal ties (Geddes 1976:47). Lee points out that a man should not move in with his wife's consanguine kin group for several reasons: one, it would be considered a betrayal of one's own lineal group, and a lack of responsibility or a friction with the man's parents and his male relatives. Two, he would be spiritually on his own, as it is impossible to practice two ancestral ceremonies in the same house; he can not be included in his father-in-law's rituals as that would be in defiance of the incest taboo - it would mean that he and his wife belonged to the same clan, and the Hmong are clan exogamous when wedding relations are concerned. Three, a man who lives with his in-laws would be considered inferior and weak, as he would have to submit to the wishes and demands of his wife's relatives; a man who lives patriuxorilocally because he could not afford the bride price and instead has to work it off is considered to be in an economically lower position than a man who

could afford to pay the bride price (Lee). Females born into the family are included at first, but when they marry they derive their identity from and belong to the lineage and clan of their husbands; even if they get divorced or become widows and move back to their families of birth, they are not entitled to re-enter the spiritual world of their father's lineage, and therefore they have to re-marry to avoid becoming 'lost souls' after death (Lee; Symonds 2004). While the desire to have sons among Hmong parents is great, because it is sons who will offer sacrifices to the ancestral spirits and to maintain the family line, daughters are referred to as 'other people's women' and their contribution is to the family's economic activities until they get married (Lee).

As the extended family grows, the 'cluster of classificatory brothers' might separate and form their own households; but the brothers, their wives and their children will become a lineage with an agnatic male core and with common parental spirits traced to a founding father (Lee). Since a lineage is formed through its male members, especially those between father and son and between brothers, these bonds will be maintained through residential closeness and frequent visiting and co-operation. Lineages grow fast, so there will be lineages within lineages, and the importance of the relations within them will vary according to person and generational level; important brother bonds will be outclassed by newer and closer father-son and grandfather-grandson bonds. When the father of the original family dies, his widow might become a focus for the group, and after her death the eldest son will be the leader and the focus of the lineage. He might perform rituals in honor of his wife's parents even though they are not members of the lineage. This practice Geddes writes is to express the Hmong value of respect for age and to commemorate the connections the lineage has with other clans, through their female members (Geddes 1976:53-54). Lee elaborates and writes that all male household heads have to make offerings to all members of the consanguine group in connection with important events such as the New Year, weddings or harvesting, starting with the oldest generation and continuing to the youngest generation. Ancestral spirits and local spirits are asked to partake in the offerings given to them, usually a pig or a chicken, in return for their protection and assurance of the well-being of the household. Although practically all blood relatives are remembered in the rituals, only people with parental status will be worshipped, as they will protect their descendants if pleased or cause harm or sickness if they are neglected. Ancestral rites, Lee writes, renew and strengthen

group and lineage sentiment and solidarity (Lee).

A much more inclusive group membership is the clan, the affiliation being made through an assumed common ancestor traced back to the origin stories mentioned above, which make Hmong clans patrilineal exogamous surname groups (Lee; Symonds 2004:xxvi). Geddes points out that the Hmong are not patrilineal through descent, but through marriage, and unless the father marries the mother in the proper manner and establishes property rights, the children will belong to the clan of their mother, or more correctly the mother's father (Geddes 1976:56). There are uncertainties around the exact number of Hmong clans, but the most commonly mentioned numbers are twelve, eighteen or twenty-three. The functions of the clans are several: one, they serve as a source for group identification and social interaction (Lee; Symonds 2004). Two, membership in a clan gives security and prosperity in daily life and in relations to other persons, whether living or dead, and it is a source for co-operation and mutual assistance and help (Geddes 1976). Three, clan membership dictates who a person can and cannot marry, as marriage to members of the same clan is forbidden. Within clans there are sub-clans which are usually identified through ritual behavior and ceremonies and through the way they build their graves (Lee; Symonds 2004). The connections and memberships of people through families, lineages, clans and sub-clans prescribe the closeness and the privileges and duties they have towards each other (Lee).

## **The Hmong marriage and bride price customs**

For a clan to grow and to increase its strength it needs new members, and since the Hmong are clan exogamous this needs to happen through acquiring women from the outside and to obtain rights in them and their children (Geddes 1976). At the time of marriage girls become women and boys become men (Symonds 2004), and so it is a transformative ritual in respect to status position within the community. Marriage in Laos often followed a period of courtship that had its peak at the time of the New Year celebration, and the best way to meet during this time of festivity was through the ball game (Donnelly 1997), a flirtatious game that helped the two involved get to know each other through song and the exchange of personal items. It was not unusual for the boy



to come and play the flute or sing outside the girl's house and for a wedding to follow a few days later (Donnelly 1997). The time of courtship was experienced as counterweight to the hard work of daily life; it was a time of dressing up in beautiful costumes, being coquettish and indulging in secret enjoyment hidden from the elders; the girls did not reveal their flirtatious games, and the parents pretended to not know what was going on (Donnelly 1997). Since the girls at this time were preparing to depart from their own family and to give their services to a new family, in the case of marriage, the time of courtship was also filled with anxiety; the girls were afraid the parents, whom they felt looked at them in terms of economic value, would be angry to lose their labor contribution (Donnelly 1997).

Premarital sexual games between girls and boys seemed to be common in Laos, and it did not inflict upon Hmong social forms; if a girl got pregnant before she was married it was not considered a great moral flaw; it could even increase a girl's value, as it was a sign of her fertility (Donnelly 1997:121). In contrast to the joyful aspect of the courting period, Donnelly also describes the girls' feelings of sadness and vulnerability in this process, feeling forced to follow the will of others, not belonging anywhere and having their happiness depend on someone else, being "romantically helpless within the structure of Hmong society" (Donnelly 1997:124).

The New Year courting period often ended in marriage, and where Donnelly (1997) did her fieldwork, marrying was called "becoming a daughter-in-law", since the new wife most often moved in with her in-laws and worked under the command of her mother-in-law. Symonds (2004), on the other hand, noticed that the marriage process in Thailand was called "buying/getting a wife", referring then to the bride price exchange between the two families. I will get back to this later. It was preferable to marry into a family already related by marriage as this would speak well for the couple's future and would give them a more sympathetic treatment if they needed wedding counseling later in life. One should always marry outside of one's own clan and within one's own generation (Donnelly 1997:125). The Hmong in Laos were not ordered into a class structure based on access to economic goods, and so social position was not important when choosing a marriage partner; the girl's family described a bad marriage as one that would harm her through poverty or overwork, or that would take her far away from her

family. The boy's family thought bad temper and laziness to be unwanted qualities in a daughter-in-law (Donnelly 1997:125-26).

Both Donnelly (1997) and Geddes (1976) describe marriage as a relation between two families, in which the girl has some maneuverability when it comes to choosing a husband; helped by the secretive nature of courting and elopement and the possibility to assert her wishes to her family - but where the choice is eventually made by men, following the pattern of authority within the family. The father makes the choice whether or not to support his son's decision about when and who to marry, and since the son needs his father's help in paying the bride price, an agreement between them is essential (Geddes 1976:79). The father also decides whether or not he will accept proposals made for his daughter; the daughter can object to a suitor but is eventually expected to follow the wishes of her family (Geddes 1976:79; Donnelly 1997).

There are several ways for the Hmong to go about marriage, but the two most common procedures seem to be either elopement and marriage by capture or marriage by mutual consent. In the first marriage strategy the girl's family is at a disadvantage in the bride price negotiation (Geddes 1976:80). This strategy is used if the young girl and boy are in love but their parents do not accept the union, if the parents of the girl are known to be aggressive bride price negotiators, if the girl wants to get out of an unwanted engagement (Thao 1986), or if the boy wants to marry the girl but is not sure of her consent. In the second strategy it is the other way around; this is the most expensive but also most respectful way of going about marriage, and it is therefore called 'to pave the road with money'. Regardless of the type of marriage, there is a need for wedding negotiations, which is a major event of interfamily and clan relations; since it also concerns the formation of a contract, it is the province of men, and women, even the bride, play only a small part (Donnelly 1997:145).

The wedding process with negotiations can go on for days and include spiritual rituals, singing, discussions, drinking and eating. The negotiations take place in the home of the girl's parents after the young couple has spent three days with the boy's family, where the wedding is consummated in the bedroom. After a soul calling ceremony for the girl to welcome her into the house of her in-laws, relatives of the boy and two go-betweens or negotiators leave for the girl's parents house where relatives of the girl and two

go-betweens are ready to start the negotiations (Symonds 2004). I will not go into details around this ritual<sup>1</sup>, but will instead present some of its main functions. A Hmong marriage is not only a union of two people; it is first and foremost a series of unions between lineages and clans; it facilitates new alliances, preserves and repairs old alliances through the resolving of previous disagreements and includes other villagers in the festivities forming networks through the fulfillment of obligations (Symonds 2004). Geddes writes that “marriage is the creative act at the centre of almost all new kin relationships” (Geddes 1976:59), and Symonds describes how relatives of the bride are remembered through gifts of money, thereby tying the couple to several clans (Symonds 2004:68). The wedding ceremony centers around the negotiation of the bride price which can be divided into two parts:

... the ‘milk and care money’ that compensates the mother and the father for the care and upbringing of the young woman, and the ‘money owed for the shirt’ which is payment for the birth shirt, or placenta, of the child (children) the young wife is expected to produce - in other words, for her fertility (Symonds 2004:169).

This means that the children the woman produces will belong to the husband’s clan, and if the husband dies, his younger brother has a right to take her as his wife without paying a bride price. If she remarries outside of her husband’s clan, a bride price should be paid to relatives of her former husband - which makes her position similar to that of a daughter (Geddes 1976).

Geddes (1976) points out that even though the bride price in Thailand was high relative to the average income, it was not aimed at economic gain, and Symond’s descriptions of the wedding negotiations seem to support this statement, as the gifts given to the bride and to the couple by the girl’s parents almost equaled the value of the bride price, and some of the bride price was given back to the young couple to help pay for the girl’s funeral expenses when that time came (Symonds 2004). The bride price payment is separated from general commercial transactions in that it is paid in silver and not ordinary money; still, Geddes claims, one should not argue away its meaning as a price:

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<sup>1</sup>See Symonds (2004:61-71) for a detailed presentation of a Hmong wedding negotiation in Thailand and Donnelly (1997:145-54) for a Hmong wedding negotiation in the U.S.

Miao<sup>2</sup> clans are exclusive groupings in several respects and women are important assets to them. Through marriage, a clan gains new spiritual adherents and its constituent households mothers, housekeepers, and workers in the fields. It is appropriate that these assets should be paid for to validate the transfers in the public eye (Geddes 1976:61).

Both Donnelly (1997) and Thao (1986) stress that the bride price also serves as an assurance of the in-laws love for and good intentions towards the bride, it symbolizes the in-laws' seriousness and the girl's value and her protection as she ages. Donnelly also points out that; "As a transaction between older male relatives of the bride and the groom, the transfer of bride wealth signals the subordination of bride and groom both to their elders and actually has more to do with a hierarchy of age and power than of gender" (Donnelly 1997:159).

## Hmong gender roles

The description of Hmong origin stories, clanship structure and marriage negotiations shows how Hmong women are essential, but not equal, to men within the Hmong social structure, and this opposition often comes in the form of pairs, Symond writes:

... the earth and sun are female, the sky and the moon are male ... Hmong associate men with the left side of the body because 'the right hand toils and the left hand rests' (Hertz 1960:108). So, as Robert Hertz indicates, women's significant contribution of physical labor is widely acknowledged, but it does not correspond to increased social worth

The male principle is also associated with the 'bones' of the body and the female with the 'flesh' (Radley 1986:387), ... The bone metaphor is linked to the idea that men form the 'skeleton of society' upon which all else is built, consistent with Hmong ideology that 'men are more important', as informants uniformly report. The male principle is also associated with the direction of 'up' which is more valued than 'down'. But males are also associated with the roots of a plant rather than the flower because the roots are more durable and lasting, just as males are permanently connected to their natal families even after death (Tapp 1986b:158-59; Hang 1986:34) (Symonds 2004:30-31).

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<sup>2</sup>The Chinese word for the Hmong; "means, depending on which linguistic historian you read, 'barbarians', 'bumpkins', 'people who sounds like cats', or 'wild uncultivated grasses'" (Fadiman 1998:14). Miao was widely used until it was replaced by Hmong (meaning free men) in the 1970s, campaigned by the scholar Yang Dao (Fadiman 1998:15).

Symonds points out that since the Hmong lineage, spiritual rituals and public life are male it is a general understanding among both genders that Hmongness is defined by males, and males are defined and find authority in their Hmong identity; this means that if every single Hmong woman died, the patriline would continue because Hmong men could marry other women who would then become Hmong - while the same is not true for the women. If a Hmong woman marries someone non-Hmong, she and her children will cease to be Hmong, as a Hmong woman exists and is defined in relation to either her father or her husband; and so if Hmong all men died, Hmongness and Hmong society would disappear (Symonds 2004:8-9).

The gender inequality is evident through all spheres of Hmong social life in Laos; I will mention just a few. In Laos the household and the chores within it, in addition to the agricultural labor was supervised by the oldest couple, with the oldest male making decisions and choices regarding and affecting all members of the family, and all members were expected to act in accordance with the welfare of the group, which was decided by the men (Donnelly 1997:28-29).

In a household the daughter followed the instructions of her mother, younger sisters their older sisters; the new wife followed the instructions of her mother-in-law, and younger co-wives the older co-wives, while sons followed their father's decision, and after being married for a while they spent more time with their brothers than with their wives (Donnelly 1997:32-33).

In addition to gender roles being instructed by the age and gender hierarchy in the Hmong society, there were particular qualities that were encouraged and sought after in men and women; a man should be a strong worker; he should know the appropriate ancestral rituals, be knowledgeable and be able to make informed decisions as well as be kind and not hit his wife and children unless they deserved it (Symonds 2004:44-45). A woman should also be an industrious and hard worker; she should listen, be polite and obedient and acquire respect for herself and her family through her actions, and she was expected to be fertile and to give her husband and his lineage many children (Symonds 2004; Donnelly 1997).

It is important to know about the Hmong clanship structure, marriage and bride price customs, and the way gender roles were practiced and understood in Laos and Thailand, as they say something about what the Hmong brought with them when they escaped Laos and came to the U.S. as refugees.

## **The difference between a refugee and an immigrant**

During my fieldwork I had arranged to meet two Hmong women in their late twenties at their workplace; they were both teachers in elementary school and had agreed to talk to me after their workday was over. We sat down in a quiet classroom, and the conversation went on for hours; one of the women told me how she and her family had managed to escape from Laos to Thailand in 1978 when she was six years old. A year later she, her mother, three sisters and four brothers arrived in the U.S.:

Nou was only six years old when she, her family and many of their extended family members and neighbors had to leave their home in Laos to try to find their way over to Thailand. For a month they stumbled through the jungle getting more and more tired and hungry. When they had no more food left the women stayed in the jungle with the children while Nou's father together with the other men went to Thailand to find some food. On their way back, Nou's father was imprisoned for reasons Nou did not know. When he was released he collected more food and tried to find his way back to his family waiting for him, starving, in the jungle. He and the men with him got lost and ate the food while trying to find their way. Again, Nou's father had to go back to Thailand to fetch food and finally he made it back to his family who was waiting for him in the jungle, surviving on anything they could find to eat. Nou's father brought his family almost to the edge of the Mekong River, but he was too drained to walk the distance. Nou's mother had to decide if she should stay with him, or if she should go with her children - she chose to follow her children. They found a man who would help them get safely over to the other side - the price he said; a wife. Nou's mother was forced to make yet another choice; to give away one of her young daughters to a man she did not know to save the rest of her family, or to stay in the jungle - for a refugee, it is not really a choice, is it?

Sometimes there is just a thin line separating the experiences of a refugee and an immigrant, and migration<sup>3</sup> can be interpreted and approached in numerous ways, from

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<sup>3</sup>Defined here as the general movement of people from one geographic place to another, including voluntary and forced, short-term, long-term and transnational, and internal and international movements

economic and legal, to historical, political, geographical and so on (Demuth 2000). Still, I find it important to emphasize, although simplistically, some of the more typical differences that do exist between the two categories, refugees and immigrants, who, it is important to remember, are not at all homogenous. I will also specify some of the reasons why the Hmong came to the U.S. as refugees in the first place.

## **The immigrant**

Choosing to immigrate is often a life altering decision. It is therefore often carefully planned and evaluated (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002). A family or an individual can save up money, prepare themselves psychologically and plan the trip for years before they actually go. The reasons some people choose to immigrate are many and highly subjective, but a common trait of immigrants is that they leave their native country to better their own and their children's socioeconomic status or position and they leave as a result of individual agency and motivation (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002, Demuth 2000).

The economic factors that are often emphasized are employment and wages. Immigrants often become conscious of available opportunities through so called 'push' and 'pull' factors. The 'push' factors include poverty, unemployment, underemployment and the difference in wages and opportunities between countries. The 'pull' factors include the countries or employers want or need for cheap and disposable immigrant labor, which for the immigrant might mean new and better jobs with better pay or working conditions (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002; Fernandez 2000; Demuth 2000).

Other incentives to immigrate are interpersonal forces, social networks and social stability. People migrate because family members or friends have migrated before them, and this network of support will help them get settled in the new country. 'Old' immigrants will help 'new' immigrants find a job and a place to live, and will give them important information on how to get by in the new country (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002; Demuth 2000). This is made especially visible through the trend of creating ethnic neighborhoods and enclaves, and this social network will grow and

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(Demuth 2000).

nurture itself, assuring a steady flow of migration and a legal and illegal labor force (Fernandez 2000). Because of globalization and the increasingly easy access to information about other places, and the informal channels that tell of, especially successful, immigrant experiences, more and more people are encouraged to find better opportunities elsewhere. Changed cultural models and expectations of what constitutes a good life are leading immigrants to look beyond the borders of their own country (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002; Mahler 1995).

Immigration therefore is complex, and involves economic, social and cultural factors (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002). Still, common for most immigrants is that the trip is well planned and there is a wish to leave their old life and country to start a better life somewhere else. This does not mean that all immigrants achieve their goals after arriving in the new country; many become disillusioned and live on the margins of their new society, putting their hopes for a better future in their children.

## **The refugee**

What first and foremost separates immigrants from refugees is their motivation for leaving their native country (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002), the fact that every refugee is a migrant, but not every migrant is a refugee (Demuth 2000:27). It would be right to say that: “People who flee persecution and then cannot return to their homeland for a long period of time are refugees” (Hein 1995:1). The persecution might be based on race, religion, nationality, being member of a particular social group or having some sort of political affiliation, but refugees might also be forced to leave as a result of the mortal dangers of war in general, of human rights violations, or because of environmental damages resulting from droughts, hurricanes, floods and the like (Hein 1995; Demuth 2000).

When refugees leave their home it is because they are forced to do so; therefore planning and preparation are not possible, as the departure is often on the spur of a moment. The flight is often unorganized, traumatic and might entail great losses. Commonly refugees do not leave their country because they search for better opportunities; they leave because they no longer can perform the most basic of all parental functions, which



is to provide for the safety and well being of their children (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002). Pull factors for a refugee are therefore first and foremost survival and freedom, social stability and access to nourishment and health (Demuth 2000).

Depending on when the refugees arrive in their new country, social support networks may or may not be present to help them settle and adjust to conditions in their new home land. The life refugees left behind, and how attached they were to their 'home', also conditions how they adjust to their new environment (Demuth 2000). In addition refugees, as well as immigrants, might find it difficult to be accepted, or to be formally and lawfully admitted in their new country as a refugee. The ones who do get accepted can legally begin their new lives in their new country; the ones who are rejected risk being sent back where they came from or to a third country where they can 'try again'. Others again might be detained for an uncertain period of time while waiting to be sent back and some enter their new country illegally, trying to carve out a life for themselves as undocumented immigrants (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002; Demuth 2000).

While immigrants have the opportunity to visit their country of origin, refugees can only dream of one day being able to return safely. The feeling of being uprooted and the experience of war-related violence, separation from family members and hasty flight might explain why many refugees suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002).

As I have shown, there are differences between immigrants and refugees in how they come to their new country and the premises for their flight and new settlement - but very often immigrants and refugees are treated as one group, immigrants or migrants as defined above; other differences among them might be given greater attention, as well as their ability to assimilate into the main stream community. Portes and Rumbaut write that:

Today's immigrants differ along three fundamental dimensions: 1) their individual features, including their age, education, occupational skills, wealth, and knowledge of English; 2) the social environment that receives them, including the policies of the host government, the attitudes of the native population, and the presence and size of a co-ethnic community; and 3) their family structure (Portes & Rumbaut 2001:46).

The second generation immigrants, they write, are going through a process of ‘segmented assimilation’ and what segment of the society they will assimilate into depends on four factors:

1) the history of the immigrant first generation; 2) the pace of acculturation among parents and children and its bearing on normative integration; 3) the barriers, cultural and economic, confronted by second-generation youth in their quest for successful adaptation; and 4) the family and community resources for confronting these barriers (Portes & Rumbaut 2001:45-46).

As described in the beginning of this chapter, for refugees the journey or flight to their new country is one of strain and anxiety. It often entails tremendous loss of possessions and also human life, and people are put in positions of impossible choices. Many Hmong refugees lost all of their possessions in the jungle, from their embroidered costumes and silver necklaces to pots and pans. The ones traveling with small babies often had to give them opium to quiet them down so the communist soldiers would not find them; many of the babies never woke up. Parents and children were separated in the flight and many died of starvation or illnesses in the jungle or were shot trying to swim over the Mekong River to safety in Thailand. There are probably not many Hmong in the U.S. today who did not lose a family member in coming to the U.S.

## **Why do we find Hmong refugees in the U.S?**

In Laos the Hmong had settled in the remote northeastern mountainous areas (Hamilton-Merritt 1999) where they were mostly self sufficient, and practiced a form of slash-and-burn agriculture. They also grew and traded poppy (Geddes 1976).

The quiet and sheltered life of the Hmong in Laos was disturbed in the 1960s when the mountain-dwelling Hmong were recruited by American forces and the CIA in the fight against the Communist guerillas called the Pathet Lao, in Laos (Hein 1995). The Secret War in Laos was played in the shadow of the Vietnam War, and was crucial to how that war developed. The Hmong, with U.S backing, kept the North Vietnamese Army and 70,000 soldiers from accessing southern Vietnam for ten years. Among several tasks and assignments, the Hmong “gathered critical intelligence, rescued downed U.S. aircrews,

and observed and sabotaged the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex in Laos, so vital to the North Vietnam's military strategy" (Hamilton-Merritt 1999:xvii). Their involvement came with a great loss; soldiers, old people, women and children all suffered and died in large numbers (Hamilton-Merritt 1999). The Hmong, who were a minority group in Laos, thought that in return for their military assistance they would gain greater military and economic autonomy in Laos after the war was won, perhaps even a state of their own (Hein 1995).

Even before the communists consolidated power in Laos in 1975 many Hmong had fled to Thailand, as the conditions for living worsened as a result of the war; a large number made it to safety, but more than 15,000 Hmong perished during flights to Thailand (Hein 1995:35). After 1975:

... the borders closed. The Mekong River became a Berlin Wall. Those trying to escape were shot down in the river by Vietnamese and Lao soldiers. The victors in Laos ... launched a brutal campaign to eradicate the old order, including those who had supported the Royal Lao Government, and particularly the Hmong, whom the new Lao regime vowed to 'wipe out'... tens of thousands of Hmong were murdered in Laos by this regime. Some escaped the dragnets to flee to the remote mountains to hide, often in caves... Because these escapees were often too weak or too sick to flee Laos, they spent years hiding in the mountains to gain enough strength - both physical and psychological - to undertake the rigors of flight. As a result, Hmong refugees continued to arrive in Thailand through the late 1980s and into the 1990s (Hamilton-Merritt 1999:xviii).

For the Hmong who had made it to safety in Thailand, the challenges were still not over. Many Hmong lived for years in Thai refugee camps<sup>4</sup> because they were not accepted for, or they refused, resettlement, and/or they were not willing to voluntarily return to Laos; General Vang Pao instructed Hmong to stay in the refugee camps well into the 1980s, as it would be easier for them to go back home when he 'retook' Laos (Hein 1995; Faderman 1998:68). The conditions in the camps were horrific: "Sanitation was minimal; disease was rampant; malnutrition was common because there was seldom enough food to go around" (Faderman 1998:66), and the cruelty of Thai officials included violence, theft and rape; Hamilton-Merritt reports of a fourteen year old Hmong girl who was

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<sup>4</sup>Ban Vinai was constructed in 1976 and with its 40,000 Hmong refugees it was the largest Hmong settlement in Southeast Asia (Hamilton-Merritt 1999:14). In all twenty-one relocation camps, holding Hmong, Lao, Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees were established in Thailand (Faderman 1998:66).

raped and beaten so severely by twelve Thai throughout an entire night that she couldn't walk and had to crawl home the next morning (Hamilton-Merritt 1999:477).

The challenges facing the Hmong did not end in the camps; the U.S. State Department and United Nations officials drafted the Comprehensive Plan of Action, put into place in 1989, an international program meant to deal with Vietnamese boat people. The Tripartite Agreement, formed between the U.S. and the governments of Thailand and Laos, was a sub-plan under this program, and it affected the Hmong through the forced repatriation of thousands of Hmong to the still hostile Laos. In spite of strong protests from several persons knowledgeable about the situation in Laos and political hearings about the situation, the repatriation did not stop until 1996. On May 15, 1997 General Vang Pao and his army were formally recognized for their achievements and accorded the status of war veterans in the U.S. (Hamilton-Merritt 1999).

There is a common belief among the Hmong living in the U.S. today that the U.S. had promised to help the Hmong out of Laos if the communists won the war. Therefore many feel that the Hmong were betrayed by the U.S. when they, as a result of politics, withdrew from Laos, flying out only the most prominent Hmong leaders by helicopters. If they weren't betrayed, it is certainly right to say that the U.S. disclaimed any responsibility towards their Hmong allies, and it happened long before the war was over:

On Monday, October 20, 1969, less than a month after Vang Pao's recapture of the Plaine des Jarres and five days after a massive antiwar demonstration in Washington, Senator Stuart Symington opened secret hearings on Laos... The principal witness was William Sullivan, who had served as U.S. Ambassador of Laos from late 1964 until March 18, 1969... Sullivan maintained that the U.S. had no moral commitment of any kind to Laos, no written, verbal, or moral obligation to the Royal Lao government or to General Vang Pao and his Hmong soldiers (Hamilton-Merritt 1999:225-26).

I believe these to be important historical facts, worth mentioning in themselves, but particularly because the U.S. treatment of the Hmong as refugees has caused them much frustration, anger, fear and grief (Hamilton-Merritt 1999), and many first generation Hmong still struggle to adjust to their new country - as they would rather be back in Laos, if it was safe for them to live there.

## Statistics on Hmong adjustment to the U.S. society

Portes and Rumbaut, in their book *Legacies*(2001), have analyzed information from the decennial census and Current Population Surveys of the U.S. Census Bureau and the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (collected between 1992-1996) to assess the rate of immigrant adaptation among the first and especially the second generation. They claim that the outcome of the adaptation or assimilation process is determined by “... school performance, language knowledge and use, ethnic identities, the level of parent-child generational conflict, and the extent to which peer relations reach beyond the ethnic circle” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:22). I will in this section sum up some of their findings about the Hmong first and second generations in relation to each other and to the process of segmented assimilation. Portes and Rumbaut maintain that:

1. Forty-eight percent of Hmong children are embarrassed over their parent’s cultural ways (p.38).
2. Hmong parents have high expectations for their children despite their own general lack of education, and while fifty-four percent of Hmong youth aspired to an advanced degree, only six percent realistically expected they would be able to attain it (p.103, 216-218).
3. Ninety-six percent of Hmong children communicate with their parents in their native language, although the study shows they are not at all fluent in their native language and fifty-eight percent prefer to speak English, while their parents ability to speak English is a lot lower than their children knowledge of Hmong - indicating a big linguistic gap between the parents and their children (p.123, 127, 129).
4. From 1992 to 1995-1996 thirty-six percent of Hmong children changed their ethnic identity from national origin to panethnic/Asian (p.160, 163).
5. The Hmong had a parent - child conflict of sixty-six percent and forty-six percent of the children showed strong attachment to family obligation (p.198, 201).
6. Eighty-three percent of Hmong children attend inner city schools and sixty-two percent feel they have unsafe conditions at school, and seventy-eight percent report there is many gangs at school and fights between ethnic groups (p.40, 204).
7. Only twenty-four percent of Hmong children say they have high self-esteem and thirty-four percent report of high depressive symptoms, females having lower self-esteem and a higher depression score than males (p.207-208, 110).
8. Although the Hmong received a positive governmental reception that included considerable resettlement assistance, their very low average education and human capital profile makes them one of the poorest immigrant groups in the U.S. (p.78, 80-81, 216).

## The organization of Hmong clanship structure and community networks in the U.S.

During one of my conversations with an administrative worker, Hue, at a Hmong mutual assistance association we were interrupted by a phone call. After he was done talking on the phone Hue smiled and said it was someone who wanted to apply for a particular position at the organization, a position the organization needed to fill, but they had not gotten the official ad out yet. Hue said word of mouth was so fast in the Hmong community that, even though the position had just recently become vacant, he had already had several callers, who had heard about it from relatives and family members that worked in the organization, or who knew someone who did - it was the magic of the clanship structure.

To understand my informants in the following chapters it is important to know the local conditions and the context they are operating within in the U.S. As portrayed earlier in this chapter, the Hmong clans and kinship structure were strong organizing principles in Laos and Thailand, and in this section I will show that they are still strong organizing principles after the Hmong came to the U.S.

When Hmong and other Indochinese refugees started to arrive in the U.S., from 1975 and onwards, the American policy was to disperse the refugees throughout the country<sup>5</sup>, not to assimilate the refugees, but to hinder the drainage of community resources in a particular state, or area. This meant that Hmong refugees with no immediate relatives in the U.S. would be resettled in an area with a low Hmong population (Hein 1995:50-53). Based on the U.S. census of 2000, Pfeifer (2001) compares changes and trends in the Hmong population patterns and distribution across the U.S. from 1990 to 2000. Both in 1990 and 2000 the largest Hmong population was recorded in California, but according to the 2000 census, among metropolitan areas Minneapolis-St. Paul (The Twin Cities) had by far the largest Hmong population (40,707), while Fresno came in second (22,456); this was a reversal of the pattern from 1990, when Fresno had the

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<sup>5</sup>The newly arrived Hmong refugees were spread out to fifty-three cities in twenty-five different states. In this process clans were broken up and although most Hmong got resettled in cities, some families were placed in isolated rural areas causing even greater levels of anxiety, depression and paranoia (Fadiman 1998:185).

largest urban population (19,444), while the Twin Cities came in second (17,764), and it showed a trend of secondary migration within the U.S. and a strong growth in the Hmong population in the Twin Cities (Pfeifer 2001:1,2,5).

Pfeifer pointed out that one of the most striking patterns emerging from the census was that the Hmong tend to congregate within one particular city within a particular state - with 97% of all Hmong counted in Minnesota living in the Twin Cities. The trend was visible in most states containing a Hmong population, with urban populations between 60% and 99%, the exceptions being California and Wisconsin, where the population was spread across several cities (Pfeifer 2001:8-9).

A suggested reason for the development of Hmong communities within certain cities in an area is the importance and centrality of the clan system to the organization of Hmong society. Living in a community that contains members of one's own clan and also members of other clans is important for several reasons related to Hmong identity and cultural maintenance: one, the access to and closeness to the social support network of clan and extended family members. Two, the presence of clan leaders to resolve disputes, elders to officiate in life cycle rituals like weddings and funerals, and the availability of Hmong cultural experts like shamans. Three, the proximity of other clans for marriage purposes since the Hmong are clan exogamous, but still favor marriage to other Hmong. As Pfeifer sums up:

... the characteristics of the clan system as well as the strength of the enduring emphasis upon the maintenance of a distinct Hmong identity are key factors which have contributed to both the persistence and consolidation of highly concentrated Hmong enclave communities in certain metropolitan areas and regions of the United States (Pfeifer 2001:10).

## **Leadership and the development of Hmong Mutual Assistance Associations (MMAs)**

Political violence and international migration have the potential to disrupt leadership continuity in Hmong refugee communities in the United States. At the same time, clan and village authority structures from Laos favor leadership continuity despite dramatic social change... Initial leadership status in a host society is linked to authority structures from the homeland,

but social change influences subsequent leadership careers (Hein 1995:213).

Despite the traumatic and uncontrolled circumstances that lead the Hmong to the U.S. they have made a considerable collective effort to manage their future (Hein 1995), despite some political conflict within the group. In the U.S. today there are Hmong who support general Vang Pao and his continued fight against the communist regime in Laos and who eventually hope to return to Laos for good, and there are Hmong who see the U.S. as their permanent new home and who feel committed to making the most out of their lives where they are now. Even so, the Hmong organized at a greater rate than other Indochinese refugees in the U.S. “In 1985 there was one Hmong association for every 478 Hmong, compared with a ratio of 1:832 for lowland Laotians, 1:1,024 for Cambodians, and 1:1,082 for Vietnamese” (Hein 1995:94). The greater mobilization among the Hmong not only shows the continuity of clan and political organization from Laos; it also shows the function of the clan system: creating bonds between all Hmong sharing the same last name and encouraging collective solutions to common problems. The fact that most Hmong who came to the U.S. have to deal with the transformation from a horticultural village life to an urban, industrial society is evident in the unique formation of the Hmong MAAs, where almost half provide social services, and one in six have an economic function, which is far more than any other group (Hein 1995:95).

Jeremy Hein (1995) found, through an analysis of forty Hmong refugee leaders in different communities in Wisconsin, that the Hmong clan and kinship system favored leadership continuity in spite of social change. Leadership is defined as “a formal or informal position of authority which influences decision making and opinion in the Hmong community” (Hein 1995:215). In Laos each clan would elect a leader to facilitate collective decision making, and adult men monopolized these leadership roles and offices, making decisions in issues affecting the clan and leaving women out of public decision making. The role of clan leader would often merge with the role of village chief who had several functions regarding the welfare of the community. Hein found that continuity in leadership within the Hmong refugee communities in the U.S was evidenced by the fact that almost all of the leaders in Wisconsin had been either civilian or military leaders in Laos, and many had also had important positions in the refugee camps in Thailand. While Hein showed that kinship plays an important part in leadership continuity by the



fact that eighty percent of the leaders in the U.S. had fathers who had been civilian leaders in Laos, there was a generational change of leadership experience, with the older generation having more civilian leadership experience, and the younger generation having more military leadership experience. The fathers had leadership positions in Laos; their sons exercise authority through Hmong MAAs. After the Hmong arrived in the U.S. there has also been an expansion in the areas of leadership statuses and authority (Hein 1995).

I find it important to point out that only three out of the forty leaders in the analysis were women, in spite of the researcher's effort to locate female Hmong leaders. Also none of the forty leaders had mothers or sisters who had leadership positions in Laos or Thailand, indicating a low participation of women in public issues due to a highly patriarchal culture and leadership structure (Hein 1995).

### **Hmong legal issues in the U.S.; marriage by capture**

The Hmong in the U.S. have experienced that several of their customs have come into conflict with the American legal system: religious praxis, the use of opium, and marriage customs include some of the most prominent cases (Hein 1995; Ly 2001).

As I have written earlier, in Laos marriage by capture or catch-hand marriage was practiced in two different situations: one, the boy and girl were in love and wanted to get married but the union was not approved by the girl's parents, and so they decided to elope. In this case the marriage would be planned and consensual and the young couple would run off together, without assistance from the boy's family. Two, the boy wanted to marry the girl but was not sure if the girl wanted to marry him, or he wanted to marry her despite her protests: with the assistance of two relatives he would abduct the girl against her will and bring her to his parents' house where the marriage would be consummated by sexual intercourse. In both instances it would be expected that the girl show signs of resistance, to protect her own virtue and her family's honor, and in both cases the boy's family would be in a better situation to negotiate a lower bride price, since the girl, if going back to her family, would be disgraced (Hein 1995; Donnelly 1997; Ly 2001).

Different degrees of Americanization and Hmong cultural interpretation connected to marriage by capture reveal a gender conflict that requires the intervention of the American criminal justice system (Hein 1995:108). While many Hmong women value and embrace the greater equality between men and women in the U.S. and see marriage by capture as a violation not to be excused by cultural interpretations or misunderstandings, many Hmong men are slow or reluctant to adopt the new gender roles and cannot accept the newly won independence of Hmong women - thereby engaging in marriage by capture (Hein 1995:109). The first generation Hmong, especially men, are shocked when youth are blamed for sexual assertiveness, and they claim that a girl is unconditionally responsible for any consequences that might follow from the contact between the two sexes, as she should not let herself be lured away from her friends, and in any case she could always politely refuse the boy's sexual advances if she is not interested (Donnelly 1997). In Hmong communities in Laos rape was not considered a social category of offence, since if the boy abducted the girl he obviously wanted to marry her, and if it resulted in a misunderstanding it was the girl's fault; this was explained by the saying that "If the female dog doesn't wag her tail, the male dog doesn't follow" (Donnelly 1997:141-42). In the U.S the youth are influenced in different degrees by the main stream society, and the cultural signs' conventional meaning might not be shared equally between the two sexes or between individuals - leading to misunderstandings, abuse of cultural customs and violations (Donnelly 1997).

Although marriage by capture is illegal and contradicts American law, the courts have often given male offenders the benefit of the doubt, showing surprising tolerance for the practice on behalf of culture, neglecting violence against women (Hein 1995:109). The issue of allowing Hmong cultural evidence into U.S. courts developed after much tension between Hmong cultural practices and American laws, and the following debate formed three different viewpoints in this regard: One, extensive use of cultural evidence, and a cultural, affirmative defense should be allowed by letting the defendant prove that according to his cultural beliefs, or the standards of his culture, his actions were not illegal or criminal. Two, cultural evidence is irrelevant in the question of guilt, and the problems of using culture to decriminalize behavior are too many. Three, limited use of cultural evidence should be allowed during trial stage, but only to determine legal responsibility; whether or not the defendant understood that the act was illegal, and

during the sentencing stage to determine if there are any mitigating circumstances (Ly 2001:472).

The use of Hmong cultural evidence as justification in an affirmative defense<sup>6</sup> in a U.S. trial is a two edged sword, as Ly (2001) discusses; supporters of the first viewpoint mentioned above think the use of cultural evidence enhances individualized justice and advances America's commitment to the growing multicultural society, thereby encouraging the preservation of immigrant cultural practices. Supporters of the second viewpoint feel that the use of cultural evidence undermines the basic premise of criminal law - that everyone is equal before the law, and it therefore fails to protect the victims of the defendant's crime, as they are not given the same protection and equal treatment under the law. In addition they claim that since culture is neither static nor equally shared and understood among its members, cultural evidence can never be properly defined (Ly 2001:489).

The third viewpoint mentioned above, where it is suggested to use Hmong cultural evidence to a certain degree, is what is happening in U.S. courts today; and it is mostly detrimental to Hmong women (Hein 1995). The use of cultural evidence can give one group advantages at the expense of others (Ly 2001), and in the cases of marriage by capture this is certainly true. The use of the custom of marriage by capture, when it is not consensual, is a violation, by men, of women's rights to say no. Since a woman who finds herself in this situation, is, by her Hmong culture, deprived the choice of going back to her family (Ly 2001), she is ultimately the victim of this situation.

Simultaneously she is the victim in the U.S. legal system if her perpetrator by using cultural evidence evades or decreases his punishment; Hmong women in general are victims if the court's acceptance of this kind of practice sends a message to the men in the Hmong community that they can continue to force unwanted marriages upon Hmong women in the name of culture (Ly 2001:491-93). The fact that more Hmong women now use the American legal system or the threat of doing so (Donnelly 1997:143) is a sign of the growing gender conflict. It indicates that the custom of marriage by

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<sup>6</sup>In an affirmative defense "the defendant admits that all the elements of the crime have been established, but asserts that he should not be found guilty or punished less severely because he is less blameworthy for specified reasons" (Ly 2001:488). In a justification defense the defendant in addition argues that his harm/crime should be punished less or not at all to avoid an even greater harm/crime (Ly 2001:488).

capture is not consensual in the regard to women, and they will not put up with it.

Not only do women have a disadvantage in the American courts when it comes to the execution or protection of their rights in marriages by capture; they are also at a disadvantage within the Hmong cultural structure where male elders play a prominent part in “resolving” disputes. Hein writes that:

Despite the leniency of the courts in bride-theft cases, Hmong clan leaders seek to resolve these and other crimes within the community. Male elders have a special leadership role in the Hmong clan system... Elders avoid the intervention of American organizations to preserve their traditional dominance over disputes. The village mediator who presides over conflicts ranging from theft and adultery to murder is an honored status in Hmong society - one that is eroded when American judges, police officers, and social workers decide right and wrong (Hein 1995:109).

In light of the Hmong marriage, kinship and prestige structure, where men are at the top of the hierarchy and the future of the household and the family, women do not, I believe, have a favorable position when a conflict occurs and the ones mediating it are all older men.

## **The U.S. and the impediments of a multicultural society**

History is a constant process of change - every age being both transitional and formative (D.T Miller 1970).

In this segment of the text I will give an abridged presentation of the American ideology of assimilation, unity and individual action and opportunity, as this forms the underlying context of my fieldwork.

Robert N. Bellah writes in “America’s Myth of Origin”, the first chapter in *The Broken Covenant. American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (1975), that the American nation was formed in large part by the first pilgrims and the idea of an American civil religion; helped along by specific, and still persisting, myths, providing moral and spiritual

meaning to individuals who dealt with dialectical images and experiences of America as either a paradise or a wilderness. The first English colonists, who were tired of the corrupt English church and state, sought a new land where they could form a new covenant, combining political order and Christian charity and virtue; emphasizing individual action but within the bounds of a collective, normative and religious context (Bellah 1975). At the same time a different idea emerged: namely that society and public virtue could be based on and formed by the coalescence of individual interests, advocated by those who saw their new spiritual liberation as a freedom from any of society's laws. These two ideas show a tension between utilitarians and the traditional religious adherents; between individual happiness and public good (Bellah 1975). This dualism, ingrained in the American society, requires a process of revolution turning into constitution, and conversion turning into covenant, and this process is meant to be circular. Bellah writes: action is needed to preserve both the freedom of individuals and the integrity of the republic, the society of the U.S. (Bellah 1975).

This era not only formed the overarching religious and political environment as we know it in the U.S. today; it also established a powerful social and cultural hegemony with an inherent inner tension. This inner tension resulted in the Civil War (Bellah 1975), and in *The Shaping of American Ethnography: The Wilkes Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842*, Joyce depicts how this period and the challenge of the American ideal of individual freedom, by those who wanted to abolish slavery, helped create a worldview based on racial assumptions; "They sought out and found the physical, empirical evidence demanded of it by American society - evidence that, to no one's surprise, placed the Anglo-Saxon as the most intellectually developed, morally aware, and physically beautiful creature of God's Creation" (Joyce 2001:9). This worldview still seems to be incorporated into American thought; Arthur M. Schlesinger writes that white Americans have always been racist; in their laws, institutions, customs, conditioned reflexes and their souls (1998:18), and this has, throughout history, influenced the reception and incorporation of later arrivals to the U.S. The question is, also asked by Bellah (1975), whether the American society and the republican liberty, at a time of great changes in the composition of immigrants arriving to the U.S., can deal with the present challenges brought by a greater cultural diversity, and its own inherent tensions.

We might say, perhaps, that many of the challenges facing American society today go back to the era leading up to the nineteenth century, when two very different views of immigrants emerged; the idealized immigrant is the poor, hardworking European peasant who gladly gives up his old ways - language, customs and values - to become a prosperous, proud, and loyal American, the idea being that immigrants should all become 'just like us' and that cultural diversity should be limited to superficial 'folkloristic' forms. On the other hand, large-scale immigration of people that resist the idealized script generates a fear of losing control and of being 'under siege' (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002:36-38). This believed difference between 'old blood' and 'new blood' have had political implications, first maybe in the form of The National Origins Law of 1924, which continued to make it easier for immigrants from Northern and Western Europe to enter the U.S, while it became increasingly difficult for immigrants from Asia, Southern and Eastern Europe to enter American soil legally (Fernandez 2000). The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 changed the ethnic composition in the U.S. by finally making it easier for earlier restricted immigrant groups to enter the country through family reunification, although the new law still favored 'old blood' immigrants (Joyce 2001). After 1965 large number of Asian, particularly Vietnamese and Cambodian, Latin American, Mexican, Caribbean, Philippine and other immigrants from non-European countries arrived in the U.S. (Fernandez 2000:19). This changed composition of immigrants to the U.S. has lead to the latest anti-immigrant sentiments which are based on the belief that the cultural differences and ethnic backgrounds of the new immigrants are so profoundly different that assimilation into U.S. society is impossible (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002:38-39).

Peter Sahlins (1993), on the other hand, portrays the challenge as a misunderstanding of the term 'assimilation', especially assimilation, American style. Assimilation, American style is not meant to blend all immigrants and their differences into one whole, he writes; it is rather a process of human dynamics, similar to religious conversion where "the immigrant is the convert, American society is the religious order being joined, and assimilation is the process by which the conversion takes place" (Sahlins 1993:48). This means that assimilation does not necessarily equal acculturation, and the people inhabiting the U.S. can be as diverse as they wish, as long as they believe in the main principles and moral precepts of the American society and identify themselves first and

foremost as Americans (Sahlins 1993). This is an idea similar to the convent of the first pilgrims that founded the American nation.

While Sahlins (1993) claims that assimilation, American style has been a success, others, like Arthur M. Schlesinger, worry that the ideal of a shared American national identity is now disappearing, and instead there is a growing ethnic and racial division of all Americans, and this new 'ethnic gospel', or 'multiethnic dogma' proposes that the U.S. is no longer a nation of individuals, but a nation of groups more or less ineradicable in their ethnic character (Schlesinger 1998:20-21).

It might seem that the U.S., and its diverse population, is in the midst of a new revolution, and before this revolution can produce a new constitution and covenant there needs to be an agreement of what to hold on to and what to change - in other words, how to go forward (Bellah 1975). This must be both an individual question and a question for the nation as a whole, and as both Sahlins (1993) and Schlesinger point out, both immigrants and the hegemonic population must want this assimilation and integration.

I have chosen to present an inherent inner tension in American society, between the freedom of the individual and the unity of a nation, between ethnic differences and assimilation, since I find it highly relevant both as the context of my fieldwork and as an ongoing process for my informants and a source of struggle and negotiation between the Hmong first and second generation.

## **Summing up**

In this chapter I started out presenting Hmong folk tales, clanship structure and marriage and bride price customs in Laos and Thailand, and I have shown how there is a prominent gender view present in all of these cultural patterns. The Hmong folk tales depict a Hmong society created by active and forceful men, with the help of passive and obedient women. This gender view continues in the clanship structure, which is partilineal and patriarchal, and where men are ritually responsible for the welfare of the living and the dead in the family and clan, while the women are seen as belonging to

others, because as they marry they join the clan of their husbands. The functions of the clan are several: it is a source of group identification and social interaction; it is also a source of security, co-operation and assistance, and it regulates marriages. Hmong marriage, including the negotiation of a bride price, is an important individual and social event. It marks the transformation from childhood to adulthood; it unites lineages and clans in forming new alliances, and it preserves and repairs old alliances. Even though Hmong girls actively participate in courting games, they are relatively powerless when it comes to choosing a husband, as it is up to the man to initiate wedding negotiations with her father, or to initiate an elopement. The bride price ties the woman and her children to the husband's clan, compensates the bride's parents for bringing up the girl, serves as an insurance of the in-laws and husband's seriousness and love, and signals the subordination of the bride and groom to the age and gender hierarchy. Hmong men, through patrilinearity, represent Hmongness, and gender inequality is present in all spheres of Hmong social life. These aspects of Hmong social life in Laos and Thailand are important for the understanding of the conflict, which is to be described in the analytical chapters, between the first and second generation Hmong after their arrival to the U.S.

Next I presented the differences between immigrants and refugees, and I presented the historic background for why we find Hmong refugees in the U.S. today as well as some statistics about their adjustment after their arrival. The reason I chose to differentiate between immigrants and refugees is that the two groups' dissimilar premises for leaving their native country, or place of origin, might be essential in understanding how they are adjusting, or struggling to do so, in their new country. The Hmong have a unique and historical relationship with the U.S. through their common involvement in the Secret War in Laos, and this explains why so many Hmong arrived in the U.S. after the mid 1970s. The U.S. treatment of the Hmong after the communist takeover might also explain the Hmong's tumultuous feelings towards and adjustment problems in the U.S.

Since the clanship structure seemed to be such a strong organizing principle in Laos and Thailand, I found it relevant to show that this has not changed after the Hmong arrived in the U.S. The importance of the clan has led to the consolidation of Hmong within cities in the U.S. for several reasons: the clan is important in relation to Hmong identity



and cultural maintenance; it gives access to social support networks, extended family members, Hmong elders and cultural experts to assist and perform in rituals, and the proximity of other clans is important for marriage purposes. The continuity of clan and political organization from Laos is also evident in the development of Hmong MMAs and in the leadership continuity within these organizations - also showing the low female participation in public issues.

Several Hmong customs have come into conflict with the American legal system, and marriage by capture is one of them. The American courts' handling of this issue and their acceptance of the use of cultural evidence have often given male offenders the benefit of the doubt; by showing a sometimes naive tolerance for cultural practices the courts are neglecting questions of violence against Hmong women and their right to equal protection under the law.

Finally, I have presented what I understand as a prominent and inherent inner tension in American society: the dualistic and perhaps mutually exclusive wish for a united nation through assimilation and individual freedom and opportunity.

All of these aspects are important to remember as I now move on to the analytical chapters of this thesis: first, I will describe the continuation of Hmong social and cultural patterns in the U.S. and the restrictions this ensures for the second generation Hmong girls; in the second analytical chapter I will portray the girls' agency within these patterns and structures and their strategies to change Hmong social and cultural patterns:

Women, for their part, lead relatively comparable lives, both within a culture and from one culture to the next. Their activities, in comparison with those of men, are relatively uninvolved with the articulation and expression of social differences. Therefore, we find, in most societies, relatively few institutionalized roles for women, and relatively few contexts in which women can legitimately make claims... Whereas men achieve rank as a result of explicit achievement, differences among women are generally seen as the product of idiosyncratic characteristics, such as temperament, personality, and appearance (Rosaldo1974:29).

This description fits the empirical realities of many of my informants, and this will become even clearer in the following sections of the text. Even though the young girls in

the second generation are growing up in the U.S., with all its opportunities, many of my female informants felt or visibly were restricted in their personal and individual expressions because of the strong influence of Hmong specific gender roles and an explicit gender hierarchy. This situation limits their opportunities to achieve success, to obtain an education and a profession they can excel in, and as I so painfully observed, it limits their possibility to obtain personal happiness.

## Chapter 4

# The Perseverance of Hmong Social and Cultural Patterns



In this chapter I will show how some of the Hmong social and cultural patterns that have been documented in Laos and Thailand continue to influence the lives of the Hmong who have come to the U.S. With social and cultural patterns I mean shared categories related to a system of signification, shared rules for thought and behavior and a shared understanding of how to live ones life. These patterns are not static, but since their value and meaning, which might not be available to discursive reasoning, are often inscribed into the body they are harder to change (Hylland Eriksen 1998:23). Being socialized into a particular society, Hylland Eriksen writes, means that one either holds on to or contests these learned rules, and I will argue that in the meeting with new and

different cultural patterns the old patterns are in a position to be negotiated. In this chapter then, I will show how certain patterns are communicated from the first generation Hmong parents to the second generation Hmong youth - and how the second generation feel pressured to, but do not wish to or do not, relate to these social and cultural patterns in the same way as their parents, as a result of growing up in the U.S. which has a different set of social and cultural patterns.

I will focus on the cultural patterns of kinship and marriage and the gender views and prestige structures that these patterns convey. When later in this chapter I talk about the Hmong structure or structural power, I mean the hierarchical structure of gender and age ingrained in the Hmong kinship or clanship structure: where men are considered superior to women, and elders are entitled to respect by the younger. Ingrained in what I call the Hmong structure or Hmong structural power is also the view of men as essential to the survival of the Hmong, and the view of women as belonging to other people, or other clans; in addition, what is prestigious is defined by men and is for the benefit of men.

This chapter will portray how Hmong social and cultural patterns weigh heavily on the second generation and how they influence them and eventually pull them in culturally specific directions. But it will also show how members of the second generation are opposed to the perseverance of Hmong social and cultural patterns and the Hmong structure. In addition it is my aim to show how Hmong social and cultural patterns and their practice are influenced by the change of location, specifically how the new lives of the Hmong in the U.S. have changed their view on girls' sexuality - and how this affects the young girls.

## **Gender and age in relation to kinship and marriage**

Nine fireplaces are not as bright as the sun. Nine daughters are not worth as much as one son. Hmong proverb (Foo 2002:148)

A majority of my female informants felt out of place in their own family, or they felt less valued or less appreciated than their brothers. This might be explained by the

continuation, in the parental generation, of social and cultural patterns related to an age and gender hierarchy common in Laos and Thailand. Symonds (2004), who conducted her fieldwork in Thailand, argues that it is men who define Hmongness since Hmong lineages, spiritual rituals and public life are controlled, practiced and regulated by men. Since the Hmong are patrilineal and clan-exogamous and patrilocality is the preferred rule of residence, Hmong men marry and bring in 'outside' affinal women. If a Hmong man marries a non-Hmong woman she will become Hmong, but if a Hmong woman marries a non-Hmong man she will cease to be Hmong. In a household, Lee writes, all women are treated as outsiders (Lee). They are considered to be "other people's women" when they grow up, and when they get married they are no longer part of their fathers' clan, even though they keep his clan name. They do not even entirely belong to their husband's clan until they and their husbands are dead, their souls merge, and they become one spirit (Symonds 2004). This pattern, or this belief, seems to be prominent also among Hmong in the U.S., and the lack of appreciation and value my informants felt might be explained by Ortner's (1981) findings. She writes that when women are seen as affinals, and the emphasis is on a woman's sexuality instead of her status as kin, she will get less respect, and such a society will be more repressive towards women.

In Laos and Thailand Hmong men and women are not only different in that men are considered to be 'inside' while women are 'outside'; the relationship is clearly asymmetrical in nature, as men are considered to be the leaders and decision makers in the family. The difference between men and women and women's "... inferiority in relation to males began as early as birth, when the placenta of a boy baby was honored by being buried next to the center housepost while that of a girl baby was disposed of by being buried under the bed" (Faderman 1998:125). This says something about the unequal relationship between men and women. While men are connected to the ancestral spirits through the center housepost and will become responsible for their spiritual well being (Symonds 2004), women will leave the lineage, and their most important role will be to bring sons into the lineage of the husband. After the Hmong came to the U.S. there is no longer any opportunity to bury the placenta of a child, either under the housepost or the bed, but as I will show there are other ways of expressing the different value put in boys and girls.

In addition to the asymmetrical relationship between men and women, Hmong households and communities, both in Laos and Thailand and in the U.S., are lead according to age; “Elders are considered more knowledgeable than the young, and therefore control production and subsistence; they are afforded greater respect, deference, and honor” (Symonds 2004:38). Within this age hierarchy the general rule is that older men and women get the most respect, but men get more respect than women. I discovered that there are nuances in the age and gender hierarchy relating to marital status, as I will show later in this chapter.

How, then, does this view of women as affinals and outsiders imprint on the gender view and gender worth of a young Hmong woman? How does it affect her development and future as a woman and as an individual? How does the expressed age hierarchy affect the relationship between the sexes?

## **Gender differences**

The fact that most of my female informants felt they didn’t have a rightful place in their families can be exemplified by showing the different importance of a man and a women in kinship relations, specifically in the form of funeral rituals.

Through one of the organizations I contacted I met a Hmong man in his thirties. He was divorced and had four children from his previous marriage, but as divorce comes with a stigma in the Hmong community he did not communicate this fact to me, I was given the information by someone who worked with him. Vue was proud of his military career, and it was visible in every aspect of him: how he talked, how he dressed, how he acted and in his personal views of how to discipline youth. He judged himself and other people by what kind of job they had or how much money they were making. Vue wanted to study law so that he could get recognition. He aimed for success and wanted to be able to crave respect in the form of a governor position or something similar.

One evening Vue took me to a funeral house so that I could get a feeling of what a Hmong funeral was like. On our way there Vue told me about the funeral of his own father, a well-known man he said, with a good military career, as a five star general.

The funeral had lasted for three days, but Vue as a good son had stayed awake for five days to show his respect. He also made sure to point out to me that since his father had been such an important man, the funeral had been very expensive, and they had slaughtered seventeen cows to feed all the guests, or people attending the funeral. Vue's father was buried on a hilltop with a beautiful view, but as the casket was lowered down into the grave, the grave filled with water, even though there were no natural sources for the water. Vue took this as a very good sign, and said it meant that the lineage of the father would be prosperous. He told me that, since then, he and his brothers had done very well. When we arrived at the funeral house, which looked much like a community house, it was pretty late in the evening, about 9pm. The funeral house consisted of three rooms. There was a big room filled with people, mostly older Hmong men over the age of forty-five, who were talking, watching TV, and playing cards, but also some women and children. Some of the men wore suits, but most others were dressed in casual clothes; Vue said that the ones in suits were the ones close to the deceased or her family. There were practically no youths there. In a different room they had food, and in the third room the deceased was lying in an open casket. The closest family sat in a circle around it, and two men were playing a traditional Hmong flute and drum.

As a son, Vue had played an important role in his father's funeral, he felt it was expected of him and he was very proud to have played the role that he did.

I met Youa at a McDonalds on University Avenue. I had planned to meet with a different girl that day, but she stood me up and when I called her she told me her mother did not want her to talk to me. And so I called Youa whose phone number I had gotten from a mutual friend of ours. Youa appeared to be an outgoing and intelligent nineteen-year-old girl. She came from a traditional, shamanistic, Hmong family, in which her mother was a housewife and her father was a respected Hmong mediator who helped solve disputes between families in the Hmong community. She had two brothers, and had been allowed by her parents to attend college and study sociology, and even to live on campus as long as she lived with her brothers. While her mother believed that everyone had a role to fill and that being a housewife did not mean she was less worth than her husband, just that she had a different role, Youa was more of a feminist and believed that what was possible for a man should also be possible for a woman. She felt

she had a good relationship with her parents, although not a completely honest one. When our conversation touched on the topic of funerals, she told me how she had been put in her place by a very traditional, outspoken uncle:

... a lot of Hmong girls kind of feel disconnected in this world, I think that's something I dealt with too, cause my dad and my mom has always been like, you know, you are equally as important as your brothers. But then I have an uncle, who is very vocal about like, tradition and stuff and like, one time I went to his house and that was pretty much what he told me, that you know, nothing you do is really important to your parents, you know, they just say that to make you feel better. Eventually when you get married you are not going to be able to do anything for them anymore, and when your parents die you are not going to be able to do anything for their funeral, you know. All you can do is come and mourn like everyone else, you are just an outsider, just like everyone else. I felt really bad, after he said that to me, I thought - oh great, where am I going to go in this life then.

Youa felt, like many other young Hmong women, that she did not have the same rightful place in the family as her brothers. She was an outsider now, and would be even more so when she got married. Xiong, one of my key informants told me how girls were not only treated as “wives to be”, but that the importance of having sons was so great that both women and men were often disappointed if they had a daughter. Xiong said that when her aunt came home from the hospital with her baby daughter, her uncle was so angry and disappointed that he threw the baby in the trash. They had to force him to go pick her up again. Symonds (2004) describes how, in Thailand, the outsider status of a daughter causes not only the relationship between mothers and daughters to be a more painful one, since daughters eventually go away; but also women who have sons will not only get more respect from their husbands and in-laws, they will also have gained more social security, since sons take care of their mother and father when they reach old age, and even in the afterlife. If I assume that this is the belief of the first generation Hmong parents in the U.S. it might explain what my informants often felt to be a distant relationship between themselves and their mothers. But what felt like distance and strictness from my informants' point of view could also have been a mother's effort to prepare her daughter to be a good daughter-in-law, and by that to ensure that she would have a good life. I will get back to that later.

The way the Hmong gender hierarchy is played out in the U.S. not only impinges on the



girl's feelings of value and worth; it actually influences a Hmong girl's opportunity to get a good education. Even though many Hmong parents understand the importance of obtaining a higher education to be successful in American society, and encourage both their daughters and their sons to pursue one, there are still, I realized after talking to my informants, too many Hmong parents who do not put education *before* marriage. Xiong told me that since she was a girl her parents did not see the point in paying for her education, as she would eventually get married and take that investment out of the family. Youa said the same about her grand-mother; "my grand-mother, she likes, saves money for my uncles to go to college but she doesn't save money for my aunts' to go to college".

A different effect of male authority over women is the fact that many young Hmong women define themselves and are defined by others in relation to men, again a result of clan structure and patrilineity. They are either so-and-so's daughter or so-and-so's wife. Yee said this about her in-laws; "When I was married some of my relatives from his side, they never really knew my name. They're like; oh yeah, that's Mrs. Mua, or Mua's wife, or so-and-so's daughter-in-law; they never knew me by Yee; they would never know me like that; I do not even have an image there". As a result of this, young Hmong women have a very restricted repertoire of roles and statuses and have limited means to express themselves and develop as individuals. Individualism is one of the core values of the American society where they now live, while in the Hmong community individual interest should be sacrificed for the common good of the clan. This, of course, is more detrimental for Hmong women than for Hmong men, since the interests of the men often run parallel to the interests of the clan, while the same is not true for the women.

Zong told me that:

For a girl in particular it is not really anything you can hold on to. My spirit will belong to my husband's family, and my old family will not have a say in it. And when we get married it is our husbands who decide what we should believe in, if we should go to church or not. The guys can hold on to what they grew up with. In the Hmong culture it is whatever the guy says, you have to do.

So, men define who a woman is, and who she is, is preferably a wife:

I still have the feeling that I do not want to get married, that I want to do my education. And my mom would say; 'Oh, you can get married and have a child and still have an education. Or you can go for an education, but then you have to get married'. They are not forcing me, but they say I have to. And kids - my mom say I have to have at least four. And I say; wow - four, that is a lot!

The dream of independence was very much present in the minds of practically all of my female informants, but it might come at a high cost for the women who want to pursue it. When I asked what Zong wanted to do the most, she said:

Go live by myself, be independent, explore the world more. That is also a big issue - girls who go and live by themselves. They say the girl is not obedient; she is not well mannered, and in a way she will ruin the parents' name, and she is out there all alone and a girl. If guys do it, it will not be a problem

At least Zong could still verbalize her restrictions and her dreams. I experienced often that young married Hmong girls did not even have an idea of who they were or what they wanted outside of their role as a wife and daughter-in-law. During several of the mom support groups I attended, the representative from the organization who was leading the group tried to encourage the girls to list some of their future plans, good qualities, or to mention skills they had which they were proud of, or episodes where someone had told them they did a good job, but it was like talking to thin air; the girls all had emptiness in their eyes. They had no dreams and no goals, and could very often not mention any qualities that they thought they had. Instead they would say; "My husband thinks I'm..." or "My in-laws think I'm...". I believe the reason why so many of my female informants had a hard time describing themselves as anything else than a daughter or a wife is that in the Hmong community these are ascribed statuses that become incorporated in the girls' way of thinking, and they are not encouraged to think of themselves as anything else. Rosaldo (1974) argues that becoming a woman is often seen as a natural process; it is taken for granted in many societies that womanhood is an ascribed status while manhood is achieved and that "men create and control a social order in which they compete as individuals" (Rosaldo 1974:28), while women are not allowed to participate in public space in the same way. This means that men have the opportunity to achieve different statuses within this social order, statuses that are not necessarily connected to the domestic domain and the women within it:

Women, for their part, lead relatively comparable lives, both within a culture and from one culture to the next. Their activities, in comparison with those of men, are relatively uninvolved with the articulation and expression of social differences. Therefore, we find, in most societies, relatively few institutionalized roles for women, and relatively few contexts in which women can legitimately make claims... Whereas men achieve rank as a result of explicit achievement, differences among women are generally seen as the product of idiosyncratic characteristics, such as temperament, personality, and appearance (Rosaldo1974:29).

This description fits the empirical realities of many of my informants, and this will become even clearer in the following sections of the text. Even though the young girls in the second generation are growing up in the U.S. with all its opportunities, many of my female informants felt or visibly were restricted in their personal and individual expressions because of the strong influence of Hmong specific gender roles and an explicit gender hierarchy. This situation limits their opportunities to achieve success, to obtain an education and a profession they can excel in, and as I so painfully observed, it limits their possibility to obtain personal happiness.

## **Age differences**

The other side of the Hmong hierarchy is age. This is traditionally linked to the Hmong practice of ancestor worshipping<sup>1</sup> but it has continued after the Hmong came to the U.S. as a guiding principle, even though many Hmong are now Christians or have other convictions. What I discovered in the Hmong community in the Twin Cities is that prestige, respect and structural power do not only follow actual years lived or whether you are male or female, but is also combined with marital status and whether or not you have children. This will become clear later on, but first I want to discuss age in relation to authority and how it affects the relationship of men and women, especially across

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<sup>1</sup>The older a person is, the closer he or she is to becoming an ancestor, and it becomes even more important for people around this person to treat him or her with respect, as the ancestors can both cause trouble and be a blessing for their still living family. Youa told me: "For me, it's like, the elders in my family, I don't respect them simply because they are older, but I respect them because I know that there's, eventually in the long run I have children and my children have children, and even if my great-grandma and great-grandpa has passed away, I will still depend on them to watch over my children, hopefully on and on. So it's like, I don't have respect for them only when they are alive, I would continue it even after they are dead" (See Geddes 1976 and Fadiman 1998 for more detailed description of Hmong ancestor worshipping and the role of the elders).

generations.

In a Hmong household it is the parents<sup>2</sup> who are the oldest, and therefore they are entitled to respect and the use of authority. The father has the right to make decisions for the whole household, also in the domain of the mother who is in charge of raising the children. Because of the explicit age hierarchy, many of my informants found it very hard and unnatural to speak with their parents. The idea of parents and children discussing their issues seems not to be a trend in the Hmong community, at least not in the families of my informants, although I'm sure there are exceptions. My informants told me that it is expected that when parents tell their children what to do, the children will do what they are told without questions. To ask questions is to show disrespect. Young girls found it especially hard to talk to their parents about dating and sex, and interestingly a study in the Twin Cities "found that 70 percent of parents felt they could communicate well with children about dating. Only 25 percent of their children agreed" (Hein 1995:125-126). One of my informants told me that the reason parents did not want to sit down and talk with their children was that they did not feel they should have to come down to the child's level. So, if 70 percent of the parents felt they could communicate well with their children, I have to believe that the communication must have gone mostly one way, and that is top-down.

I met Xiong through one of the many Hmong organizations I contacted, where she used her own experiences as a teenage mom to help girls in similar situations. We became good friends. Xiong's parents came to the U.S. in 1979. When they arrived, Xiong's mother was fifteen and pregnant with the first out of her five children; Xiong's father was in his early twenties. Xiong's parents have lived in the U.S. more than half of their lives; they have gone to church on a regular basis, and they started their own business which they sold with a profit. Still, neither Xiong's mother nor father speaks English well. Xiong told me that her mother is too shy to speak much English; her father, who participates more in the public arena, speaks better, but not good, English. Through high school Xiong experienced great difficulty in communicating with her parents, and she also desperately needed emotional support that was unavailable:

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<sup>2</sup>If there are married sons in the household, it is still their parents, the oldest married couple, who has the final say in things.

From my personal experiences, what I have noticed is that in the Hmong community, I think it is more of a traditional thing to... they don't... I guess everyone is... they are kind of brought up to not really encourage you, you know, like to support you, you know what I mean. Because like what Yee was saying, her divorce you know, her parents didn't really comfort her; they kind of lectured you and they think that that's gonna make you magically change you. It's just like... because you know in high school, I had a lot of family issues at home, and you know like, just trying to please my parents, to keep up with my age group you know, trying to make friends and be my own person and stuff. It was really stressful for me because after, in the end, when I analyzed my high school, I was a very depressed high school student, you know? And I kind of think that one of the number one things that made me depressed was that my parents never really encouraged me, you know, because, like even though I tried so hard, you know, I was like screaming pretty much for them to help me, you know, that I wanted support, and I wanted them to understand me, and they never came out the way I wanted you know? Because, we would get into a lot of trouble for like cutting class, you know, and my dad would always sit there and lecture us and he would be like; 'Tell me, why are you ditching?'. And we would be like; 'I don't know; you are not gonna understand'. And he would be like; 'I don't have to understand you', you know, it's kind of like, then why do you want' me to tell you, you know! And he's like; 'I don't have to understand you because you're my kid and you're gonna go to school and, you know, that's all you do, what is so hard about that? You just go to school and come right home, that's all we expect you to do, you know'. But actually behind all that, that wasn't it, you know; they expect us to go to school, get straight A's; they want straight A's, but you can't have any friends out of school. You're just supposed to go to school, come straight back, cook for them. Clean the house and when they come home you have supper ready for them, and they eat, and you do your homework and you go to sleep and the next day you wake up and you do the same thing, you know!

Xiong was not allowed to spend time with friends after school, and she was not encouraged to do extra curricular activities, because her parents wanted her home to watch her brothers. Like many of the young girls I talked to, Xiong felt she could not communicate with her parents, that they did not understand her needs, and that all they would do was to use their authority to lecture her. In the Hmong society in Laos a young girl should not articulate or defend wishes that went against the desires of the elders (Donnelly 1997:133), and this pattern seems to have persisted in the U.S, as shown in this case about Xiong and her parents. Many of my informants told me how the relationship with their fathers changed after they reached puberty, or when they started dating. The father did not speak with them directly anymore but communicated

to them through the mother. I wonder if this might be a result of a combination of the girls becoming sexual and the tabu against sexual relations within the clan; if it is a result of the implementation of the age hierarchy, or if it is because of the fact that the girls have reached an age where it is up to the mother to teach them what they need to know in life.

The lack of good communication and the girls' unfulfilled need for emotional support might not only be a result of the explicit age hierarchy but also a result of the two generations having different social memories, and so they do simply not understand each other:

Across generations, different sets of memories, frequently in the shape of implicit background narratives, will encounter each other; so that, although physically present to one another in a particular setting, the different generations may remain mentally and emotionally insulated, the memories of one generation locked irretrievably, as it were, in the brains and bodies of that generation (Connerton 1989:3).

While the young Hmong girls seek the kind of family life they see in American sitcoms like "Full House", where the family members might argue and disagree, but where they always understand each other and come together in the end; Hmong parents expect their children to listen, abide and not ask any questions challenging the parents, and especially the fathers' authority.

I found that the structural power of the elders reaches further than the household.<sup>3</sup> It influences the whole Hmong community. I visited several Hmong organizations during my fieldwork in the Twin Cities, and all of them had older Hmong men in many of the highest positions, including the position of director. These men, I was told, are very often also prominent clan leaders and have, as a result of their dual positions, great

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<sup>3</sup>The age hierarchy builds up under the gender hierarchy, in that the elders tend to defend the wishes of the man against the wishes of the woman, thinking that the wishes of the man is more in line with the common good of the clan. This affected many young women wanting a divorce from an unhappy marriage. To get a divorce the couple have to state their complaints to the council of elders - which consist of older Hmong men. The women I talked to who had gone through this, or who knew women who had gone through it said it was such a humiliating and traumatic experience, they just dropped the whole thing. They said the women would always get the blame for any trouble the couple had, and the elders would seldom grant the divorce if it was the woman who wanted it. On the other hand, if the man wanted it, the elders were much more inclined to grant the divorce - especially if the man blamed the wife for not producing children, or sons.

influence in the community. When I interviewed one of these men, about generational problems and miscommunications, early pregnancy and marriage, and the restrictions put on Hmong girls, he seemed very evasive and did not want to admit that this was a big problem at all, and if it was a slight problem it was because of the easiness in the American society:

Yeah, all the things you talk there, they have problems too; some, maybe nobody help in family; they cannot complete their homework; they have problems in the family; parents fight each other too much, then like that too. But these things, no big deal, no. Why I say not very big, this, even things happen like this, it should be only some family, but why this a lot of family, this could be caused by the society in here... because it is easy...

He also claims that Hmong boys and girls are equal when it comes to worth, education and marriage; “Oh yeah! Now we are ok; that’s why I say yeah, now we are equal - girl, boy, equal, yeah...”.

When I talked to Bao, a female case worker in the same organization as the old man, about this she was not surprised, as she had gotten the same responses when she had talked with him on an earlier occasion. As a result she and other young caseworkers, from the organization where she worked and other Hmong organizations, were trying to form a group in which the aim was to educate older, prominent Hmong figures. The reason, she said, was that older Hmong men had more authority, and if they could use this authority and their position to get the right information “out there”, it would make the youth workers’ jobs easier. The problem, she said, was to get the elders to admit that there were problems in the Hmong community. At one of the staff meetings they had had a woman come in and talk about domestic violence, and the temperature in the room soon heated up, she said, as the older Hmong men said there was no domestic violence in the Hmong community. Hmong men do not beat their wives - and if they did, it was because the women deserved it!

I found out on a later occasion that this view, that there is no undeserved violence against women in the Hmong community, has been transmitted to boys in the second generation. During a visit to a different organization than the one mentioned above, but one also lead mainly by men, I sat in on a youth meeting where the young girls and boys

were planning a play they would perform at a later event. Some of the girls came up with an idea where they would present the issues of domestic violence and male domination over women through a conflict between two brothers who did not agree on the matter. Before the girls could finish, the boys cut in and said that the Hmong culture did not favor male authority, and they did not want to be in a play where that would be the main issue.

The age hierarchy, then, is not just present in Hmong families, causing a strained relationship between parents and their children, especially their daughters; the same conflict is easily visible, transmitted, but denied, within Hmong organizations working to better the lives of Hmong families. Following Ortner (1984), the struggle or opposition between actors in an asymmetrical relation is a typical aspect of practice theory. In the case of the Hmong it seems the elders still hold the power in hegemonic institutions like the family and Hmong organizations, and, while this hegemony is resisted by young Hmong women, it is reproduced by younger Hmong men.

I mentioned earlier that status, prestige and structural power are not always determined by age or gender, but are dependent on your marital status and whether or not you have children. The following example will show this, and will also illustrate a conflict between Hmong structural power, as defined in the beginning of this chapter, and American corporate or employment structure, where people relate to each other through different hierarchically defined positions.

## **Gender and age in relation to marriage status**

One of my male informants, then an unmarried man in his early twenties, told me about an incident that happened when he was the Christian director, or superintendent, at the Sunday school in a Hmong church where his older brother was a pastor. He was in charge of the money and the teachers volunteering at the Sunday school:

I remember getting into a scuffle with one of the ladies; she was married and she never showed up, you know, sometimes, and she was pretty responsible; her husband was studying to be a pastor, and she was studying to be a pastor's wife. But he never went into the ministry, so he just hung around



the church, you know, he kind of had some status, but not any status that said he was the head person you know; he was kind of like a respected person, so that made her a respected person too.

After several weeks of not showing up when she was supposed to, Ger sat her down and told her that this could not continue, and that even though she was working on a voluntary basis, she needed to do what she had said she would do:

And she said; I understand Ger, you know. And she was married; she's got like two or three kids, you know; her husband is pretty respected, and I'm the... by **position**, I'm the important person, but by **status** I'm just, you know, a kid. I don't care if I'm forty, if I'm not married, I'm just a kid, to them, you know. I still have my kid name, my first name.

When this woman still did not do her job and Ger found the kids running around the church, he raised his voice to her, and told her that this could not continue and she would have to make a decision whether to do or not do this:

I kind of raised my tone, just a bit, because I was angry, but I felt what I had to say was right, and so, and this was like the third or fourth time I had said this to her, but I think her husband was kind of near by, you know, which in the Hmong culture, it's not, it's a no-no; you'd probably better just say it to the husband, and he'll say it to the wife.

The woman that Ger confronted got very angry and defensive, and demanded an apology for being insulted and treated like a kid.

What ended up happening was that she told the board, and the board met a couple of times, and they wrote me a letter; they said, Ger you need to apologize to this woman; you were wrong, and here's the date; prepare a statement to say and say it to her... So we had this big meeting, the board was there; dong! it was like six of them, and they were like, looking down on me like; 'ok Ger, we are ready'. And she was there, with her kids, like, on her arms you know; one was holding... so I wasn't just apologizing to her you know. And then the husband was there too, standing there on the other side, like right next to her, you know, making sure I said the right words there, and my brother was over there on the side, and I was there in the center you know, like I was the center of focus, like I did something wrong, you know, and everyone was surrounding me, telling me that.

Ger apologized for using the tone he did, but not for what he had said, and he continued:

To you I'm a boy, because I'm not married, I think I was like 23 at the time; you are like 33 with three kids and a husband, and according to Hmong culture, I'm nothing, and you guys have it all. But according to the American culture and the structure that we have set up, I'm your supervisor, and you are my staff, and you need to respect me in that aspect and that is the aspect that I'm coming from.

This example shows that Ger and the women were constructing their identity and the power related to it on two very different grounds; while Ger thought he was entitled to respect following his position as supervisor, and according to the American work structure, the woman thought she was entitled to respect defined by her status as wife of a respected man and a mother; that is, according to Hmong structural power. This makes sense in respect of both persons involved. Ger could not, as an unmarried man, achieve any status of relevance within the Hmong culture, and the woman could not use any other status or position other than that of wife and mother, since any such status or position would be deemed irrelevant. She was important in relation to her husband who was a respected person in the church. Since it was a Hmong church, the Hmong culture carried more weight than the American work structure and so the board felt it appropriate for Ger to apologize. This shows the workings of the Hmong hierarchical organization, namely that "... persons and/or categories of persons are ranked or graded according to criteria of social or religious value that theoretically transcend immediate political and economic 'realities'" (Ortner 1981:360). This means that within the Hmong community marriage status is more important than status related to work position, even in situations where it should not have any relevance. Within this structural system individuals are differentiated into different "strata" and are expected to behave in accordance to specific rules of mutual, but not necessarily equal, reciprocities and obligations (Ortner 1981:360). As Ger pointed out himself, culturally speaking he was a kid; he was not married; he had no children and he still had his kid name. In the Hmong culture marriage equals prestige and structural power for both women and men, and together with the axis of age and gender it forms the dominating core of the Hmong structural system.

There are actually two ways of interpreting this event; one, Ger overstepped the Hmong hierarchical boundaries, and his obligation of respect towards the woman, as a result of operating within a different, and less relevant, in this context, hierarchical system; that

is to say that of American work structure. This means that in some situations, Hmong women are able to use the Hmong social structure for their own benefit so as to gain respect from Hmong men.

Two, the woman involved in the event was entitled to respect only as a result of her marital position with a man older than Ger, so if we take the woman out of the equation, what Ger did was to insult a man older than himself, and, following Hmong age hierarchy, that demanded an apology. In reality this means that the woman only existed in relation to her husband and was not, in her own respect, entitled to an apology.

## **The construction of gender roles**

The construction of Hmong gender roles is closely connected to the organization of prestige relations, and following Ortner I too found that:

...prestige criteria are in fact 'encompassing': They provide the largest framework and ultimate reference point for the organization of almost every aspect of social life... The prestige system of any society is the system that defines the ultimate goals and purposes of life for actors in that society. It defines what men and women are, as well as what they are (or should be) trying to accomplish or to become, and defines how they can and cannot go about that project (Ortner 1981:360-61).

When marriage is seen as the ultimate goal, the socialization of Hmong girls into wives-to-be is one such prestige criteria, especially for the mother, who by bringing up obedient, industrious and well-mannered daughters gains prestige for herself and her family. A wife brings prestige to herself and her family if she knows the proper rules of conduct within a household. For the young girls, on the other hand, who in a greater degree are living between the Hmong culture and the American society, the ascribed status as wife-to-be, and the roles that come with it might seem very restrictive and not very attractive.

The first generation Hmong parents in the U.S. seem to have a clear picture of how a woman or a girl can make the most out of their ascribed status as wife or wife-to-be. I met Phoua, a woman in her early forties and a mother of two, through one of her

colleagues, who was a friend of mine. She was working as a teacher, and I met her once when I came to eat lunch with my friend. I asked her if she would have the time to talk with me sometime, about raising children in the U.S., and she suggested I come by in one of her breaks, and I did. Phoua was very clear about her responsibilities and what she had to do to be respected in the Hmong community. Her thoughts were that the Americanization of the Hmong was working against these traditions:

**Phoua:** Even the people like my age, some people they change too, I think that is the wrong direction and the wrong choice. Mostly our people, the age like me, we not change, I don't change the attitude I have before, and I have to keep my language, I have to keep my culture. I have to keep the root that I have, I'm done before, I don't want to change my personality to be more Americanized. I don't care about the people out there. To me, I care about myself, my family, my relative. So I have to do things, be respectful. If I have a thousand people come to my house, I have to respect them and have to be the housewife. But some people, like my age, they change; they don't want people come to their house; they don't like their cousin; they don't like their relative, they hate people come to visit them, so you make, this country, usually if you have lots of friends, or even not your friends, but you have many relatives come to visit you, then some lady hate that way, but not myself. Our culture, if you have many people come to your house, then everybody say that you are very good housewife, and you can respect who ever come to visit you. So people talk to people; people talk to people, and so you have your name become a, you become a very special person; you become a very special housewife.

**Me:** Right, so it is important to know all the things you have to do, like to cook and all that?

**Phoua:** Yes, I have to be a very, very hardworking housewife; especially your house; you have to clean and get things ready. When people come to your house they can see how you have cleaned, been a hard worker.

**Me:** So, It's about what other people say about your house?

**Phoua:** So they say; Oh, this housewife is nice, and she is the hardest working woman; she is a very special woman; she is working hard, and when ever we there she prepares things. We don't know if she has it or not, but she prepares it for the visitor.

**Me:** So you get a good reputation if you are a good housewife?

**Phoua:** Yes.

**Me:** Is that important, to have a good reputation?

**Phoua:** Yes, yes!

Phoua had two children, a thirteen-year-old boy and a fifteen-year-old daughter, and during our conversation it became very clear that she wanted her children to keep all the Hmong traditions. She considered herself to be very traditional, and told me several

times that her husband had the final say in everything concerning the family, and even though she had a job outside of the home, her role as a housewife came first. From our conversation it became clear to me that raising her daughter to be a respectable young lady, and being an industrious housewife herself, were the prestige criteria that defined her as a successful woman and wife. In her voice I could hear how proud she was about keeping and performing her wifely duties. She obviously did not consider her responsibilities to be a burden, but rather her choice, and she valued the status it gave her in the Hmong community. Therefore, when raising her daughter she was constructing a gender image that reflects these criteria, as she wished her daughter to be a respected wife-to-be. It is very important, I was told, in the Hmong community for mothers to control their daughters and to teach them right, because if the daughter does something wrong, defined by the Hmong community, it is the mother who will get blamed. These prestige criteria which are directing gender construction were repeated to me by an older Hmong man in his sixties:

The perfect daughter... in Hmong culture? Yeah: in Hmong culture we... the perfect daughter we... like I said, she knows to help her family, know how to take care of parents and know how to manage money... if lucky she got the money, not spend a lot. Know how to spend the money, know how to take care of the young daughter, young sister, young brother, what ever, and helping family, go school and come back home, and not to drinking, not to smoking - thing like that. And the parent say perfect girl in the family. If their daughter run out every night, not every night, some... some time per week, maybe still drinking, smoking, thing like that not perfect for Hmong family. Hmong family... aaaa, I lose my daughter... yeah.

I then asked this man if it was preferable that the girls stayed at home, and he answered:

Stay at home... after school, working, cooking, helping family

He later described the perfect wife for me, and the similarities between the perfect daughter and the perfect wife were striking; the only difference was that as a wife you have responsibilities towards your in-laws, as opposed to your family. Industriousness is highly valued both in a daughter and in a wife; the older man gave me an example:

Early in the morning his wife didn't wake up; until nine or ten, still not wake up yet. In only a couple of week they (the in-laws) say; 'You want to marry another wife?' (laughing). Hmong culture like that.

When visiting Hmong families I experienced these prestige criteria myself. After a short time in the house I was always offered something to drink by the mother, and if I came later in the afternoon I was invited to have dinner with the family. I learned that it is in the kitchen that women share stories and information, since this is their domain, and therefore men seldom enter this area. Men do the heavy work for ceremonial meals, and since they are at the top of the hierarchy, it is a Hmong rule that men eat first and the women eat later. Even though this rule is not closely followed for the everyday meals, it is expressed and is a factor in the gender construction.

The gender specific prestige criteria are imprinted on the young girls from a very early age, and all of my young female informants complained about the unfair load of work they had to do at home; still, some caught themselves in passing the gender specific roles to their own daughters:

As a girl you are expected to do all these chores, and your parents prepare you for that. It is only for your own benefit, when you go live with your in-laws you know what to do. And they do expect you to do all the chores in the house, even if you are only fourteen or fifteen years old. My daughter is only eight, and I expect her to know how to cook, and clean the dishes. By twelve she should know how to cook certain dishes.

My informants learn early on that their most important role is to be a resource to their parents, to help them, and especially their mother with the chores in the house, and to take care of their younger siblings. They are often told what to do, what to think and how to act - to such a degree that their role repertoire becomes very one dimensional, and the result, as I saw it, is often young girls who are not self-reliant and who have no sense of a self. This is especially true for young girls who go straight from a daughter status to a daughter-in-law status at a very early age. One of my young informants said; "I depend on my husband and in-laws to say what is good and what I should do".

Rosaldo (1974) writes that womanhood is considered easier to obtain than manhood, since it has a greater degree of continuity; to become a woman a young girl only has to follow in her mother's footsteps; it is a 'natural' process, while men have to achieve manhood. I would argue that this 'natural' process of becoming a woman did not at all seem easy for my young informants, and they expressed to me that it was especially

hard to simultaneously follow the Hmong prestige criteria, telling them how to be a proper Hmong woman, and American popular standards of how to be a teenager or to become their own, independent person.

## **Living up to Hmong beauty standards**

I agree with Rosaldo (1974) when she says that women are often judged by their individual characteristics, and I would add; in relation to gender specific prestige criteria. Ortner (1981) uses the term “beautification” to explain how young girls, simultaneously as their virginites are being protected, are used as bait to draw in husbands and enhance the kin line. “Beautification” can take many forms, but the aim is to show off the young woman as attractive in front of the community and especially for the eligible bachelors. The women are judged by their looks and appearances and not least by their sexual suitability.

In the Hmong community the “beautification” of young girls was most obvious during the Hmong New Year celebration. In the Twin Cities they have two celebrations, one, and the largest, in St. Paul, and the second in Minneapolis. They both last for three days. Even though the Hmong New Year celebration might have lost some of its original meaning after the Hmong’s arrival to the U.S., and even I could see it was more about “cultural displays” than lived rituals (Donnelly 1997:64), it is still an important time for gathering in the Hmong community. During one of my home visits with a Hmong family, the mother and the daughter proudly showed me the daughter’s traditional outfit for the New Years celebration. I imagine that this is a time where daughters are showed off to the community, and I know for a fact that many romances and marriages have their beginning at this event. The “beautification” of young girls has at this event gotten a particular American flair to it through the New Year beauty pageant, where girls are even more on display and where cultural beauty criteria are enhanced through picking the winner. In addition to the beauty pageant, where the cultural beauty standard is decided upon, Hmong girls expose themselves in the flirtatious ball tossing game. I observed this game myself at the St. Paul New Year celebration; young girls and boys line up in two rows facing each other, and they toss a ball back and forth.

They are only allowed to catch the ball with one hand, and if one of them is unable to catch the ball, the other part is entitled to ask for a personal belonging. I didn't see any exchange of personal belongings, but I did see flirtation, and all the girls who participated in the game wore beautiful Hmong costumes, in contrast to other Hmong girls at the celebration who wore tight-fitting American clothing.

After talking with many of my informants, I learned that there are particular standards, or prestige criteria that the young girls should follow to become a respectable wife-to-be. A girl should not wear too tight clothes, and not too baggy clothes - black slacks and generally conservative clothes are preferred by the parents. She should not wear too much make-up but should keep her natural look. It is desirable that a girl is not too thin and not too thick; that she has a light complexion and that she is tall so that her children won't be "midgets". Very importantly, she should have long natural hair with no streaks or coloring. She should be quiet and shy and not outgoing and strong willed. The young girls who do not comply with these prestige criteria are considered to be a "bad girl" and might suffer from stigmatization and a negative reputation brought on by community gossip. Xiong told me:

I used to have, like, long, dark hair to my butt, you know, and below my butt; and Lia you know, who was here; her parents **loved** me, because of my hair, and I was the only one, out of all our friends who can come over to her house, because of my hair. And I got like special privileges because of my hair, and when I cut it, you know, her mother was like; 'WHY did I cut it', you know, and my mom was really sad too.

While Xiong got praise and respect as long as her hair was long, it was a whole different story after she decided she wanted to keep it short, and she started to experiment with having different colors in it. Like PaNhia, a sixteen year old, Xiong experienced loss of respect when she cut her hair. PaNhia said; "When I first got my hair cut, a couple of the parents did come up and say; 'You got your hair cut; you don't have my respect any more'. And I'm like oh God, oh my gosh, you know, just because I cut my hair, I'm not gonna get your respect?! Long hair is the ideal, just because it shows you are a girl". I talked to PaNhia at a Hmong organization where her mother worked after closing time. Her mother waited in a different room during our talk. PaNhia was a genuine tomboy; she had short hair, wore baggy clothes, and she wanted to be a police officer, preferably



an FBI sniper. She was outspoken and wanted to move out of her parent's house to go to college, and she did not want to get married - ever. After our conversation PaNhia offered to drive me home; she was just going to pass it by her mother. I waited, but after almost an hour I went to look for her. I opened the door into the room where the mother had been waiting and saw the mother crying. PaNhia was there and so were two other women. I excused myself and went back to the other room. Soon after PaNhia and her mother came out, and they drove me home. In the car I asked PaNhia why her mother had been crying, and PaNhia said that it was because her mother thought she was such a bad girl. I asked why that was, and PaNhia said it was because of the way she looked, how she dressed, and just in general how she was.

My time in the Twin Cities showed me that when it comes to gender construction there are certain "beautification" standards young girls are expected to follow. Having the culturally appropriate appearance and looks, as mentioned above, are important prestige criteria in the Hmong community. In addition, a Hmong girl should know the proper behavior at home, how to treat guests and how to act in public. She should also express the wish to follow the right path in life, defined by Hmong parents as the preparation for and aim at marriage. This is done by staying at home, helping out by doing the cooking, the cleaning and taking care of younger siblings and following the rules of the parents. If a Hmong girl does not follow the 'beautification' standards, the proper rules and the right path, she will bring shame to her family.

## **The importance of controlling Hmong girl's sexuality and public exposure**

After hearing my female informants tell me an array of stories about the enforcement of strict rules when it came to dating and going out in general, I was amazed to find what seemed to be a general change in the Hmong's view of sexuality and female public exposure, from when they lived in Laos and to the practices in the U.S. This change, which seems to have been brought on by aspects of the Hmong's exposure to the American society, did not benefit the young girls at all; I will get into this shortly.

To understand the changes that have taken place and the relationship between my informants and their parents, it is essential to see where the second generation is coming from. Donnelly writes about courting in Laos that:

Cooper says it is ‘considered bad form’ for parents to notice their daughters’ adventures. He implies that parents are often aware but silent, which seems intuitively correct. At the time of courtship, a girl was preparing to shift her efforts so that they would benefit a different family, in the service of her own future. My informants tended to phrase their girlhood relationship to their birth family in terms of economic value, not affection, and thought their family would be angry to lose their labor contribution. Some of their stories convey a feeling of alienation from family that may have helped them want to leave. As my subjects had been taught to conceal nothing from their parents, their new secrecy, aimed at avoiding confrontation, imbued courtship with an anxiety that has persisted into their adult years, making them still shy about speaking of it, and helping to recreate this gulf between themselves and their own daughters (Donnelly 1997:119-120).

Many of my female informants gave me stories which portrayed the same feeling of alienation from their family; they too felt their worth to be measured in economic value, and most did feel a gulf between themselves and their mothers. What has changed after the Hmong came to the U.S. seems to be the parent’s ‘ignorance’ or silence about their daughters’ adventures; in the U.S. they seem to be very involved in these, or, more correctly, they seem very interested in preventing them. My informants felt very restricted when growing up, especially in their interaction with the opposite sex. Pai, whom I met at a reading with Mai Neng Moua, and with whom I later corresponded through e-mail, explained to me:

I had to be a good girl, and I couldn’t go out with a guy unless my parents approved of him. Even when they did approve of him, I had to bring a younger sibling with me. I’m sure that you heard of this same story before. Anyways, I couldn’t stay out late at all. I didn’t have the privileges like my brother did in staying out and hanging out with friends. Now that my dad was named pastor at the church, I had to be even more careful to not damage the ‘Name’ The name means a lot to the Hmong people, and that’s how you are identified in the community. If you have a good name then everyone wants to be your friend and they look up to you and stuff. If you don’t have a good name then basically, people look down on you; they don’t want their sons or daughters to marry your side of the family.

Donnelly (1997) writes that sexual games and having multiple partners before getting

married - even premarital pregnancies were not considered grave moral flaws in Laos. After conducting a six-month-long fieldwork in the Twin Cities I feel it safe to say that sexual games, multiple partners and premarital pregnancies are not accepted in the Hmong community, although it all happens rather frequently.

Even though I registered a change in the first generation's attitudes towards a girl's sexuality and public exposure, my focus was more on the consequences of the parents' strict behavior towards the girls, and so I do not have any data explaining why these changes have occurred - but I do have some proposals: one, many Hmong converted to Christianity while in the refugee camps in Thailand, and many of the Hmong who came to the U.S. had Christian sponsors; others have converted to Christianity, in one form or the other, after their arrival to the U.S. Since the Christian norm or virtue is to abstain from sexual relations until after marriage, many Hmong might have picked up and incorporated this aspect into their more traditional Hmong cultural patterns, especially that of gender hierarchy - which might explain why the rule is only enforced on the girls.

Two, although sexual games were allowed in Laos, it seems they were conducted within a strict framework of rules. Since courting in Laos was conducted secretly, Hmong parents seem to react to the lack of proper dating rules, the public exposure of girls and their sexuality in American society, and the effect of this public exposure on the family and clan name. While Hmong teenagers in the second generation want to explore the dating world of the American society, the parents are afraid of losing control of their children's actions, and simply do not have the knowledge they need to set appropriate boundaries for their children.

Three, because of their status as refugees and as a result of language difficulty and lack of usable or relevant work skills, many Hmong men feel they have lost their position as 'head of the household' or 'provider', and they therefore seem to have fewer ways of obtaining personal and family or clan prestige. Therefore, it seems, controlling their daughter's behavior and public exposure, or making sure their wives do so, has become a way for Hmong men to acquire respect, when they can not do so through the more traditional channels.

Four, Hmong mothers seem to be so shy and embarrassed when it comes to discussing

courting or dating and sex, as the example from Donnelly above shows, that even though dating and going out has become a big part of their children's lives in the U.S. and the prevention of it the mother's means of obtaining prestige for herself, they choose to not communicate with their daughters about this specific topic and instead stick with the line "Don't have sex!"

We might say, therefore, that the prestige system of the Hmong has changed slightly after the Hmong arrived in the U.S. While it is still the ultimate reference point and framework for social life (Ortner 1981), the control of daughters' behavior and sexual exposure has become, to a greater degree than in Laos and Thailand it seems, a main criteria for the prestige and 'name' of the family and the clan. A consequence of this might be that gender differences have become even more prevalent in the U.S. or have taken a new form, compared to in Laos and Thailand.

Ortner writes that the tendency of "holding on" to daughters is most evident in the guarding of an unmarried daughter's virginity (Ortner 1981:371). And while Hmong daughters cannot be compared completely to the "sacred maid" Ortner portrays, there are certain similarities. While the marriage of the "sacred maid" is a village affair, the marriage of a Hmong daughter, both in Laos and in the U.S., is an important family and clan affair. In addition, Ortner writes about the "sacred maid" that "In a real sense she is symbolically the daughter/sister of the entire village, and its prestige is tied up with her prestige" (Ortner 1981:372). A Hmong daughter in the U.S, I learned, carries the prestige of her family until she is married, which means that if she does something wrong according to the Hmong cultural or structural patterns, it will put all the women in her family in an unfavorable light, and if the fault is grave enough she will disgrace her whole family and clan. I found that, like the sacred maid, a Hmong daughter is expected to maintain her virginity until she is married (Ortner 1981), and she should stay out of public view so that others will not get the impression that her family can't control her, or that she is ignoring her obligations by acting like a 'bad girl'.

In the Hmong community in the Twin Cities, the idea behind the 'holding on' to Hmong daughters did not seem to be, as it did in Ortner's case, linked to descent line maintenance, but seemed instead to be linked to prestige building and maintenance, related to the family- and clan name. The virginity and image of the Hmong daughter

seemed to be particularly important to her parents *before* she got married, since after marriage she was the 'problem' or 'treasure' of a different clan. The importance of controlling a Hmong girl's sexuality is closely linked, I believe, to the wedding negotiations; here two families and clans come together in something that can be considered a political/economic ritual, where the lineages and their members are compared and a price is agreed upon for the daughter, based on her and other clan members' previous behavior. While it is the father's clan that will be disgraced if the daughter does something wrong, it is the mother who will be personally to blame for the daughter's behavior - therefore both parents are strict in enforcing the 'proper girl behavior'. Still, the fact that the girls are protected does not mean that there are no premarital sexual activities among young Hmong girls in the U.S, and this has become one of the major concerns of both Hmong parents and organizations working within the Hmong community. In the U.S. today every third Hmong girl gets pregnant before the age of eighteen, and often as young as thirteen - fourteen years old.

Phoua, whom I mentioned before, has a thirteen-year-old son and a fifteen-year-old daughter, and is very traditional in her thinking and actions. She would not dream of letting her daughter go on a typical American date:

No, no, no, no, because you know my culture; if you are a girl and you go with a boy like that, then your culture has no respect for you, so either parents, or cousin, or relative or friend, they don't respect you, because they mean that you are not a girl that will be a good girl. She can dating, but she cannot go out with men.

Phoua said that the correct form of dating would be for the boy to come to the girl's house where they could talk and get to know each other - supervised. They could talk on the phone and write letters, but they could not go out together or be alone. These are common rules enforced by many Hmong parents, and I saw it in action myself. After interviewing an older Hmong woman about her time in the refugee camp in Thailand, her daughter and her fiancé offered to drive me home. For that to be possible, the daughter's younger sister had to come with us, so that the couple would not be alone on their way back. Phoua said that you can date someone with your mouth, but not your body - and for a girl it is important not to be in situations where someone might think that she dated with her body. One person is enough to start a rumor, and that could

just as well be the man that the girl is dating. If he said he had sex with the girl, she would be disgraced. For the boy on the other hand, the rules are different:

Because if the boy go out and they dating or do whatever they want, they don't lose anything.

What she meant is that boys do not lose their virginity the way girls do, and that there is much more tied up in a girl's virginity than the loss of a physical state of being, namely her own and her family's prestige and honor, and her family's chance of obtaining a high bride price. I asked Phoua what would happen if a boy got a girl pregnant, if that would have a negative effect on him; the answer was no. If he didn't want to marry her he would have to pay a fine to the girls' family and say that it was an accident, but he was not shamed:

The guy is ok, but the girl, if you got pregnant, so you are very bad. That's how our culture have way for the girl, more stricter than the boy.

These rules related to 'holding on' to daughters have four consequences in particular for the young Hmong girls in the Twin Cities that I find important to discuss: one, the fear of shaming the family or ruining the family name with their actions limits the girls' chances of personal development. Two, the parents' wish for a high bride price forces an image on the girls as economic assets, or things their parents can sell. Three, if the parents for some reason have not been able to 'hold on' to their daughter and the daughter gets pregnant, she might be forced into a marriage she does not wish to save the family's honor. And last, the strict control of girls' sexuality and public exposure limits their chances of participating in activities outside of the home. I will in the following present these consequences more extensively.

First: Pai stated earlier how important it was for the Hmong to have a good name, and Phoua made it clear that if a girl went out alone with a boy she would be shamed. These two facts are connected in that young Hmong girls, with their behavior, are responsible for the family's name, as it depends on whether they are shamed or not. This is a big task for anyone, and especially for young teenagers who are struggling to fit into American society and popular culture of which they are a part everyday at school.

They must also be sensitive towards the cultural patterns of their parents; and these are two social worlds where the rules for proper behavior are very different. Aaron, a psychologist working with South East Asian teenagers told me:

In a lot of times, what happens is that, what I have noticed is that a lot of the rationale for why they do things with the girls is around shame; it has to do with communal shame. If the girls go out and want to hang out with their friends, ok, if they are gone outside of the house for any length of time, the parents immediately begin to fear that that kid is going to be shamed in the community and they will never be able to marry her off. So it then becomes an issue of, you know, she is a tramp, so then they immediately start cracking down on it; you know they are trying to keep her in line, because they don't want that reputation to go out, because then nobody will marry her... That's a big thing that comes up all the time, that disappointment, that my parents are disappointed with me. The shame piece is a big piece that comes up, you know, because the parents, the shame that the parents experience is much more intense than the shame that is in this community, you know, the main stream community. We have shame, but it is individual shame. If I do something wrong I feel bad for myself, bad that I did it. Other people may make me feel bad, but it is still inside of me. And in the South East Asian community, they have communal shame on top of individual shame, so it might start in the community and the shame is so intense in the community, and it affects not only you, but it affects every member of your family. And so then you take on this burden of having not only your own shame, but everyone else's shame on top of it. So that is something the kids just don't, it's very intense and they don't like that feeling, they don't know what to do with it.

While in Laos Hmong parents closed their eyes when it came to their daughter's pre-marital sexual activities; in the U.S. their eyes are wide open. This shows how cultural or social patterns change with time and place, how culture is not a stable entity handed down through generations, but it also shows that this cultural pattern has changed to the continual benefit of the men and not the woman. So even though the expression of cultural rules changes, the hierarchical structure based on gender and age is the same. My informants expressed discontent and frustration of being held accountable for the shaming of the family, and it greatly influenced their chances and possibilities to develop as persons - in their own right, and to make decisions based on their own needs and wishes. One reason for the adjustment in Hmong cultural rules regarding sexuality and shame, that I did not mention above, might have to do with the new economic situation the Hmong are experiencing in the U.S. The majority of Hmong

families in the Twin Cities live on social security, and with the common large family, that means they are barely scraping by. If a daughter gets pregnant before she is married, her family has the burden of supporting an added member. This will have a negative economic affect in that they will have less money for the rest of the family, and a chance of getting less for their daughter when marrying her off.

Secondly; the reasons for the strict 'holding on' to daughters in the Hmong community has to do, I believe, with the parents need and wish for a high bride price and their desire for a favorable kinship image during the wedding negotiations. The result was often that my informants felt, as Donnelly (1997) also pointed out, like a 'thing' their parents could 'sell' - and it made them feel alienated from their families. Again Aaron told me:

The other piece to it is that, you know, that paying for the bride kind of thing; you know, she's a financial resource, so it would be an example of; if you have fine crystal, and you know the value of the crystal is \$10,000 and you know that in the next twenty years, it is going to be \$20,000, the chances of you actually using that crystal every day, are going to be very small, because there is that factor that you are looking at it for a financial reason, and I think sometimes that happens in the Hmong community; they will look at the girl for that reason, so it is kind of an income, a resource kind of thing.

In this we see that kinship, marriage and prestige systems and gender ideologies are closely connected, as Ortner and Whitehead (1981) point out. Because of the traditional Hmong wedding negotiations many Hmong girls are introduced to the idea that they are nothing but a financial resource to their parents and that they should act accordingly. Some girls find the whole bride price system demeaning; others feel terrible if their parents do not demand a high bride price for them or if their husband-to-be will not pay a high bride price. There are also families who do not put this economically motivated behavioral pressure on their daughters, or who say that the bride price system is in reality for their daughters' own benefit, to make sure they will be loved and taken care of. But in the Twin Cities the Hmong community is large, and news travels fast by gossip - the Hmong form of 'checks and balances' - and so living in a close knit ethnic community often means that in many cases you have to live by the community's expressed "as if" (Leach 1954) laws. And these laws state that Hmong girls should behave in a specific way so as not to damage their own or their parent's reputation. The



few girls, therefore, that with the support of their parents choose an unconventional life style, might find it hard to be accepted by the Hmong community in which they partly live. Leach (1954) writes about an “as if” social structure, which can easily be compared with the Hmong social structure, since both are made up of “... ideal patterns - the social relations which are regarded as ‘correct’...” (Leach 1954:vi). Like many other “as if” social structures, the Hmong hierarchy and the expressed cultural patterns might seem to be stable and unchanging, but of course they are not. Still, I believe it was very hard for many of my young informants to see beyond the limitations of the social structure and cultural patterns enforced upon them, and to see instead how they were open for transformation, based on the girls’ own actions.

Third; what happens then, when Hmong parents for some reason are not able to “hold on” to their daughter? According to the parents themselves and the organizations I contacted, this was a major issue in the Hmong community in the Twin Cities. The fact that many girls ignored the parents’ authority and took teenage rebellion to the extreme put them and the parents in a culturally difficult position later. Because of the often expressed importance of a bride price and the significance of keeping the family name and reputation a good one, some of my informants, when they got pregnant without being married had the traumatic and unpleasant experience of being pressured into a marriage they did not want. I talked to a seventeen-year-old Hmong girl who had gotten pregnant by a much older man. This man was in and out of jail for criminal misconduct and had been left by two previous wives because he was abusive towards them. He also had four children by these two women. The young girl I talked to did not want to marry him and was very scared of having to move in with him and his parents, because, as she said, they did not like her. Her parents on the other hand said that she did not have much of a choice; she could either marry him or she could move to relatives in a different state. Regardless of the girl’s own wishes, her parents presumably made the decision based on minimizing the shame and financial output for their family. While sending unruly daughters away to distant relatives has become one way for Hmong parents to try to deal with the problem, marriage is preferable in any case. An older man told me, during a conversation about the consequences of getting pregnant before being married, how this happens:

**Me:** The parents lose good reputation?  
**Old man:** Oh yeah, oh yeah! (laughing).  
**Me:** So, not just the daughter but the parents too?  
**Old man:** Not only the daughter; that's why Hmong parents control their daughter in the home a lot! Don't want to get out, because the other family will laugh at them. When their daughter got pregnant, then all the families laughing; that family say: hey watch that family, their daughter not married, but got one baby (laughing).  
**Me:** So, it is important for the parents that the girl gets married?  
**Old man:** Oh yeah!  
**Me:** If she gets pregnant?  
**Old man:** Yeah! Hmong, when their daughter got pregnant with some boy then both family talk, talk! If not marry they talk a lot about that, and punish the boy, not only punish - pay! To support the daughter.  
**Me:** How much is, how much does the guy has to pay, in general?  
**Old man:** Depend economic, depend who live in which country.  
**Me:** Well, here.  
**Old Man:** In the U.S.?  
**Me:** Yeah.  
**Old man:** Oh, a couple of thousand dollars (laughing).  
**Me:** Really?  
**Old man:** Yeah, not only \$2-300; no, more than a thousand dollars have to pay (laughing). Have to pay, that's why they got married a lot (laughing)!  
**Me:** Because they can't afford to pay...?  
**Old man:** If I lose \$3,000 for you, what do I do? I marry the girl, better than just pay \$3000, right?! (laughing).  
**Me:** Because you have to pay anyways!  
**Old man:** Yeah, have to pay anyways.  
**Me:** So he might as well marry her...  
**Old man:** That's the problem; one problem cause marry too, you see?!

What I think the old man is trying to point out is that if a boy and a girl get pregnant without being married, the boy and his family has to pay a fine to the girl and her family, to correct the mistake, as Phoua pointed out earlier. On the other hand, since the boy's family has to pay the girl's family in any case, they might as well get something more out of it, and so the boy is pressured or encouraged to marry the girl - that way, the fine becomes a bride price instead. The girl often has no say at all in the matter, as she has already disgraced her family by getting pregnant, and if she gets married it will help make the situation better for her family. So while the boy's family wins by having to pay a small bride price for a wife, the girl's family wins by saving the family's reputation from damaging gossip. In the Hmong community concern for the family should come before individual needs. This notion is, as pointed out earlier, by far

more beneficial to men than to women, as men, just by being men, are seen as more valuable for the family, and since their actions are not as readily interpreted as shameful to the family. If we look at the situation above we might say that there were two victims in this political/economic ritual - the young boy and the young girl, but that is not entirely the truth. It would be much easier for the boy to get a divorce without being shamed in the community, and if he wanted to marry a second wife out of love later on, that is his right<sup>4</sup>, while the young girl can only choose between being unhappily married or shamefully divorced, if she can get a divorce at all. Therefore this example not only illustrates the difference between the genders when it comes to communal and individual shame; it also shows the expression of prestige structures through social evaluation, where women are seen as uncontrolled and selfish and men are seen as the opposite, controlled and concerned with the common good of the family and clan. Women, therefore, are being sacrificed, to be dramatic, for the maintenance of male prestige.

Fourth; the strict control of girl's sexuality can be seen in the girl's lack of involvement in any activities outside of the home. Apparently because, as Ortner and Whitehead (1981) points out; "the 'public domain' or the 'sphere of wider social coordinations' is...dominated by men, and that it is in this domain that larger prestige structures take their shape" (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:18-19). The fact that young girls are withheld from the public domain negatively influences their chances of developing skills that they need to be able to function well in the American society; it limits their personal growth and prevents them from achieving prestige based on their own achievements instead of prestige ascribed to them in relation to their male relatives. It isolates them and makes it harder to choose a different path than the one expected of them, possibly leading to a downward spiral of uneducated, disempowered young mothers. Hmong girls are often not encouraged to succeed in any other way than becoming a good wife-to-be, unless their success can be "used" by their parents to enhance their own family's name and reputation. Having women entering or not entering the male dominated public sphere is a double-edged sword. Women who do have personal success are often frowned upon in the Hmong community and blamed for being selfish, while if women do not enter they will not be able to take control of their own futures.

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<sup>4</sup>In the Hmong culture it is not uncommon for men to have several wives, and even if this praxis is illegal in the U.S. it still happens within the Hmong community. Having several wives is a sign of prestige and power.

Many of my informants were not allowed to join in after school activities like sports, dancing, and girl scouts, or spend time with friends in any organized or unorganized way. During a home visit with a caseworker from the Hmong Urban Village I got the chance to talk to the family's thirteen-year-old daughter. The family had been in the U.S. for twelve years, but none of the parents spoke any English. They were very traditional. The daughter told me that she was not allowed to spend time with friends outside, not even go to the movies. Before we left the caseworker asked the girl if she had attended any Girl Scout meetings, and the girl said "No, I don't have a ride". The caseworker then said that they could arrange for someone to pick her up, and the girl said "No, that's ok; they (her parents) probably won't let me go anyways". After we left the caseworker told me that this was not a unique incident, and that with this family it was becoming a pattern. Every summer the Hmong Urban Village hosts a camping trip or something similar for the children enrolled in their different programs or for children of their clients. The summer before my fieldwork started this girl had signed up for the camping trip and had given in a parental consent. A couple of days before the trip the case worker had called to confirm and had not been able to get a hold of any family members. Only hours before departure the caseworker had managed to get a hold of the girl, only to find out that the mother had changed her mind and would not let the daughter go on the trip.

I believe, and I was told by both men and women working within the Hmong community, that many Hmong parents find it hard to understand that something good can come of letting their daughters explore different interests. They have not defined it, culturally, as a relevant prestige criterion, and so it is ignored. Some of my informants told me that girls are not encouraged to be smart, and when they are married they should never portray being smarter than their husbands. Mai Kor, whom I met with several times during my fieldwork period and who became a good friend and a main informant, told me about an episode that happened when she was younger and her whole family had to sleep on the floor in the living room because they were renovating the house. In the evening the children talked amongst themselves about what they wanted to become when they were older and Mai Kor said she wanted to be a nurse and work in a hospital. Mai Kor's step father just laughed and said "Sure, you can be the one scrubbing the toilets!" The idea that the public domain, and the achievements

possible there, are intended for men is still clearly expressed in the Hmong community. It seems the individual success that women have in the Hmong community is treated as illegitimate, and it is to be explained away and trivialized. Youa told me about her aunt:

I don't think the Hmong community is very accepting of, you know, individual success, it's like, if you do something you have to do it for the community, the greater good, you know, and not so much, like, because a lot of people are criticized for like how much individual success they have. In a sense like, I have an aunt, who's very wealthy, but she is divorced; she has nothing else in her life but money, you know, and it's like, people look down on her, because it's like, you know, they're like: 'if you weren't so selfish, and if you would be more open to family, more open to your family, your sons and your husband, you probably wouldn't be alone'. And because of that, they are more disrespectful towards her, although she can be a good person at times you know... I think even with Mee Moua<sup>5</sup>, you know, I think a lot of people are proud of that, but a lot of people are kind of weary about it, because she is a woman; it's like; what is she trying to prove?!, you know.

### **”Sex should be for reproduction”**

Individualism is, as Youa pointed out, looked down upon in the Hmong community, especially when a woman tries to achieve it. People are not meant to be alone; they are meant to be together as husband and wife, and as a couple they are meant to reproduce; this way the family and the clan should always come first.

Despite the fact that having children is so important in the Hmong community, even in the Twin Cities, almost all of my informants told me that they had never talked to their parents about sex; all their parents had said about the subject was “Don't have sex until you are married!” This might reflect the shyness that Donnelly (1997) pointed out, that since Hmong parents were used to treat courting with a great deal of secrecy themselves, they are still embarrassed to talk about it. I only spoke with two first generation Hmong parents about sex, a man and a woman, individually, and they both blushed and giggled and seemed very uncomfortable with the conversation. Zong, a young Hmong woman in her twenties said:

That is really rare for Hmong people to do, to actually sit there, because Hmong people are like; don't have sex, you know, don't have sex at all. So it

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<sup>5</sup>First Hmong senator in Minneapolis/St. Paul

is kind of like, talking about sex is something that, just; hush, hush, you know. But no, I've never talked about sex with my parents. It's more like you go to school, and you learn from sex education, but as far as going, you know, face to face with my parents about that stuff, no, that was like a no, no, because, if I would have went to my mom and said: 'hey mom, you know, I'm having sex you know, what should I do about it, or is it something you want to tell me?' She would say: 'Why are you having sex; you shouldn't be having sex in the first place, you know'.

And about birth control Zong said:

My mom would say: 'what's that?' You know, she wouldn't understand what birth control is, because back then when she was having babies, she didn't know what birth control was, you know, and so it is kind of like you have to go through the whole process of explaining and then one thing is, they (the women in the community) will tell you that if you take birth control, that is gonna ruin your body. Because I guess Hmong people they like a lot of natural herbs and stuff, so it is kind of like, if you take anything that comes in the form of a pill or something that is not Hmong tested or something; then you know, it is bad for your body, it can ruin your body as a female, because as a female your body is very important to you, and you don't want to mess it up by taking pills like that too, so...

The shyness might be one reason why Hmong parents do not talk to their children about sex; another reason might be that sex in the American modern sense is too individualistic. It is about individual needs, wishes and pleasures instead of being just a way of enhancing the family and the clan. Young Hmong girls should not seek individual reasons to have sex; they should not have sex until they are married, and until it is for a common good purpose. Therefore, birth control pills must seem like something highly unnecessary in Hmong parents' eyes, because before you are married you should not have sex, and when you are married you should have sex to have children, particularly sons. Birth control is something that enhances girls' individualism and independence and that in itself is a reason for Hmong parents to reject it. It makes it possible for a girl or woman to decide if she wants children and when she wants children, and this, I imagine, is not a power that Hmong woman should have, since it is the domain of men to decide what is in the best interest of the family.

This explanation fits the pattern that I observed in the Twin Cities; namely that when a Hmong girl is married she is no longer, or should no longer be in control of her own

body and sexuality - it becomes the husband's and his family's asset. Bao, a caseworker at Hmong Urban Village told me about one of her home visits. She went to see one of her clients to talk about birth control and family planning. Her client was a nineteen-year-old Hmong girl who already had four children, had not finished high school and suffered from depression. Bao gave the young mother information and options and asked her what she wanted to do in the future, to prevent having more children; the young mother, Bao said, seemed very uncomfortable during their conversation and said that she had to discuss it with her husband. Bao had hardly gotten into the car after the home visit was over before the young mother's husband called. He was very angry, Bao said, because he did not want his wife to know about such things, and he told Bao not to come back. Bao was sad, and felt helpless that she could not help the young mother; and that she did not want to, or could not, help herself.

During my fieldwork I heard of husbands who wanted their young wives to keep on having children so that they could have sons, and so that the men could have more power over their wives through the fact that it is harder to get a divorce if the couple has children. I also heard of a father-in-law who had poked holes in the condoms lying in the bedroom of his son and daughter-in-law because he wanted them to have children. And despite living in an enlightened country where information is available, Hmong girls *are* afraid of the consequences of using the pill, since their bodies and their reproductive systems are their most valuable asset in the Hmong community.

So, men attempt to control Hmong girls' sexuality, both before and after they are married, possibly because having children under the right conditions is a woman's greatest prestige criteria; since men decide what is in the best interest of the family, they should also decide when and how many children a woman should produce.

## **The Hmong rite of passage to adulthood; marriage and children**

"Marriage, by Hmong standards, is a way of life" (Thao 1986:77)

Marriage in the Hmong community, both in Laos and Thailand and in the U.S., symbolizes “social maturity” (van Gennep 1960), and seems to be the expressed ultimate goal and “prestige criteria” (Ortner 1981) for both men and women. In Laos and Thailand the Hmong did not have any rituals celebrating physical maturity or puberty; therefore traditionally, they went straight from childhood to adulthood, through marriage, without any intermission. Until a Hmong marries and has children, he or she is not considered an adult, regardless of the individuals’ age or other accomplishments. Van Gennep writes that “Marriage constitutes the most important of the transitions from one social category to another...” (van Gennep 1960:116) and that marriage essentially is a social act. We must not forget that for the Hmong marriages often also have a political and economic aspect; one of my informants once told me that “Americans marry the one they love; Hmong love the one they marry” this is because Hmong marriages are not always based on the wishes of the individual, but those of the family.

Symonds (2004) writes that in Thailand the Hmong marriage process consists of “a series of exchanges between wife-givers and wife-takers leading to an alliance between clans. Bride-price is only one aspect of the exchange. The exchange is not formally complete until the bride gives birth to a child, at which point the contract is fulfilled and the alliance sealed” (Symonds 2004:60-61). While marriage is important because it gives you an adult status, childbirth shows that you are responsible and that you have the clan’s best interest in mind. For Hmong men it is important to have sons “...who will continue the lineage, feed the ancestors, and eventually procreate again, producing bodies that allow the souls of dead lineage members to be reborn” (Symonds 2004:61). For Hmong women it is important to bear children in general; otherwise the groom and his family may return her and demand the bride price back.

Since the Hmong came to the U.S. they have had to deal with the “liminal phase” (van Gennep 1960) of adolescence; in the U.S. and most other western countries, this is traditionally a period of rebellion and challenging of parental authority. This new liminal phase does not make sense to many Hmong parents, and because of it they find it hard to steer their children onto what they see as the right path which implies forsaking individual interests for the interest and common good of the family, which



again essentially means marriage. With this I am not saying that members of the Hmong second generation do not get married at an early age, because they do; every third or fourth Hmong girl gets married and have children before the age of eighteen. But as I will show in the next chapter, this trend is more complex than just following tradition. The Hmong teenagers exposure to and interest in this new liminal phase makes it harder for parents to “hold on” (Ortner 1981) to their daughters and to guard and protect their unmarried daughters virginites, as explained above. The parents wish to marry off their daughters and the daughters wish to seek other roles and statuses than wife-to-be creates an ongoing struggle between them.

## **Men’s rights in women**

There are several ways of going about marriage in the Hmong community: arranged marriage, mutual consent, elopement, marriage-by-capture; which can be voluntary and planned or in-voluntary, and forced marriage (Symonds 2004:60); a girl who gets pregnant before she is married, consensually or by rape might be forced to marry the father of her child. Regardless of type of marriage, there need to be negotiations between the families, and this “is a major event of interfamily relations” (Donnelly 1997:145)<sup>6</sup>. Since the negotiations are concerned with contracts, this is the domain of men, and women, especially the bride, do not play much of a role in the events at all. The two first mentioned types of marriage are most favorable for the bride’s family, as they give the best outlook to negotiate a high bride price, while the three last types of marriage are more favorable for the groom’s family, since the groom has already copulated with the bride and have the advantage of negotiating a low bride price on the grounds that if the girl is not married off fast she will be shamed in the community, and as will her family. None of my informants had been active in the wedding negotiations leading to their marriage, even though this is one of their most important rites of passage.

I met Seng through an event hosted by several Hmong organizations, as she was working in one of them. She was in her mid twenties, single but dating and lived on her own. One evening we met over a bowl of pho at one of the many Asian restaurants on

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<sup>6</sup>See Donnelly 1997:145-154, Symonds 2004:61-71, and Thao 1986:77-81 for more detailed descriptions of wedding negotiations and ceremonies.

University Avenue, and she told me about her younger years.

Seng was fifteen years old when she got married to a man eight years her senior. She did not know him then but had met him briefly at the Hmong New Year celebration, and he was a distant cousin of her mother. Two days after the event he came to her parents' house and asked her father if he could marry her. Seng's father said yes, even though Seng did not want to get married at that time. Since the families knew each other and had had no previous feuds the wedding negotiations only took six hours. Seng could not tell me much about it. She said; "My parents, they are very ah, if I give an objection to it they will get really mad, because they say that they know that that's good for you; you just pretty much, you really have no say into it; it's more your parents. The only thing you can do is cry; you can't do nothing much, because it is more important to get your parent's blessing; they are more happy to let you go that way".

The ideal behind Hmong marriage is to produce children (Thao 1986). Since Seng was so young when she got married, she did not know that marriage equaled sexual intercourse, and she refused to sleep in the same bed as her husband, whom she didn't like. Instead she slept on the floor for two months:

I didn't know that women and men sleep together; I was dumb (laughing). I stayed, two months I slept on the floor, cause I didn't like my husband at all. I slept two months on the floor, and every time he comes close to me I'm like: 'go away!' You know, like pushing him away. He was really understandable; he knows that I wasn't really ready for it. So it got to the second month, and he was like: 'I can't do this no more; you are my wife, and you have to sleep up here with me!' And I'm like: 'No! Why do I have to sleep up there? I can sleep down here, I'm still your wife, you know'. And it got to the point where he's like: 'you know it's like a point in that men and women, they have to be together, and that's what I married you for'. I'm like: 'No', you know. Two months later he was like: 'if you don't let me sleep with you, or sleep in the same bed with you, then I'm gonna tell the old people, and at that time it's gonna get worse, and you are gonna be more embarrassed'. So I finally gave in and said; 'Ok, you can sleep next to me now'.

This example with Seng shows that in the U.S. a Hmong marriage is still about the exchange of women between clans and families, and that women do not have a say in it. It is about building and maintaining relationships - between and for the benefit of men. Rubin (1975) points out how marriage transactions are tied into political and economic

arrangements, and in the case of the Hmong this is especially true regarding the bride price. The example with Seng shows that a favorable relationship between two families makes the wedding negotiations go smoothly and fast. I will in the following focus on the unequal rights of men and women in the marriage negotiation and in marriage in general. Rubin writes that “Kinship systems do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights and *people* - men, women and children - in concrete systems of social relationships” (Rubin 1975:177 [author’s highlighting]). Hmong marriage has been traditionally, and is still in the U.S., an important ritual where men come together to discuss the exchange of a woman. But that is not all; this ritual of negotiation is a political show, in which lineages are compared and the previous actions of clan members have an impact on the present transaction, and it is about economics - the value of a daughter. In Seng’s case the families were related and had had no prior difficulties with each other, and therefore the negotiations were short. It didn’t matter if Seng wanted to get married or not; the only thing that would have been different if she had protested, she said, was that her parents would have been angry and the negotiations would have taken longer. Seng’s situation therefore illustrates that Seng’s father saw it as his right to decide when and who his daughter would marry, which parallels Rubin’s statement; that “...men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin. In this sense, the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves” (Rubin 1975:177). Seng therefore does not have the right to decide for herself and of course have no rights over her male kin. A woman can influence who her son will marry, but has no rights to exchange him or to marry him off, the way daughters are exchanged in a political/economic ritual by their fathers. Rubin rests on Levi-Strauss and *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969) when discussing how kinship systems influence the gender view and sexuality of both men and women with the purpose of ensuring a socially practical marriage. The Hmong clan and kinship structure professes clan exogamous marriages, they denounce homosexual relations (Thao 1986; fresnabee.com<sup>7</sup>), and have an asymmetric gender system, and so men and women have to find their

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<sup>7</sup> At <http://www.fresnabee.com/special/hmong/pnxiong> there is an article about two Hmong girls of seventeen and twenty-one who committed suicide together because the Hmong community and their families could not accept that they were a couple. Her brother said “She liked another girl. The culture couldn’t take it. In this country, men marry men and girls marry girls, but not in our culture”.

gendered and sexual place within this system. Therefore, I will agree with Rubin that the kinship structure, through marriage rules and rules about sexuality, sculpts the gender view and sexuality of both men and women and reproduces the patriarchal gender system which I found with the Hmong. This system is constraining for both sexes “But it can be deduced from *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that more constraint is applied to females when they are pressed into the service of kinship than to males... From the standpoint of the system, the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response” (Rubin 1975:182). Seng conformed to the ideal Hmong female role when she got married; she did not object, except initially, and she surrendered to the ideal Hmong sexual role when she gave in sexually to her husband as well.

Unfortunately, Seng and her husband could not seal the marriage contract by having children, and after seven years of marriage they got divorced. Seng explained to me:

In our culture, after a certain years of marriage, if you can't have any kids, then they want to, the reason why me and my husband separated was because we couldn't have kids together, so they (the in-laws) wanted to have, I guess, their genes to keep growing, yeah, to reproduce, and we can't have kids together, so he just decided to leave...some people gossip a lot, but for us, they tend to just blame and to say that it's my fault, that I can't have any kids. But when we went through all the testing, through the doctors and everything, they really found out it wasn't my fault. But traditionally, they (the in-laws) didn't want to say it was their son's fault, so they still kind of blamed that it was my fault, yeah.

Seng's in-laws were very traditional, and even though Seng and her husband had become happily married, except for the fact that they could not have kids, they pressured their son to get a divorce and to try his luck with a new wife. This happened despite the fact that, during medical examinations, they had discovered that it was Seng's husband who was the problem. Seng's husband did get re-married but did not succeed in having any children with his second wife either. This example illustrates two points in particular: first, that having children is a prestige criteria and the reason behind Hmong marriages; and second, that in any case, the woman will be blamed for the unsuccessful attempt at reproduction. Both of these facts influence the gender and sexual identity of men and women and also preserve the asymmetrical gender hierarchy. It might therefore be right to say that “the subordination of women can be seen as a product of the relationships

by which sex and gender are organized and produced” (Rubin 1975:177).

## **The liminal phase; when one becomes an anomaly and a danger to the system**

Turner (1967) writes about the liminal period in initiation rites as culturally created, both to mark the transition from one status or ‘state’<sup>8</sup> to the next - for the sake of the community and the individual, and to prepare the individual going through it for his new roles, rights and obligations. The period of adolescence has for the Hmong, especially the first generation, become an unfamiliar liminal phase between childhood and adulthood that was not initially present in their culture, but was introduced to them after their arrival to the U.S. Since American society and culture, and not the Hmong, created the expressions of the liminal phase of adolescence, the elements and symbolism attached to it are often impossible to for Hmong parents in the first generation to understand - even though they fully experience the confusion and dualism of the process. Since the expectations to marry are so high, many of the second generation men and women who choose to live ‘in limbo’, without being married, often experience a continuous pressure to conform and often have a feeling of not belonging anywhere.

Mai Kor, whom I mentioned earlier, was born in Thailand, and came to the U.S. when she was a year old with her mother and grand-mother (mother’s mother). Her father died in the war in Laos when Mai Kor was only three months old, and when her mother got married again a year after arriving in the U.S. Mai Kor was sent to her grand-mother and lived there until she was twelve years old. She developed a very strong relationship with her grand-mother and respected her tremendously. By age twelve she was old enough to help her mother with her six new children. Mai Kor’s stepfather was abusive both towards Mai Kor and her mother, and Mai Kor thought it was because he didn’t like the fact that Mai Kor’s mother had been married before. Since it was so stressful living at home, Mai Kor went back and forth between her mother’s house and her grandmother’s house. When Mai Kor was fourteen her stepfather was arrested for the abuse, and he and Mai Kor’s mother got divorced. Then came a period of five years

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<sup>8</sup>State, in short, is a more inclusive concept than status or office, and refers to any type of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized” (Turner 1967:200).

when Mai Kor's mother stayed single, and these were the happiest years in Mai Kor's life. After high school, even though Mai Kor's mother protested and said it was not the right thing for a young woman to do, Mai Kor decided she wanted to move to another state to attend college, and so she did. Her second year in college Mai Kor's mother got married again to a "loser" and compulsive gambler. Mai Kor thought it was because all her four sons had moved to stay with their father, and she only had her two daughters left and she felt lonely. She had two more children with her third husband.

Since Mai Kor had seen how marriage had treated her mother, she said she never wanted to get married herself - but slowly she started to feel left out when her friends one after the other got married and moved away. Then came the phone call from her grand-mother; she had found a husband for Mai Kor; he was a lot older, not too handsome, but he had money, so Mai Kor would be taken care of. Mai Kor panicked and ended up marrying a man she had only known for six months instead; she quit college and moved with her new husband to the Twin Cities. Mai Kor was twenty-one years old when she got married.

There are two points I want to make here: first, the example with Mai Kor's mother shows how important it is for the first generation Hmong to be married, that marriage is the natural state to be in, and also that the reason behind marriage is to have children. It also shows that a woman would rather be married and unhappy than unmarried and happy. Mai Kor said her mom was such a wonderful and strong woman when she was unmarried. It could seem also that every time Mai Kor's mother got married, she married into a worse situation than before. Because of her last marriage to the compulsive gambler she gambled away her house and practically everything she owned. This could be explained by what I heard about divorced women being damaged goods, and therefore men who did not have a lot of money, or who wanted a second wife, could get them 'cheaper'. The women felt they did not deserve better and settled for less. This again could be explained by the fact that "women are given a social role and definition by virtue either of their age or of their relationship with men...women are generally seen as the product of idiosyncratic characteristics, such as temperament, personality, and appearance" (Rosaldo 1974:28). Therefore, all the efforts of Mai Kor's mother while she was divorced: her raising seven children by herself, her involvement in

several Hmong women organizations and Mai Kor's school activities did not seem to count, or it did not seem to empower her. She did just see herself as unmarried, and the unmarried do not have a favorable position in the Hmong community, and the divorced even less so. Like Yee, a divorced woman in her mid twenties told me:

Taking out a divorce was really, extremely hard! Of course when anybody gets divorced they always blame the woman. I don't know why, but it's always the woman's fault. I mean, you know, they, from both sides, from my side of the family, his side of the family, they were all like; 'What did you do! Why weren't you a good wife?! Why didn't you make him happy? he was happy when he married you; gosh, you should have just kept it up', you know. 'I told you to be patient; I told you to be calm, not to lose your temper, be patient, do all the housework, do all the cleaning, wake up early in the morning. Do what your husband tells you to do and shut up about it!'

Secondly; when Mai Kor waited for so long before she got married, she took advantage of the American created liminal phase to empower herself, but she became an anomaly in the Hmong community. Many of my informants suffered under the stigma of being recognized as something polluting, existing in-between roles and statuses. Turner (1967) uses Mary Douglas when writing that "the concept of pollution 'is a reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction'" (Turner 1967:202). Hmong parents in the first generation see their children perform actions that contradict the expected cultural actions related to their age-group, and so they are "at once no **longer** classified and **not yet** classified" (Turner 1967:202, author's emphasis). Hmong parents seemed so scared of their children losing touch with their culture that, in their effort to teach them the cultural rules, values, and norms, they scared them away, or even worse, made their children detest their own inheritance. The case is that many Hmong parents do not understand their children's actions when in the liminal phase, as they themselves have not gone through it. Turner writes that "liminal *personae* nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, 'inoculated' against them, through having been themselves initiated into the same state" (Turner 1967:203, author's emphasis). In the Hmong community there is a saying that: "If you are not married by eighteen, no one will want you". This was a very real threat to many of my informants, who, I think, felt that if they had not gotten married by then, they would cross some kind of boundary and end up in the liminal phase. For some, the pressure of the hegemonic structure and the prospect of ending up alone and

unwanted, facilitated the choice of early marriage; for others, like Mai Kor, the liminal phase was a challenge and an opportunity, until eventually she also gave in to the pressure to get married. The Hmong culture and social structure fear unmarried women, and Lee writes that “A spinster is considered ominous to the interests of a lineage. Upon her death, her funeral will be as brief as possible. This is to prevent her soul from staying too long among the living members of her consanguinal kin group, since it could lead to the existence of other spinster descendants” (Lee). Since, in the Hmong community, marriage and bearing children are the number one prestige criteria and the transition into adulthood, the American liminal phase that some Hmong youth choose to go through - including higher education, living by themselves, working for the benefit of enhancing their own life, rebelling against Hmong cultural traits - are considered dangerous and polluting by Hmong parents in the first generation. This in particular affects young women, since their more “selfish” needs do not correspond with the beneficial needs of the lineage; but, as I will show shortly, men too can be treated as liminal personae - an anomaly.

Ger was twenty-four years and single but had a big group of friends with whom he often spent time. He had a good education and a decent job in the Hmong community. He shared an apartment with a friend, who was also single, as it was cheaper and more convenient, and overall Ger was pretty happy with his life; he was searching for love, but was in no hurry to marry. As he said:

I'm not gonna shack up with the first girl I see, you know. I mean, I think just the bottom line for me, it is very easy, it is easy to get married, you know. I could, honestly, if I wanted to, and I'm not trying to boast or any thing, but if I wanted to I could just go anywhere, in any part of the country here, pick up some Hmong girl who's old enough to bread babies, you know, had some kind of education, looked pretty, I guess a trophy wife, you know, and marry her within a weekend, bring her home, but you know, how is that gonna help me meet my needs?

Ger's parents on the other hand are getting impatient, and every time they talk on the phone they ask Ger if he has found someone; “It's not so much a bad thing; I think it's just ‘when’; it's basically for them, to sum it up for them, it's; ‘When are you gonna start your life?’ And I'm like; ‘I'm living my life’. ‘No, when are you gonna complete what you are supposed to do?’”



When I asked Ger if he thought his parents could come to believe, like he did, that you could still **be** someone without being married and without having a family - that you could still live your life to the fullest; he said:

No, I don't think that's their view, I think their view is: Ger needs to get married; when is he gonna get married, you know. What can I do, I mean, they used to think that I was gay. I think, when I started to live with some roommates, and they were guys, you know, I think just for my part, just like, that helps me, cause they're guys, they're my age and we can relate, and we can do stuff, just watch each others back you know... for them, they thought, you know, he might not be straight, is my son a homosexual, you know, but I think it took them a lot to ask that, you know, and they finally did ask it, and I answered them, I'm not.

Ger, like Mai Kor and many others, ended up being an anomaly because he did not advance from childhood to adulthood through marriage at the appropriate age. And even though Hmong men can marry later than Hmong women, twenty-seven was considered very late. Since he had not married yet it was probably harder for his parents to include him in their life, because as Turner writes, the ones going through the liminal phase are structurally invisible; they have nothing of value that people can know them by; no status or position, no rank or kinship position. Because of this, because he was considered to be childlike and not responsible for the wellbeing of the lineage, Ger was not invited to the annual New Year celebration for his lineage. His parents, who did not understand his choices and were looking for some kind of explanation, wondered if he was gay. In the Hmong community "The bond of marriage can be created only between a man and a woman. Marriage between persons of the same sex is not only impermissible but impossible, because marriage should produce offspring" (Thao 1986:77), and so if Ger was gay that could explain why he was not married, even though this fact, if it came out, would disgrace his family. Turner (1967:209) writes that the liminal period often is a time of reflection. He writes that during the culturally constructed liminal periods the liminal personae are taught the secrets of the society through several created processes. Even though the liminal phase many Hmong in the second generation go through is not created by the Hmong culture, but by the American culture, the similarities are there; they see their natal culture from a different point of view and have to make up their mind about it, the danger being that they will not come back to it. Most do come back in one degree or the other; some don't. As for Ger, the

last thing I heard was that he went to a different state, picked up a girl and got married. If he did it out of love or pressure, I don't know - but for him the liminal phase ended, and he was incorporated into the Hmong kinship structure as a grown man willing to pass on the responsibilities of the lineage.

## **How the extended family disempowers young women**

In Laos a household consisted of a married couple, their unmarried children and their married sons' families (Donnelly 1997). The extended family therefore very often contained three generations, ordered in the kind of age and gender hierarchy mentioned earlier. In Laos the extended family meant having a greater labor force and an added economic unit, which ultimately added to the prestige and strength of the oldest man. For the women it had the opposite effect; bringing in a new woman as an economic unit could bring down her position in the household as a result of the added competition (Donnelly 1997). Of course, which woman would suffer the most within the extended family depended on their age and marital/maternal status; at least this was the case in the Twin Cities.

Bao is a caseworker at Hmong Urban Village, she leads several mom support groups and pregnancy prevention programs. Contrary to many Hmong women she did not get married until she was twenty-six and had her first child at twenty-seven. We saw each other almost on a daily basis, and I often observed her in job situations as I came with her both to the groups and programs she was leading and when she went on home visits to see clients. She came forth as self reliant, independent, reflective and very capable. Still, when it came to her role as a wife, she did not have the same repertoire to play on, and it bothered her greatly.

The first I heard of it was when we were driving to one of the mom support groups she was running; she was pregnant at the time with their first child, and she told me how she dreaded having to go to church regularly when the child was born. I asked her why that was, and she told me that while she was not particularly religious, her husband's father and his family were and that meant that she and her husband would have to

practice the same way her in-laws did; it was just the way it was.

During the last month of Bao's pregnancy she and her husband bought a house.<sup>9</sup> Bao was really thrilled about it; she couldn't wait to turn it into a home. Unfortunately the excitement soon turned to frustration and stress when her husband informed her, he did not ask her, that his parents and his sister were moving to the Twin Cities and they needed a place to stay. As the oldest son he had offered them to stay with him and Bao in their new house:

My in-laws are planning to move in with me! It's a crazy story. They are moving in from another state and need a place to stay. I'm not sure how long they're going to live with us. Sounds like it will be forever (because you can't really kick them out). And culturally, you know how it goes... it's expected. Anyway, the crazy thing is... my husband seems O.K with the whole situation. I don't blame him because, after all, they are his parents and he definitely loves them. But it's hard for him to realize that I might not be O.K with it. I really need my space! Gosh, I sound quite selfish don't I? Well, I don't mind if they stay for a while, but to actually 'live' with us is another thing. And what's worse? He's also invited his twenty-five year old sister to live with us. This is because she also just moved down and doesn't want to live with anyone else but us as well.

The weekend Bao and her husband moved into the new house Bao went into labor, and a few days later her in-laws moved in:

Well, I can start by telling you how my birth experience went. That weekend, I was moving from my old apartment into my new house. There was so much to do! Good thing I had my family help me. There was so much to pack, I thought I'd go mad. My husband tried to do everything himself. If your husband packs like mine, you'll never find any of your things later. So as pregnant as I was, I tried to do as much as I could just so that I can find everything later. We started and finished moving on that Saturday (April 26th). I was so tired! I thought I would rest at my new house. Well, Saturday night, just when I thought I could rest, his family came over and did a big barbecue. I had no clue why or who invited them. I was pretty upset and asked my husband. He said that he didn't invite them, but I know that he had suggested it to them before. I couldn't believe that after moving all day, he or whoever wanted to do this at night. How inconsiderate! I didn't care if he had the energy to entertain guests, but I surely didn't. Well, his side of the family came over and brought all their kids, and boy were

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<sup>9</sup>Since Bao and her husband had gotten married at such an "old age", and since his parents lived in another state, they did not move in with his family, which is the Hmong tradition.

they loud! I could not rest at all. That next day, I had to hurry up and sort all our stuff. Everything was in boxes. I needed to sort out as much as possible, even though people were telling me to rest. Since my in-laws were moving down and were bringing a lot of their stuff, I had to establish some ground for myself!

After Bao's in-laws moved in, Bao became a prisoner in her own house, as she could say nothing about all the changes that took place:

Anyway, I'm at my new house now... and have so much going on. Some days, I think I'm going to go crazy. I feel like I'm a stranger in my own home. Also, I can't stand that stupid chicken diet that all Hmong women have to go through. I think I've lost like 30 pounds already! I'm also homebound...which means I can't go anywhere for a month... another Hmong rule.

Suddenly, Bao goes from being an independent working woman to a restricted new mother and daughter-in-law:

People are always over, eating, sleeping, hanging out. Kids are always running around. The house is a mess, and there is stuff all over the place. The in-laws are being used as baby-sitters, cooks, etc. Of course they don't mind doing all this, because they love parenting. It annoys me because it's in my house, and I don't get any rest from all this. I felt like a stranger in my own home. Things were being done without my permission, etc. The reason why my husband's older sister and brothers are always over with their kids is that it serves as a convenience for them to just drop off the kids whenever they need to (the kids are so naughty and very noisy) or stop by and use the kitchen, have social gatherings, etc. My mother-in-law runs the household and whatever she says is 'Okay', goes. I especially needed a lot of rest that first and second week that I was at home with my baby, but believe me, I got far from that. In their eyes, as long as I didn't have to cook and clean, I was getting all the rest I needed. So I felt very cheated. And my husband could not do a darn thing about it. Most of the time I just stayed in my room with my baby to be away from the traffic and the noise, etc. And then in my room I'd go crazy because I desperately needed social contact; to talk to people or friends about what I was going through. Day and Night, my bedroom served as my refuge. Sometimes I would just cry because I felt so helpless. I really also had no privacy because people still popped in to see the baby again and again, without asking me. And I'd just sit there wondering how my life could have changed so much.

Bao's story exemplifies several structural limitations that Hmong women in general have to struggle with after getting married, but that might seem much harder for women who

have become Americanized. These structural limitations are part of the general asymmetry between men and women expressed through kinship and marriage and prestige rules. For Bao, this asymmetry became particularly clear after she had her baby. Within the Hmong culture, having children is often seen as the symbol of maturity, of adult age and responsibility. It is a sign that you are putting collective interest before personal interest, and it is a means to attain prestige. How a woman acts in her marriage and in relation to her in-laws defines her as a good or a bad woman. Marilyn Strathern (1981) uses the concepts “self-interest” and “social good” when referring to maleness and femaleness in a society, where women are seen as being more inclined to “self-interest” and men to “social good”, but where men and women both, according to their personal actions, can be considered to be more or less “male” and “female”.

At her workplace Bao was used to being judged by her work performance, but this judgment only said something about her ability to perform her tasks; it didn't say anything about her as a woman or as a person; it was just one of her many roles. When you have the status as a wife in the Hmong community, on the other hand, the role you play is affecting many more aspects of your life; it will define you as good (collective interest) or bad (personal interest), and it will bring prestige or shame to yourself and the clan of your husband. It is therefore not so strange that Bao went along with all the changes that happened after the birth of her first child: the change in religious practice, the chicken diet, the “stay at home for a month” rule, the in-laws moving in, the house being used as a social gathering and babysitting place, and the “takeover” of the household by the mother-in-law. For Bao to be considered a good wife she had to embrace all of this; she had to accept her place in the hierarchy, and as the youngest and newest daughter-in-law that meant she did not have a lot to say about things. The marriage and prestige system is in this way highly constraining. Why did Bao feel so alienated in her extended family?

Women everywhere are often considered to be anomalies (Rosaldo 1974). An anomaly is used to describe something that does not fit into any existing scheme of classification; it is something that cannot easily be explained or accepted; it is the opposite of order. Since the Hmong are patrilineal it means that descent is only traced through the male line. This in itself symbolizes the asymmetry between men and women; women are

dependent on their men and their goodwill for a good afterlife. When a woman marries she goes to live with her husband's family where she is an outsider. She is needed, but she doesn't really have a rightful place there, and she constantly has to negotiate her role by following the rules of the hierarchical family structure. This is a seed for conflict, as her in-laws most probably operate with a different social memory and a different cultural stock than she is used to. When young Hmong women in the U.S. get married and move in with their in-laws we might say that they resemble what Turner (1975:233) calls "marginals". "Marginals" resemble the person going through a liminal phase, because they are often so Americanized that they have lost some or much of their Hmongness; they belong simultaneously to two qualitatively different groups. Following Turner we might say that Hmong women do look to the Hmong community for warmth and a feeling of belonging, but since they see the American society as their structural reference group they cannot feel comfortable with the roles they are ascribed in the Hmong community; these are often inferior to their held positions in the American society - as the example with Bao showed. Still, it is their in-laws who 'manage' their reputation in the Hmong community. As one of my informants said:

They make you or they break you! Because that's the truth; because if they like you it's all good because they are gonna say good things about you; they are gonna like you; they are gonna tell people good things about you. But if they don't like you, they're gonna tell everybody that you are lazy, that you are this and that, and they are gonna really, really ruin your reputation.

So even though Hmong women may have always had a liminal status when living with their in-laws (True Hang 2002), their status or feeling of being a "marginal" is even more pronounced in the U.S. and, as Turner writes "Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (Turner 1975:233).

## **Summing up**

This chapter has dealt with how cultural patterns in the form of kinship, marriage and prestige systems are communicated from the first to the second generation Hmong, and

how these same patterns are interpreted by the second generation. Hylland Eriksen (1998:24) writes that culture is only shared to the degree it is made relevant by all participants in a situation of interaction. The generational conflict I have portrayed throughout this chapter shows that the Hmong first and second generation, although they might share certain cultural categories, do not agree on them. The different interpretations of the male dominated cultural patterns by the two generations are emphasized by the fact that the Hmong now live in a society with differentiated cultural patterns. While the first generation Hmong adheres to the more 'traditional' interpretations of Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige systems, the second generation Hmong women are influenced to a much higher degree by the cultural patterns found in American society, and they therefore interpret Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige systems with values and knowledge found there.

Despite the disagreement between the two generations on Hmong cultural patterns, I have in this chapter showed the perseverance, or at least the strong and continued influence, of the Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige system on the actions of young girls and women in the second generation; because of the perseverance of the Hmong structure young girls are molded to fit into an asymmetrical and constraining gender view. I have also showed some of the consequences of such a gender view on the actions and possibilities of young girls.

Since a culture is not static, but rather is situational or contextual, dynamic and continually shifting, I have showed how the Hmong view on female sexuality and public exposure has shifted after the Hmong came to the U.S. This shift, rather than giving Hmong girls more freedom, has made Hmong parents develop new rules about 'holding on' to their daughter's sexuality, which confine the girls to the home and make it very difficult for them to participate in activities outside of the home. Even though some Hmong cultural patterns have changed after the Hmong's arrival to the U.S. they still give precedence to the patriarchal structure, to the benefit of Hmong men. From illustrating how the Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige system and the expressed gender and age hierarchy mold or lay the premises for action, I will in the following chapter illustrate how actions taken by young Hmong girls, where they simultaneously use and change old categories, have the possibility to slowly change the dominant

Hmong structure.



## Chapter 5

# Recreating Hmong Structural Power: Individual Strategies



In the previous chapter I illustrated how the dominant Hmong gender and age hierarchy created a particular view of women and how women, as a result of the kinship and marriage system and the male prestige system, were molded into a particular pattern of early marriage and motherhood. I also illustrated how, because of this pattern, Hmong woman and young girls felt restricted and constrained - and how they had limited possibilities to develop as persons and individuals in their own right instead of in relation to the dominant males in their lives, like their father and husband. It might have seemed in the foregoing chapter that the hierarchical structure, presented in various forms, was bounded and stable, but that is not the case at all; the structures are

situational and relational, but at the same time they represent the commonly expressed, experienced and idealized “as if” structures; therefore they seem to carry more weight than they actually do - because the Hmong first generation believe they agree to these “common denominators” (Hylland Eriksen 1998). For the Hmong second generation, “...to rephrase Marx’s famous statement: agents act intentionally, but they have to act upon social conditions that they have not themselves chosen” (Hylland Eriksen 1998:28). The previous chapter illustrated how the Hmong social conditions and cultural patterns placed the young Hmong girls within a context they had not themselves chosen, and how it limited them in various ways.

In this chapter I will show how young Hmong girls are recreating and negotiating their place in the male dominated Hmong structural system - based on their agency; through their planned actions and the sometimes unintended consequences of their actions, within the system. I will show that it is a complex and contradictory process of empowerment for women and that the young girls both are operating with(in) culturally accepted Hmong rules and drawing inspiration from the American society, bringing something new to the process and to the negotiation of gender roles. We might look at the first and second generation Hmong as two almost separate groups, two culturally different groups, seeing all the differences between them and having in mind that they have two very different social memories. Hylland Eriksen illustrates (1998) how different groups on Mauritius, through compromise and relating to common denominators, uphold a working, peaceful society. In the case of the Hmong it is foremost the lack of agreement upon common denominators and the forced hierarchical structure that I see as the core challenge within the community and between the two generations; as Hylland Eriksen writes; “...when compromise fails, conflict ensues; and certain forms of conflict can sometimes be both necessary and desirable” (Hylland Eriksen 1998:6). This chapter will deal with how conflict is sought resolved through individual action, how the two levels -agency and structure - articulate with each other (Hylland Eriksen 1998:27).

I have chosen to begin this chapter with a rather extensive situational description and discussion of the actions taken by one of my main informants, Xiong, to better her own situation; the example illustrates both the cleverness of an individual and the fluidity of Hmong cultural patterns. Since my portrayal of the conflict between the two generations

and between Hmong and American cultural patterns, or ways of thinking, is seen mostly through the marriage system, I will order the following sub-chapters chronologically in relation to Hmong girls' actions in, and thoughts about, this system: starting with discussions about the bride price, then turning to marriage and divorce, before ending this chapter with a portrayal of more general generational conflicts.

## **Xiong gives marriage a new intentional value**

Xiong was brought up to be quiet, shy and to not show her emotions. She was not encouraged to develop her talents - like drawing - but was instead expected to help her mother with housework. Most of her communication with her father was through threats and violence from his side. In high school she had a hard time speaking up in class or defending herself if she thought she was being mistreated by teachers, since her parents had imprinted in her a respect for elders that she assumed applied to everyone older than she was. Since she was taught not to express herself, she found it difficult to figure out who she was and where she belonged. One evening, after closing time at the Hmong organization where she volunteered and where we often met, we ended up talking for hours while snacking on chips and twisters, and Xiong told me about her turbulent time in high school.

It was like one charade after the other, you know, because I had actually different groups of friends, you know. Because, one, the group that I hung around the most, were the ones who were kind of like me, who wasn't really good in school, you know, we wanted to play, you know, I guess the more popular ones, you know. And then I had the group of friends who were like the shy ones, like I was too, and they were actually the school girls, the ones who worked hard, you know, and it was kind of like around those that, you know, I think that I was really smart you know, and around those I felt ok to be smart, you know what I mean, like I felt it was a safer environment. And my other friends were just kind of like ok, just like the tough crowd, so you had to be tough, you know, but that never was me, really. And I had my group of friends who were like the depressed crowd, you know, which, they weren't depressed like - oh, I'm so depressed - but they were more of like, I don't know, I guess more of like the ones who were into the heavy metal, the dark stuff, the sad stuff, the poems, and I actually liked that crowd and the smart crowd a lot more because I think I was more me around those two crowds.

Xiong told me she was generally depressed and unhappy with her life and her relationship with her parents when she was in high school, and all the pressure and expectations they put on her made her feel like she would crash. She started dating Thomas, a white American, because he was so positive, and he was the first person to ever encourage her in anything, Xiong said. After about seven months she got pregnant. The pregnancy, she said, was not something she was aiming for, but she didn't do anything to prevent it either; "When I found out I was pregnant it was actually a relief for me, you know, because I was like; yeee, I'm gonna get out, you know. It was like; this is my ticket out of here, you know".

When her parents found out about her pregnancy, she moved in with Thomas and his parents<sup>1</sup> as they were both only seventeen years old. They did not go through the traditional Hmong wedding negotiations and Thomas did not 'pay' a bride price for Xiong, something that her mother did not like very much, and she complained that she had been raising Xiong for seventeen years and now she would not get anything back from it. Still, even though Xiong and Thomas were not married, neither the Hmong nor the American way, they were still considered husband and wife in the Hmong community. In the beginning of their marriage, Xiong said, they would always be introduced during family gatherings as "This is our daughter Xiong, who is married to the white one", so as to warn the others not to be too shocked. But regardless of the negative stereotyping and attention they experienced, Xiong said that her relationship and communication with her parents had become much better after she got married; "It is better now, I think because now they respect me more, because I'm grown and they can't really treat me the way they did, because I'm not legally, I mean, not legally, but culturally **their** daughter any more, you know, so they respect me more". Xiong said that, now, she feels more entitled to act outside of the Hmong cultural norms:

I kind of think that it is good now, because now people know that, it is kind of like they know that I don't take it, so they don't really bug me as much you know, which is good. And like I was saying; I have the excuse of like my husband, you know; he's like white, so they're all like: 'Oh that's ok, she's like that because she has to be, you know, she has to be, because her husband is an American, and so now she has to be an American'.

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<sup>1</sup>An unmarried Hmong girl can not live in her parents house for the first month after the baby is born as it would upset the spirits.

This case has several interesting aspects. Firstly, Xiong obviously felt trapped, mistreated and disempowered in the hierarchical family structure where she grew up. When she started dating Thomas, the white American, it could have been in an effort to distance herself from the Hmong structure, because since the Hmong are patrilineal, women who marry a non-Hmong man are not considered Hmong any longer. Remembering what we know about the constraining system analyzed in the previous chapter, we might say that dating Thomas was for Xiong a step in dealing with and distancing herself from what she saw as a womanly hostile environment. Perhaps this reflects an element of strain theory, as described by Ortner (1984:151-52), where actors are seen as trying to deal with what they experience as a complex situation and where they are developing “projects” to transform their state of being and their relationships with the system, persons in the system and their own place in the system.

Secondly, the next step was taken when Xiong got pregnant. Even though it was not a consciously planned action, it was none the less a Hmong cultural reason for moving out of her parent’s house, getting an adult status, and, by being considered married to Thomas, cutting her normative ties to the Hmong community. This exemplifies the essence of the duality of structure, described so intricately by Giddens (1986), where he points out that structure is both constraining and enabling; the Hmong structure constrained and pushed Xiong so far that she thought her world would crash down on her; at the same time, by using the Hmong marriage and kinship system and cultural rules, she maneuvered herself into a situation containing more freedom and respect than she felt she could have achieved if she continued to stay on the same path as before.

Thirdly, what is particularly interesting also is the way the Hmong prestige structure have found a way of including and accepting Xiong by defining her and her actions as standing outside of the Hmong culture or structure, while she still plays a part inside the culture or structure. Xiong still has a connection with her parents. Xiong explained to me that after she got married to Thomas it was easier for her to be outspoken with her parents and other family members, and she generally felt it was easier to be herself and to not constantly think about the consequences of her actions in regard to her parent’s reputation. She was excused since she was married to an American, and since she therefore needed to be an American - showing that the Hmong first generation, still

following Hmong kinship and marriage structure, defines her in relation to her husband. It seemed to be a general rule that when girls get married, their actions, if interpreted to be negative, will no longer damage the reputation of their fathers' family and clan as do their actions before they get married, and that is why Hmong parents keep their daughters under such strict control **before** they are married off. One should think, therefore, that regardless of who Hmong girls marry their actions after marriage are irrelevant to their parents. I learned that that is not the case. The daughter's actions in her marriage - whether she is considered to be a good or bad wife, whether she produces children, preferably sons, or not and whether she gets divorced or not - will influence the future wedding negotiations between other members of the two clans involved, the father's clan and the husband's clan. In Xiong's case there are no Hmong clans involved, as she is no longer a member of her father's clan, and she is not married into a different Hmong clan. It seems logical, therefore, that her actions, at least the ones interpreted negatively by Hmong standards, are of no relevance to the Hmong community, with the exception of her parents immediate worry about what other people might think about Xiong marrying outside of the Hmong community.

Finally, it seems relevant and interesting to compare the redefinition of Xiong's status to similar situations in other immigrant groups. Her status as an outsider to, but a participant in, the Hmong community was a functional solution for both parts. In Scandinavia some Muslim immigrant male family members have taken horrific actions when their daughter, or female relative, have chosen to distance herself from a comparable strict, male dominated, and hierarchical culture or structure, thereby 'dishonoring' the family. Both in Sweden and in Norway there have been several so-called murders of honor. These are murders, or attempted murders, of women, conducted by their kinsmen, either fathers, brothers, husbands, cousins and uncles, because the young girl or woman who was killed had acted inappropriately in relation to her parents' cultural or religious patterns or had become too friendly with men or elements in their new host society (Wikan 2002:92). Whether the daughter had acted improperly in regards to her family's standards - by going out and having fun like the average Scandinavian teenager - or if she had dared to fall in love with a Scandinavian man and wanted to marry him, the end result was the same; she had dishonored her family, and, according to her family's custom, by doing that she deserved to die. The

different outcome for Xiong and the unfortunate immigrant girls in Scandinavia could be explained by the fact that while Xiong's actions were redefined and interpreted to be irrelevant for the Hmong prestige structure as a result of her 'marrying' an American man, the actions of the immigrant girls living in Scandinavia were interpreted *within* the specific culture of her parents and were not seen in light of the fact that they were now living in a different country with different rules. While Xiong's fictive marriage to Thomas, 'verified' by the fact that they had a child together and that they lived together, is what gave her her freedom, the same actions taken by an immigrant girl in Scandinavia might cost her her life. It all seems to come down to how one is defined - as outside or inside the specific prestige structure - and ironically in both Xiong's case and in the cases of the Scandinavian immigrant girls that Wikan (2002) portrays, this is entirely done by men.

While the Muslim or patriarchal culture in Scandinavia and the 'murders of honor' indicate the rigidity of certain members of a particular group, the example with Xiong shows that people within male dominated cultural patterns can be flexible and solution oriented. I will continue now to discuss how Hmong cultural patterns might slowly be changing since Americanized Hmong women consciously and intentionally challenge the normative understanding of the tradition of bride price by bringing a new contextual meaning to the tradition's conventional value and understanding (Sahlins 1981:68-69).

## **A changed view of the symbolic and practical meaning of the bride price**

The Hmong marriage, kinship and prestige structure dictates the culture's views of men and women, in addition to giving them specific roles and statuses, but in these structures gender views are not only produced, but also reproduced, negotiated and transformed. Within these structures men dominate all the social, political and economic decision-making (Geddes 1976; Donnelly 1997). Marriage, which is also in reality the transfer of women and the rights in women, has a high place within the Hmong culture, and the wedding ceremony and the negotiation for a bride price is an

important, social, and bordering on political-economic, event between men, as it ties two clans together. As pointed out earlier, this particular social relation between kinship groups states that men have rights in women, rights that women do not have in themselves or in men (Rubin 1975:177). Since a Hmong wedding ceremony is really an event for men, the women, even the bride, had no specific role in the negotiations - but as I experienced in the U.S, they often had conflicting feelings about it.

Regardless of my relation to my informants, I was never comfortable asking about the bride price, specifically the amount of money that had changed hands - probably because I got the impression that it was simply something one did not talk about, either because it made the girls feel objectified or that the girl did not really have any knowledge about the wedding negotiations that had taken place. When it came to the custom itself, on the other hand, the girls very often had an opinion, but they were not as clear-cut as I had expected in advance. When I asked three girls who were all married what feelings they had about the bride price they told me very different things:

**Xiong:** For me personally, I kind of, I think, I kind of get mad about it sometimes, I know some people they say: 'look at the bright side, you know, the more you are worth, the more your parents loved you', or something. But to me, I think, I don't want to be viewed as a property, you know, and to be sold. Cause, well you know, I think I've told you guys this, but when, you know I married my husband, and you know I told you, he wasn't Hmong so, you know, my mom kind of knew that they were not going to pay, he wasn't going to pay a bride price. But she really wanted him to, and she was saying you know, like: 'I've raised you up this, you know I've raised you up, and you are seventeen and I'm not gonna get anything for the seventeen years I was raising you', you know, pretty much saying that: 'I deserve something'. And I know she does too, you know, and I feel bad, you know, but to me though, I just don't think that is what she should have been focusing on.

**Soua:** But like, I see it from an other point of view too, like a lot of the time that's kind of a guaranty that, it's kind of hmm, so that the guy wont bring, so that he won't marry her just for the heck of it, you know. And a lot of the time they will jack up the price so that, you know, if the guy doesn't really love your daughter, he won't just bring her back, because he will have to pay more, you know, to bring her back also. And a lot of the times, depending on how the parents feel about the relationship, they will make it more expensive so that it will be harder for the guy to bring her back. And I see a value in that; a lot of young marriages they don't work out; in this day and age there's a lot of, I see quite a few couples getting divorces or separating just because they got married so young, and I actually feel lucky, you know, that I'm not at that point, not even close to - not that I know of, of getting



there, you know. But I don't know, I guess it's just the way, it's part of the culture, I don't know, I'm just kind of used to it, used to seeing about it and hearing about it.

**Lia:** Yeah, I think it is part of the culture; it's the way it has always been, you know, so, it's hard to change. I think it is ok, but the only thing I don't like about it, the husband's family, the guy's family, they look at you as if you are a car or something, or like a servant; we bought you for this much and you have to serve us; it makes them think that they own you.

**Xiong:** Like getting married, I was telling you earlier, you think that you escape this prison, for that prison; you just go from one system to another system. Cause to me, I kind of see it like, when you were with your mom and them, you were property too, you know, and they you get sold off, and you are someone else's property, so I don't know.

**Lia:** When you go live with them (the in-laws) they have the right to tell you to do anything they want you to do, and after paying for you, if you do pass away, you know, they have do your funeral, that's like, you know, telling your parents that they will be there when you die.

According to my informants, the three girls above represent the most often stated opinions; the bride price was most often viewed as a payment to the parents for bringing up the girl and as insurance to make sure that the husband and his family will love the bride and treat her right. By paying a high bride price the groom's family show the bride and her family that they value her and that they will, collectively, put an effort into making the marriage last. If the parents of the bride demand a high bride price it shows that they love their daughter and that they want the best for her. PaNhia, the tomboy presented in the previous chapter, who never wanted to get married, told me how she and her parents view the bride price very differently:

I know my parents would want a Hmong wedding, if I do get married, but I don't want a Hmong wedding just because, oh, my husband has to pay like \$7,000, you know, so it makes me look like a piece of meat, and I don't want to feel like that. A lot of girls do feel like that, and a lot of girls, you know, some girls are like; oh yeah, we want to get rid of that, but then her parents would be like; well if we don't, like, have him buy you, you know, then it means that you mean nothing to us and that we are just letting you go, that you have no value to us; so if you go live with them, they can do whatever they want with you, and we can't say anything about it, and so it goes into the whole thing of, you know, we have to let him buy you, to let him know that we value you.

The different perceptions the girls have of the bride price are all probably based on what

they have heard about its functions in Laos and Thailand and its continued importance and practice within the Hmong community in the Twin Cities. Symonds writes that in Thailand:

The bride-price payment, referred to as the debt owed to her parents for her milk and food (milk and care money, *nqe mis nqe hno*), ties a woman to her husband and his lineage, giving them rights in her labor, sexuality, and reproduction... Although the phrase used to describe the marriage process is to 'buy' or 'get' a wife, marriage is not thought of as 'buying' a woman but rather as a series of exchanges between wife-givers and wife-takers to form an alliance between clans (Symonds 2004:41-42, 169).

Geddes who also did fieldwork in Thailand writes that the bride price is mostly symbolic and that "the transactions are not aimed at economic gain" (Geddes 1976:58). Still, he points out, women are important assets to the men within the Hmong structure, and the transfer of rights in them should be made public by paying a bride price (Geddes 1976:59). Whether or not the girls perceive the bride price to be detrimental to women and whether or not it makes them feel like property depends, I believe, on their personal experience with the tradition and its outcome. The tradition of marriage and bride price does play an important part in dictating Hmong gender views, since it is tied up with the kinship and prestige structure. The young girls' evaluation of it is therefore an important step in the negotiation and transformation of Hmong conventional gender values and relations.

Xiong, who had already distanced herself from the Hmong structure by 'marrying' a white American, also distanced herself from what she perceived to be a womanly hostile tradition, by not encouraging her husband to pay a bride price for her. She believed it was wrong that her mother was so insistent upon getting "paid", and she did not like the idea of being sold. We could say that Xiong's marriage had no function in the Hmong structure, since by marrying a white boy she did not tie her family to a different clan, and since her husband did not pay a bride price they did not commit to the conventional Hmong gender roles. We might also say that with her actions Xiong gave her marriage, which was still interpreted within the Hmong conventional value system, a new intentional value (Sahlins 1981), and she did the same with the bride price when she redefined its importance.

Lia got married to get away from an abusive mother. She got married the traditional way, with a Hmong man, who unfortunately continued the abuse she had tried to escape from. She did not oppose the tradition in general but did not appreciate the feeling of being owned by her in-laws, and she resented the treatment that it led to. In Lia's case the bride price did not work in her favor; that is, the bride price was supposed to be insurance that she got treated right by her in-laws and that they collectively would help make the marriage work, not only to her husband's benefit but to her benefit also; her in-laws did neither. It did work, on the other hand, when it came to the benefit of the husband's clan; namely the fact that they had decision-making power over her reproduction. Lia got pregnant with her first child when she was seventeen and by twenty she had three children - because her husband wanted them.

My informants' perception of being 'sold' or 'owned' might be stronger than what young girls in Laos and Thailand felt. There are two reasons for this: one, Geddes (1976) writes that the bride price in Thailand was paid in silver and not money, to set it apart from the general commercial transactions, while in the U.S. the bride price is paid in dollars, giving the impression that it is nothing more than an ordinary transaction. This development in practice might be caused by the fact that in the Twin Cities the "Hmong welfare rates are nearly 80 percent" (Hein 1995:125). Since many Hmong families, which are generally large, have severely limited income, the girls might be treated not only as assets, but also as financial assets in a more direct sense. Following, it is likely that since the girls have been 'bought' in a more direct way, with money, their in-laws might feel even more entitled to voice their claims over her. Therefore, although the bride price is supposed to be "...symbolic in terms of an exchange of decision-making power over this woman's life" (Moua 2000), it seems to have become, if it wasn't before, a very real overtaking of women's rights altogether. In *Paj Ntaub Voice* (Moua 2000; Moua 2001) women discussing the bride price say that it is the American superficial view of Hmong culture that makes them seem like property, when in reality it is a symbolic transaction. In the same discussion the women are complaining about having to give up their religion, their habits, and their interests to fit into their husband's family when they are married, and they feel it to be unjust, but unavoidable. I see a dichotomy here.

Two, the 'superficiality', or what I will assume is the feminist approach in American

society, might also be a reason Hmong girls feel devalued and restricted by the bride price system. If young girls get married to achieve individual choice, individual freedom and individual opportunity, the fact that their decision-making power belongs to someone else might be hard to deal with. All but one of my married informants told me they did not like and did not get along with their in-laws; they felt restricted, and they felt they had to do “everything” in the house; otherwise they were considered lazy; as Xiong pointed out, it is like going from one prison to another. They would rather live alone with their husbands. Compared to their mothers, young Hmong girls seem to have a changed perception of what marriage should be, based on what they learn about love in American popular culture, and so the shock of having to adapt to the expectations of the in-laws is big.

The role and status of a daughter-in-law has therefore become an arena for gender role negotiation, as young girls in the second generation refuse to accept the in-laws’ expectations of them. The first generation has noticed the change. I talked to an older couple with grown children, and, although the mother was looking forward to getting a daughter-in-law to help her with the cooking, both she and her husband knew that it would not be like it was in Laos. They both felt that the younger generation did know how to respect their role or the responsibilities related to the bride price.

**Husband:** I don’t think so; she (the wife) will cook for her (the daughter-in-law); the young generation, they know how to eat only (laughing)! But back home, oh yeah, they know how to cook.

**Wife:** Back home the daughter-in-law is like the, come and take the place of you, you know; they come and cook and clean for the whole family, because the mother-in-law and father-in-law pay a big bride price, so you want them to be a servant (laughing). Daughter-in-law feels it is an obligation too, you know; you are old enough to get married; you know your responsibilities, you have to take your responsibilities seriously. If you don’t do what you are supposed to do, you will get a bad name, like you are a lazy wife or something.

As the example with Bao illustrated in the previous chapter, the pressure to fit into an extended family and the daughter-in-law role can be tough, and the girls had different ways of handling this situation. The negotiation was present, but it seemed to be a slow process. I found that many of the younger girls, despite their limited resources and

status within the Hmong structure, found small ways of negotiating with their husbands and in-laws to better their situation. Although the bride price traditionally is a payment for the girl's labor, sexuality and reproduction, some girls were not willing to surrender to the wishes of their husbands or in-laws. Lia realized after three children that she had to take control of the situation, and so she went to get birth control. Against the wishes of her in-laws, she took back the control of her reproduction. Several of my informants did the same, realizing that, if they wanted the life they had escaped their parent's strict control to achieve, their chances were better if they did not have several children. A young girl living in a family of fourteen told me that her nosy and controlling mother in-law went into her room and went through all of her things. One day the mother-in-law had asked if she was still on the pill, and when the girl said no, she asked why she had not gotten pregnant yet. The girl had not told her mother-in-law, but told me that she and her husband were using the condom and said that "If my life is going to work out with my husband, we don't need to have more than two kids!" Many of the girls also negotiated with their in-laws, mostly their mother-in-law, about housework and child care as they wanted to have time for homework, and to go out. Several of my informants felt restricted by their husbands when it came to going out alone, but some also went out without their husband's permission. The girls had phone networks where they called each other to get support and to talk about issues they had with their husbands.

As young girls take action against the conventional roles expected of them as daughters-in-law, the system will I believe, slowly change. In the Lee family I meet two girls who were both untraditional daughters-in-law. I met this family for the first time through a cousin of a man who worked at Hmong Urban Village; he took me to the house of his uncle and introduced me to the family which consisted of a mother and a father, six sons, four daughters, two daughter-in-laws, a grand-child, and a dog. They all lived together in a rundown, three-bedroom house, where the first sign of an overcrowded house was the pile of shoes in front of the entrance to the house. At my first visit I was welcomed and offered something to drink before we sat down in the livingroom that also served as the parents' bedroom. The whole family was not there, only the father, mother, one of their daughters, Mai Yia, and one of the daughters-in-law, Peng. To begin with I referred my questions to the father, and he answered in broken English. The mother was in the background; she did not speak much English but clearly

understood what was being said. The daughter-in-law, I was surprised, interrupted her father-in-law continuously, elaborating on what he was saying. He did not seem to mind the interruptions too much. After finishing my conversation with the father I went on to talk with the two girls, whom I also met on several other occasions, both at the house, and they invited me to go with them to the Mall of America.

Mai Yia and Peng were both sixteen. Mai Yia had gotten pregnant with her boyfriend when she was fourteen and had a one-year-old son - but she still lived with her parents. In the beginning I was confused, because when the girls talked about Mai Yia's boyfriend, they would sometimes refer to him as her fiancé and sometimes as her husband, so I asked if they were married. Mai Yia said that they had gone through all the Hmong rituals, so within the Hmong community they were considered a married couple, but she defined herself as engaged. She said that her husband was in the military and was stationed out of the country just after she found out she was pregnant. Mai Yia did not want to move in with her in-laws, so, after spending the mandatory month away from her parents' house after she had given birth, she moved back in, as she felt she got a lot more support at home, and she was not ready to be a daughter-in-law. As a compromise she spent weekends and holidays with her in-laws, but as she said, she didn't like it there, so she just spent the time in her room.

Peng got married when she was fifteen and said that she married for love, and she liked being a daughter-in-law. She said she liked sitting around with the old women and learning about the Hmong culture - it was important she said, to listen and learn from the older ones. Once, when I came over the two girls were in the kitchen making dinner, and Peng was obviously in charge, taking this part of her role seriously. Still, in many ways Peng did not seem like the average teenage wife and daughter-in-law. She said that even though she had gotten married young, she did not want children yet, because she wanted to pursue a master's degree first. I understood the first time I met her that she was very outspoken, and even though she liked talking with the older women she did not entirely respect the age hierarchy as she showed by interrupting her father-in-law constantly when he was talking. When the two girls, Peng's husband, Mai Yia's son and I went to the Mall of America, Peng and her husband quarreled in the car, and she called her husband stupid several times, challenging the gender hierarchy and making it

very clear to me that she was not an oppressed young wife. When we got to the mall they were like most teenagers; they wanted to shop for clothes, have snacks and most importantly, play games at the arcade.

Mai Yia and Peng had both gotten married traditionally and according to Hmong customs, but they had negotiated the conventional roles expected of them. Mai Yia did not have to live with her in-laws and to work for them, as is most commonly expected, and Peng had also redefined the role of the daughter-in-law; she did the labor expected of her in the house, but she had taken control of her reproduction and set goals for herself to achieve a master's degree; she also challenged both the age and gender hierarchy.

Many young Hmong girls have new and Americanized expectations of marriage and are not willing to conform to a role dictated by the kinship, marriage and prestige system. The girls discussing bride price in the *Paj Ntaub Voice* (Moua 2000; Moua 2001) seem to have a firm belief in the bride price system as a symbolic relation between clans, and that it has a symbolic value meant to protect a woman from any maltreatment in her husband's family. At the same time they do not want to or do not like to recognize or accept *their* conventional value in that specific relation, saying that if they have to give up who they are to conform to the husband's family, then the bride price is detrimental to women. To me it seems they have all become feminists; they would like to see the bride price as a symbol only, and not as a ritual forming gender views within the Hmong culture.

The agency of young girls like Peng, who form an opinion against the bride price before they get married, and of girls like Peng and Mai Yia who negotiate the consequences of the bride price after they are married will, I believe, slowly change the kinship and marriage structure and by that the gender views following from it. But it is not only the symbolic value of the bride price that is filled with a new content; the marriage also, through the girls' intentions and actions, is given new meaning.

## Giving marriage a new actionable reference - rebellion

In her book *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women* Donnelly gives several empirical examples of how young girls in Laos, even though operating within a male-ordered Hmong universe, could to some degree manipulate their circumstances so that they had a say in who they would marry. One of the girls had no wish to marry at all, but this was not an option, as she came to the attention of a much older man who wanted to marry her. Through her more or less passive female role and actions she managed to get the favorable attention of a much younger man and friend who did not want to see her unhappy - and who married her before the older man knew what was going on (Donnelly 1997:134-137).

In the U.S. every third or fourth Hmong girl gets married and has children before she is eighteen. One could wonder if this trend is a reproduction of the cultural pattern and social structure that existed in Laos, where it was common to get married at an early age, but I believe the situation is more complex than that. In *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981), which I have referred to earlier, Sahlins explores the mutual relationship between structure and practice. Using as example the history of Hawaii at the time of the first European arrival, he shows how relationships between chiefs and commoners and between men and women attain new meanings and practical relations through the chiefs renewed use of the tradition of tabu as a means of acquiring better economic and political relationships with the Europeans. What started out as a reordering of concepts and signs to preserve and reproduce cultural patterns ended up transforming conventional values, because individual actors treated important signs with differential interest. As Sahlins writes, and I also showed in the previous section about the bride price, "...the conventional value of the sign acquires an intentional value, and the conceptual sense an actionable reference... What is at issue here is the difference between the enactment of the sign by the subject and its constitution in the society" (Sahlins 1981:69).

Sahlins proposes that the visible effects of attempted reproduction and eventual transformation are most evident in situations of cultural contact, but that it is generally



to be found “as actors with partially distinct concepts and projects relate their actions to each other - and to a world that may prove refractory to the understandings of any and all concerned” (Sahlins 1981:68). This description fits the situation of the Hmong first and second generation very well, since they obviously relate to two very different social worlds, with different concepts and value systems, and they cannot understand completely where the other part is coming from. Therefore, I find it useful to combine Sahlins’ theory with Barth’s theory on generative process analysis, as it portrays the complex relationship between action and the interpretation of action.

During my fieldwork I talked to several young Hmong girls who were already married and had children. Zoua was sixteen and was expecting her first child; Kate was fifteen and expecting her second child; her first daughter was three years old; Peng was nineteen and had three children; Koua got married when she was twelve but has no children; Xia was twenty years old and had two children. When I met Xia she was an intern at one of the organizations I contacted, so I bumped into her on several occasions. When we knew each other a little better she invited me to her home where I met her husband, her daughters and some of her friends and family members through a day with cooking lots of Hmong food, laughing and talking in the kitchen.

Xia grew up with her grandparents, her parents, her five brothers and two sisters in a traditional Hmong household. She got married when she was eighteen years old, to a man six years her senior, whom she had known for six months. When I asked her why she had chosen to get married she told me:

My family is a Hmong traditional family, and I just wanted to get out of the house, to have some freedom from my parents. When I lived with my parents I didn’t have much time or much freedom to go out with friends, or to actually date someone, you know, I can’t even go out on a date or for a movie, and I thought I should do something about it and so I ran off and got married, I thought marriage was the best way to get out of my parent’s house, so that’s why I got married

I was given several reasons why young Hmong girls wanted to leave their parents home. They were all based on needs developed by a combination of the strict Hmong structure analyzed in the previous chapter, and the influence of and the exposure to the American society, acculturating the girls in a much faster pace than their parents.

Firstly, my informants told me that the number one reason behind early marriages was that the girls wanted more freedom, as stated by Xia. They wanted to lead the life of an ordinary, American teenager which included dating, going out with friends, going to the movies, wearing American style clothing and make up - in general they wanted to be able to 'go play'. They wanted to be able to do all these things without having to worry about the Hmong reputation, and without having to worry about being forced into a marriage they did not want because they were misunderstood as being 'bad girls'.

Secondly, they married because they did not feel loved by their parents. They wanted to experience the kind of family life they saw on American TV-shows like "Full House", where parents openly show their feelings towards their children. They did not understand or appreciate their parents' Hmong way of showing affection: by putting food on the table and by making sure they acted according to Hmong structural rules. They wanted visible signs of affection, and married when they found those signs in a boy.

Thirdly, some girls married because they did not know what to do with their lives, they were in a period of soul searching, or they were unhappy with their lives, performing badly at school. They saw marriage as the easiest way out, since they could then quit school and stay at home while their husbands had the role of supporting them. One of my informants said:

I guess it was the right time for me because I didn't really know what to do with my life. I lived in a small town always doing the same thing. I needed some changes, especially atmosphere and something more in my life and I guess, my husband was the answer. I gave myself many choices to choose from, and, actually, marriage wasn't one of the choices. My marriage just sort of happened. The choices that I gave myself were to go away to college and leave everyone and everything behind. Join the navy or something in that aspect or, three, keep on doing what I have been doing the last couple of years, which is school, work and living with my parents. I guess, you can say I was lost, and I was doing some soul searching. Out of these three choices, I chose number two. I had a friend who was in the coast guard, and I thought about trying it out. The recruiter had started calling me already, but I was never home much to talk to him even though I was still interested. I was going to school and always working. Before I was going to really give in to consideration about joining it, my husband came along and I fell in love with him.

Fourthly, miscommunication between parents and their daughters made young girls seek

understanding elsewhere. The miscommunication had two sources: one, the parents and their daughters did not speak the same language. The parents did not understand and speak enough English to communicate with their daughters, and the daughters did not know enough Hmong to explain how they felt and what they wanted. Second, the two generations did not understand where the other part was coming from as a result of cultural differences and social memories. The parents often thought and acted within the Hmong context, while the daughters thought and acted with intentions learned in the American context - and so they did not find a common middle ground.

Fifthly, since the dating rules are so strict in the Hmong community and the risk of damaging the family's reputation is so high, the girls often got married to their first boyfriend because they wanted the chance to explore that relationship without having to do so under their parents' supervision.

I find it important also to point out that the young girls were not the only ones to use marriage as a strategy with specific intentions. Parents who did not know what to do with unruly daughters sometimes married them off, hoping that the problem would disappear. Aaron, a psychologist working with 'at risk' Hmong teenagers said:

The girls that I work with have violence in their history, and I see that sometimes the family attempts to marry the daughter off, and what will happen is that, with the violence, the violence will disappear ok, but they don't identify that maybe they were depressed and that was part of the reason why they were violent. And what you will see is that the depression takes up and it takes more of a depressed mother-kind-of-thing, and that type of stuff, you will see a lot of the other symptoms going on, but the violence will stop.

Some parents therefore used marriage as a coping strategy, because they did not understand their daughter's behavior and they did not know what else to do about it. Pregnancies outside of marriage were also a reason to marry off their daughters, probably as a way of avoiding both a bad reputation for the family and the financial drain an extra member to the family would bring.

## The aftermath

There are significant differences between the American mainstream society and the Hmong community, differences that become particularly visible when they occur as conflicting interests between generations within the same group as a result of different degrees of adaptation and acculturation. As Sahlins writes “People act upon circumstances according to their own cultural presuppositions, the socially given categories of persons and things” (Sahlins 1981:67). But then again it is important to remember what Barth (1993) writes, namely that action is continually immersed with new intentions and interpretation in a process of meaningful interaction. This might be because, and I am turning to Sahlins again, human action and its context is not forced to conform to any perceived conventional categories, and when they do not the conventional categories might be revalued in practice and functionally redefined and transformed (Sahlins 1981:67).

Symonds (2004) writes that “A Hmong marriage is far more than a union between two people; it is one of a series of unions between clans and lineages. Marriage not only facilitates new alliances and family networks but repairs old alliances through the resolution of past disagreements” (Symonds 2004:69). The clan, the family, and the group are highly valued in the Hmong community and social structure, and these are the entities that the Hmong first generation operates within. The second generation, on the other hand, while feeling the impact of the Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige structure that their parents imprint on them, are highly influenced by the American main stream and popular culture: favoring individual choice, individual freedom and individual opportunity. Hmong parents seem to act with intentions benefiting the clan, family and group, while their daughters act intentionally to improve their own situation and to fulfill their own needs.

As shown above, I discovered several reasons and intentions behind early marriage in the Hmong community, intentions triggered by needs their parents or the Hmong community cannot or will not fulfill and dreams and ideals introduced to them by American popular culture. And so when Hein (1995) writes that “Culture is the primary reason that Hmong girls tend to marry by age 16...”, I feel it necessary to correct it to: *the clash of*

*two cultures* is the primary reason that Hmong girls tend to marry at age sixteen. I do not believe that Hmong girls are simply driven to early marriage by the influential Hmong culture; instead I believe that they often intentionally chose marriage as a strategy with varying intentions. Whether the intentions are the wish for more freedom, the need for visible love, want for a comfort zone, or the frustration with miscommunication, the intentions and the values behind them are formed as the girls participate in American society, where their cultural stock is revised and differentiated from their parents'. When I asked my informants who knew American society better, themselves or their parents, a majority said that they knew American society better because they participated in it on a larger scale, and they knew the language better.

Because of the different degree of participation in American society by the first and second generation, Hmong parents do not interpret the girls' actions and the meanings and intentions behind them, which are clearly gathered in American society, with the same keys and with the same frame of mind. It gets even more complicated when the girls chose Hmong marriage as a medium for their intentions, since it is a ritual with a strong conventional value. In the Hmong community, marriage is a legitimate and culturally accepted reason for leaving the parents' house, and, since marriage and childbirth is also the Hmong rite of passage to adulthood, the young girls hoped that they would earn more respect and individual freedom by getting married and having children. The difficulty with this strategy is that the conventional value of Hmong marriage does not correlate with the girls' intentional value and their interest in marriage as a strategy to attain more individual freedom, a concept they had picked up in the American society where they lived. Therefore, when their use of marriage as a strategy was executed within the Hmong culture, where the action was interpreted in accordance to Hmong values, they did get the Hmong status as adults but also the responsibilities that came with it; in practice, this often meant they had gained nothing of what they really wanted. This is because Hmong boys, and of course their parents who the girls moved in with, still acted and thought within the Hmong structure; as exemplified with Bao in the previous chapter, they put several unwanted expectations on the girls. But the intentional value of the action, for the girls, was often found in the reasons mentioned above, such as to attain more freedom to participate in and enjoy the privileges of American society, and so the marriage was often formed on false premises

and was off to a bad start. In American society the girls' actions were interpreted very differently from what the young girls wanted, as the girls were often seen as 'victims of culture' and lost their autonomy also in the meeting with Hmong organizations who were there to 'help them'.

Even though the girls' actions and intentions are Americanized, the premises of their actions are within the Hmong structure, and so the actions are also interpreted in accordance to Hmong conventional values. This makes the strategy seem more short term and less effective than it actually is. Many of the marriages formed by young girls and boys seemed very unstable and turbulent, and I have informants telling me that:

I wish we were boyfriend and girlfriend and not husband and wife.

It is stressful to live with my in-laws, and I can't communicate my frustration to my husband; he won't understand.

I married my husband, not his family.

My husband don't trust me with the money, but he spend it all on smoke and small stuff.

My husband lied and said he was going out with friends; instead he broke into a car and got arrested.

I need space from my in-laws; I have a fridge in my room with a lock on it.

My husband cheats on me all the time; I don't trust him.

If things do not get better, I want a divorce.

An unstable marriage is an unforeseen consequence of the girls' strategy, based on mainly two factors: first, when the girls marry they are pulled back into the Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige structure, and they are expected by their in-laws and the community to behave in the conventional way; this goes against their own intention and their interest, as seen in the previous section about the bride price. Since their husbands are slower to acculturate as a result, I guess, of the male benefits within the Hmong structure, the husband's and the wife's intentions with the marriage also differ and cause conflict. Secondly, teenage marriages are not beneficial within the American society. When children marry children, their relationship, I presume, will be childlike and immature, like the quotes above reflect. The relationship cannot survive on its own financially, since often neither the husband nor the wife have finished high school or

have jobs, and so the young couple is dependent on the husband's parents, which then is another factor drawing them into the Hmong structure.

American society and specifically the organizations working within the Hmong community tend to victimize the young girls and blame the 'culture' for the girls' actions. They do not see the girls' intentions and are therefore not able to help them attain the independence and the autonomy they were trying to achieve. I often experienced the persons working with young mothers to be so concerned with being 'culturally correct', that they were afraid of empowering the girls and fortifying their intention of attaining individual choice, individual freedom and individual opportunity.

Most Hmong marriages formed by young girls and boys are legitimate only within the Hmong culture and structure since they have only gone through the Hmong ceremony and not the American marriage process, and because marriages formed under the age of eighteen are not legal in the U.S. The Hmong divorce statistic in the U.S. is high, and I believe it will stay that way as long as young girls use marriage in the first place to attain their learned American values; because when this strategy fails, divorce will most probably be the next strategy - and again the intentions behind their divorce will not be understood within the Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige structure. So, as long as the young girls put new meaning and intention into conventional rituals and values, they will unfortunately suffer the consequences that come with the transformation of a culture or structure. This will become clear in the following two sections of this chapter, but I will also show how action taken in the form of divorce might be a road to empowerment for women.

## **Rearranging and revaluing relationships through divorce**

"Hmong believe in the family. The family remains the most respected institution today as it was years ago, and couples are encouraged to maintain good marital relationships. They put their family ahead of their individual needs. Hence, divorce is very uncommon" (Thao 1986:82). Contradictory to what Thao writes, the Hmong divorce

rate in the U.S. is steadily rising, and the newly elected president (2004) of the Hmong 18-Council<sup>2</sup>, Paul Kong, said in an interview that: “The number-one issue destroying the Hmong is the high divorce rate. We, the Hmong people, have never seen this problem before. Back in the old country, divorce was a rare occurrence that appeared in extreme situations only” (*Hmong Today*, January 29, 2004). It is interesting how these two men, combined, stress the importance of the family, the downplaying of individual needs and finally the destruction of the Hmong community resulting from divorce. But for whom are the divorce statistics a problem? As illustrated in the previous chapter Hmong patriarchal kinship and marriage structure facilitates male domination and male personal advancements and achievements, and it was probably very hard for a woman in Laos or Thailand to get a divorce. The American society and legal system, on the other hand, are perceived by Hmong men to favor women (Donnelly 1997), and, of whether this is true or not, Hmong women do often initiate divorce in the U.S. But is it the divorce in itself that is the main issue, or is it the fact that men find it hard to deal with women liberating themselves from male domination and definition in relation to male prestige? It seems relevant to ask, therefore, how does a divorce affect the members of a Hmong family?

In *Balinese Worlds* (1993), and as mentioned earlier in this chapter, Barth presents a framework for how to analyze and understand human behavior. Even though his theory is very action oriented, focusing on observed events and how the participants turn them into meaningful acts, I feel that it is relevant to the context of my fieldwork even though my information was mainly gathered through long unstructured conversations *about* events. While Barth stresses the importance of observing what kind of keys the participants use to interpret the ongoing event, I often had the advantage of being told what keys and what frames the particular event was interpreted with(in). This means that I will focus more on the interpretation of my informants, than that of the others involved. Through knowledge of the context and the general situation of the Hmong I feel I can still make generalizations about actions and reactions, and the negotiation, development and defense of the different generational and gendered “cultural stocks”. Barth’s term “cultural stock” seems to be close to Connerton’s term “social memory”,

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<sup>2</sup>The Hmong 18-Council represents the eighteen clans in the U.S, and their role is to mediate between parties when conflicts occur.



as they are both directing a person's actions and interpretations. The difference as I see it is that "social memory" is more, but not completely, static and unchangeable, since it is to a greater degree inscribed in the body as ritualized habits and as knowledge you cannot necessarily explain (Connerton 1989:4-5). A "cultural stock", on the other hand, seems to be more self-motivated and thereby more intentional. We might say that while "social memory" is what makes the Hmong structure slow in changing, agency and action are empowered by the active use of the dynamic and continually changing "cultural stock".

Mayli, eighteen, and Noukou, nineteen, are sisters. They live with their mother and two brothers in Minneapolis. Their parents are divorced, because their mother refused to let her husband take a second wife. Mayli said that her father was a very important man, and her mother would have been much more respected if she had stayed and accepted the situation; instead she left her patriarchal husband, their Mormon faith and California and brought her children back to Minneapolis where she had her relatives, who were traditional and shamanistic. Starting over in Minneapolis was hard on their mother, who was blamed for the divorce, and it was difficult for the children who were no longer a part of their father's family to whom they had been very close. Mayli told me that they did not feel wanted in their mother's family, especially the girls. We are Yang's living in a Lee family, and that, she said, is not very good. Even though the effects of the divorce, in the forms of feeling uprooted, unwanted and displaced, were hard to deal with for the girls, they soon learned that it was also a window of opportunity - their mother had started to think outside of the Hmong box, Mayli said, and communication and negotiation became easier. The mother's upbringing changed from raising her girls to be good wives, so as to make their future husbands proud, to teaching them that they have to take care of themselves and to put their own happiness before anything else.

Both the sisters claimed to be unconventional, modern Hmong girls - they were continually balancing and negotiating traditional Hmong and American values, being given the opportunity to do so by their mother's choice to break the cycle of Hmong prestige and marriage and kinship structure - placing them in something that can be compared to a liminal phase.

In addition to being betwixt and between (Turner 1967), the girls told me that they had

the advantage of having relatives on their mother's side who, even though they advocated traditional values, had a modern and educated outlook on the world, so Noukou said, when you are doing something, they understand why you are doing it. Both the girls pointed out the advantages they had now that they were not living with their father, and Noukou was more specific.

Maybe I have the advantage that my dad is not living with us, and that kind of gives me the advantage of doing all the things that I'm doing right now, and to have accomplished all the things I have accomplished until now. If my dad was still living with us right now he would keep me under a lot of restrictions actually, like I think I wouldn't be able to actually be with my boyfriend the way I am right now either, I think he would really disapprove of it; he made comments before of how he disapproves of it, because he isn't Hmong; my boyfriend isn't Hmong, and he made comments about it before, and I think if he was living here I would be under a lot more restrictions, like I know I would be able to go to school and everything, but I think with my social life, I wouldn't have such a good social life if my dad was here.

For Mayli and Noukou choosing to go to college was easy, and they had plenty of encouragement from their mother, who said they should take advantage of all the opportunities they had here in the U.S, but for Mayli it was a dilemma to choose where to go to college. The American and the individual influence in her wanted to experience something new, and to move to a new place, but the Hmong in her wanted to stay close to her mother so that she could be there to help her if anything should happen. Also, even though the sisters were encouraged to strive for a higher education, at least Mayli felt pressured or encouraged by her father and other relatives to get married. Noukou said that she did not feel the same pressure, but did feel the disapproval of her choices when it came to boys, and that therefore she would always talk to her father about her academic goals and her achievements, avoiding the topic of dating in general. Fighting the Hmong expectations of them as females, both the girls dated non-Hmong boys and had no plans to get married in the near future. They both hated the patriarchal structure in the Hmong community, and felt that they could not achieve an equal relationship with a Hmong man. Neither their mother nor their father, or other relatives favored the fact that they were dating non-Hmong boys, which made it harder for them to do so, but as Americans, Mayli said, they could date whoever they wanted:

My mother has always wanted us, as much as she understands that we are

not going to, or that I don't want to, she has always told me that, you know, a Hmong guy should be who you marry because they understand your background; they understand your history and they understand why you are the way you are, but at the same time society is telling me that it is ok to date, you know, anyone, as long as you love each other, yeah, go ahead, go for it. But it is hard to do that when your own mother doesn't really approve of it; I mean at the time she didn't approve of it, but now she's ok with it. So I think that is one of the biggest things, because I'm like: it's ok, you know, this is a new world, and it is ok for me to do this. But yet, my mom doesn't want me to and, you know, mother knows best, but sometimes you just have to kind of like stop, I'm like: what do I want, and how is it gonna help me in the future; I'm not gonna live my life and make my, you know, family happy every single time. But it is still a conflict, because I don't know what I want to do still, and I don't know if it is best to keep on dating him and have my whole family disapprove, or to have the whole Hmong people disapprove, or to say: it's ok, because society says it is ok for me to date people outside my race, because we're a melting pot, you know.

The sisters continually negotiated with their parents and relatives when it came to dating and marriage, but they were lucky not to be confined to the home like many Hmong girls are; they went out on the weekends; they spent time with friends; they worked and attended several activities. Still, they knew when to give into demands from the family and the Hmong structure; Mayli said that she never had any difficulties with speaking her mind, but when she got lectured by her grandfather she had to listen, she said, and not speak. Noukou, on the other hand, challenged the Hmong structure and the age and gender hierarchy when talking back to her father:

When he lectures me and I have a response back to him, he has always had a problem with that, because Hmong parents think it is a sign of disrespect if I don't sit there and just listen to him, but I have to talk back. And it is not really talking back; I just voice my opinion, or ask; 'Why dad?', but that is a disrespect to him. And that is a thing that we have always had problems with, that he can't accept that I have an opinion too, and that I had something to say. I just couldn't control my self and keep my mouth shut. But my dad knows me now, and he knows that that is the kind of girl that I am, so he is learning to accept it.

Since their grand-father, on their mother's side, was a man with a very good reputation, they were both afraid of damaging his name - even though they had no 'real', in the Hmong sense, connection to it. Their father's name, on the other hand, was not such a

big concern, as he was living in a different state; they did not belong to his family anymore, and they seldom spoke with him. Mayli said:

You don't want to ruin the name; that's just a big deal. I don't know why it is such a big deal; I don't really understand why, but my dad, where we used to live, my dad was very well known, and on my mom's side my grand-pa is very well known. The thing with the Hmong people is that it is a very small population, and so everyone knows everyone. It is a lot of pressure with my grand-pa, on my mother's side of the family, the whole family, because the men are very good men, and I'm very proud of how they have turned out and everything, and so my grand-father's name is very good right now; it all goes back to him; it kind of bugs me, but it all goes back to him, which is, you know, great, and that includes the children as well, that includes me. I'm a part of my mom, who is part of him - that's how they look at it, and there is a lot of pressure there, so I try my best not to disgrace anyone, and I try my best. I don't know how big of an impact it will even be, but just the slightest impact - I don't want to ruin his name. And with my dad's side, I don't know how much of an influence I have on that side anymore, just because I'm with my mother now, but the thing is, my dad is still very proud of me, like I have gone to DC twice to go study, and I've had a lot of opportunities, and every time I go back to see him my cousins are like: 'Oh I heard you did this, and I heard you did that'. And I would be like: 'How did you hear about that?', and they would say that my dad told them, which is nice, because emotions are like a no-show in Hmong families. And it is good that my siblings and us have not become like gangsters or prostitutes or anything like that, because that is what is assumed when we go off with our mother; that if there is not enough fatherly figure, that we will turn bad or anything, but we haven't; we are still perfectly fine, which makes my dad look good, in the end, so it kind of goes back to him. And that is how it is, everything you do kind of goes back to somebody else.

Noukou on the other hand had a more laid back attitude:

I used to think that was really important; it is important, but I don't make it a priority to me now; it's more like, it's me now, and I'm gonna do my own thing, and whoever supports me will be there, and if they're not, then you know, that's ok. Those who love me will be there and those who don't love me won't be there. So it is important, but personally to me, it is important; I would never want to give my family a bad reputation anyways, but, the thing is, I've come to realize that I have to do things for myself, just because I've had that whole huge family conflict with my parents separating, and I've realized so much about my identity and being a Hmong girl, and I'm just like, I'm sick of it and I want to do things for myself, and as long as my mom supports me and I have two brothers and a sister to support me, then it is fine, that's all the people that I need.

To show respect for their mother's family and relatives they also attended shamanistic rituals, even though they were both Christians, and they did not find it especially conflicting.

When we lived in California we were Christians, and we went to church and everything like that; and my mom's family they all live in Minnesota, here, and my dad's family all live in California. So when we moved here my mom's family are very religious, you know; they are strong shamanism; they believe in all the, every thing, to the last little drop. And when we came here, I'm not saying that I don't believe in it, but I respect it, so whenever they have anything, I go to it; I attend it, the ceremonies thing. I attend it; I don't, I guess for me personally right now, I feel like I'm a Christian. I respect their culture, but I don't necessarily believe in everything, you know, I'll kind of go with it for now, because we have to respect our elders, that's a huge Hmong thing, so we attend; we respect what they do, but I personally don't believe in it. It was hardest on my brothers, since they were men and had to participate more.

Marriage, kinship and male prestige are the expressed building blocks in the Hmong community, and it therefore seemed logical when Paul Kong, president (2004) of the Hmong-18 Council stated that divorce was the number one factor destroying the Hmong community. With the examples of Mayli and Noukou I wanted to explore some of the effects of their mother's divorce, and I would like to change Paul Kong's word 'destroy' with the word 'transform'. Divorce is probably one of the major reasons why the Hmong community is experiencing a transformation in the relationship between men and women, between kinship and marriage and between men and prestige. When the sisters' mother divorced her husband because she did not want her husband to take a second wife, she simultaneously made the statement that her happiness was more important than her husband's prestige, that her individuality was more important than the family. By leaving she opposed the fact that she did not have a say in a matter deeply affecting her existence, and she opposed the hierarchical gender and kinship structure demanding her to exist only in relation to her husband. She made the statement that the established Hmong gender relations are not acceptable, and she taught this to her children whom she had taken with her. The immediate reactions to the divorce were in accordance with the Hmong structure, where the father could continue his life with his prestige intact, while the mother got disgraced in the community. The unintended or unexpected consequences of the divorce were multiple.

After the divorce, the mother moved back to her relatives with all of her children, an act which is not very popular in the Hmong community. Lee writes that “Daughters who marry out of their group of origin are seen as belonging to the lineage of their husbands. Even if some of them may become divorced or widowed and return to live with their families of birth, their physical presence does not entitle them to re-enter the spiritual world of the parent’s lineage” (Lee). Her children will, therefore, also belong to the lineage of her husband, and it is therefore unusual for sons, if they are grown, to go with their mother in a divorce situation. This particular family situation shows that the Hmong kinship and marriage structure can be more flexible than commonly expressed. When I talked to the sisters about attending shamanistic rituals, Noukou said that it was worst for her brothers, trying to balance their Christian faith with the attending of rituals for the ancestors - since they, as men, were expected to participate. The brothers’ participation in rituals concerning their mother’s lineage could only mean two things, I believe: one, that they changed their clan affiliation, or two, that they were simply included despite of belonging to a different lineage. I don’t believe the brothers changed their clan affiliation, since Mayli said they were Yang’s living with a Lee family, which could possibly mean that the relationship between marriage and kinship is not as absolute as it is claimed to be, that it can actually be reinterpreted or negotiated.

The fact that the sisters still had contact with their father was also unusual, and they pointed this out to me themselves. Hmong fathers, I got the impression, often withdrew from their daughters when they were old enough to get married, as if uncomfortable with the situation. Noukou expressed how different their lives would be if they had lived with their father and also expressed how different her communication with her father was, compared to that of her mother. Noukou said that if she lived with her father she would not be able to do or accomplish the things she had done so far, that she would not be allowed to date her boyfriend the way that she was now. That means that she would not be allowed to date a non-Hmong boy; she would not be allowed to spend time with anyone unattended and outside of the home, and preferably she would be married by now. When I asked Mayli to describe her father with one word, she said ‘regret’. She regretted her father being so traditional, making it impossible for them to have a real relationship. Noukou on the other hand reacted to her father’s traditional ways by opposition; by discussing with him and questioning him she challenged both the Hmong

age and gender hierarchy. Both girls often chose to talk to their father about their educational achievements, since they knew this was a more accepted topic than their dating habits or social life, and even though he had stated his disapproval of the sisters dating non-Hmong boys, he too avoided the topic, as he believed it was their mothers job to talk to them about that, and also their mother's fault if they made the wrong choice. We might say that the topic of education was the father's and the sisters' communicative compromise that made their relation possible - it was their "lowest common denominator" (Hylland Eriksen 1998). The Hmong community has become more accepting of girls pursuing a higher education, although it too challenges the Hmong gender and prestige structure, and in this case both the father and the sisters can use and benefit from the girls' academic results: the father in the form of a better reputation; the girls in the form of personal empowerment and of advancement in American society. The use of a neutral common denominator like education and Noukou's challenge of her father's authority are perhaps two different strategies intended to both preserve a personal relationship and to slowly change the rigidity of the Hmong structure, a structure they experienced destroyed their parents' marriage.

In the aftermath of the divorce the relationship between men and prestige was reinterpreted. The sisters, although concerned with their family's reputation, seemed to have redefined what constitutes a bad reputation. On one side they are afraid of damaging their grand-father's reputation; on the other side, they did not consider their unconventional and modern, in Hmong eyes, behavior as damaging his reputation. Educating themselves, dating non-Hmong boys, spending unsupervised time outside of the home both day and night, not doing chores at home and not planning marriage are all typical bad girl behaviors, as expressed to me by other informants. Still Mayli and Noukou are proud of their accomplishments, and they see nothing wrong with having the freedom that they have - and using it. I believe the reason for this is their combined and balanced Hmong and American cultural stock. This does not mean that they do not find the two social structures conflicting, as Mayli exemplified when describing her dilemma about dating a non-Hmong boy, but it means, perhaps, that they more easily can justify their non-Hmong actions by using their Americanized cultural stock. The fact that their mother had stepped outside of the Hmong structure and that they have a modern and educated family, who were willing to compromise, also made it easier for

the sisters to defend their Americanized actions, and shows that cultural patterns are far from static and unchanging.

As shown, there is a continual negotiation between the sisters and their mother, father and other relatives - a negotiation I did not see as clearly in other Hmong families. The advancement and difficulty of the negotiation seem to vary according to age difference, like with Mayli and her grand-father, and according to gender differences; Noukou pointed out to me that the conflict with her father was much more static than that with her mother. While the relationship between the sisters and their father suffered from lack of communication and few common denominators, their relationship with their mother was a more understanding one, based on openness and mutual respect as well as a more similar frame of mind. I believe that the different degree of success in the girls' negotiation is relative to the span between the participants individual 'cultural stocks', meaning that the sisters' family on their mother's side seemed to be more inclined than their father to use the same keys as the sisters when interpreting an action or an event (Barth 1993:157). Still, the challenge of operating in a context where two different social structures or cultures are relevant is complex. In such a situation there are often few shared preconditions or agreements on conventional values, and the intentions behind an act and the reference keys with which to interpret it (Barth 1993) are therefore not always understood or accepted.

This section has shown how actions taken by a woman in the first generation can empower her daughters in the second generation by initiating a break from the male dominated kinship, marriage and prestige structure and therefore making it easier for her daughters to develop more independently. In the next section of this chapter I will show how a woman in the second generation unexpectedly discovers her strength and selfhood by divorcing her husband, despite of being disgraced in the Hmong community.

## **Achieving individual empowerment through divorce**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Yee was a divorced woman in her early twenties. She got pregnant when she was nineteen, and was divorced by the age of twenty-one.



Yee had tried to hold her marriage together even though she was being mistreated, because she was brought up to please, because she didn't want to fail in anything and because they had a daughter together. When she finally decided to end it she was blamed by both her family and his family, as illustrated earlier on.

Yee was a good friend of Xiong, and I often meet the two of them together at the organization where Xiong volunteered. My impression of both of them was that they were strong women who did not want to be victimized; rather, they saw their experiences as assets they could grow from and use to help others. Our conversations often got heated as both Xiong and Yee were very vocal and very engaged, and this conversation when Yee told me about her divorce was no different. As a married woman Yee was expected to put her own needs aside, and to instead encourage her husband in his doings:

You know my in-laws, speaking of when I was married, they did **not** want me to go to school; they did not want me to go to school. Me and Meng, when we were dating, we were both in college, and you know, spring semester came, and he decided to drop out of school, and they were really, really furious at him, but I just continued to go to school, and so when we got married they expected me to **not** go to school anymore; they were like: I want you to work, and I was pregnant too, and they wanted me to quit going to school, and support Meng while he goes to school, because it is more beneficial that way. And I was so upset; I was just like, I didn't say this to them, but I was complaining to, like, my inner friends' circle; it was just like, you know what? he had his chance at school, and if he didn't do well in school I don't know why you had to take me out of school and put him back in school because he's a guy. And you know, I did really good in school...it is just so stereotypical; you are supposed to sacrifice your needs for your husband's needs.

Even though Yee felt pressured to give up school, she refused to quit and registered, with a lot of guilt, she said, for new classes - resulting in her mother-in-law being very upset and angry. As described in the previous chapter, Yee said how important it is that your in-laws like you; otherwise they will break you, and so it goes without saying that Yee's relationship with her in-laws, especially after this, was not joyful. After the divorce from Meng she continued going to school and finished her two-year degree and kept on pursuing a bachelor's degree. And now, Yee said:

I'd like to say that she is embarrassed now; she is embarrassed of what I have

accomplished. I don't think she expected me to go this far, and every now and then I see her, and, I don't know, she kind of avoids me, because she is embarrassed that I made it this far and her son didn't make it this far, and so she has this grudge against me, but I don't care, I just smile and wave.

In her marriage and in her relationship with her in-laws Yee felt that her needs were not important, but still she managed to take action and empower herself by going against Hmong cultural and structural rules. Eventually this led to her divorce, and even though breaking out of her marriage was not what she initially wanted she experienced that even though she became disgraced in the Hmong community by being a divorcée, an unintended consequence was the realization that as a divorced woman she had much more power and freedom than when she was married, and at the same time she did not have the same 'image to portray', which meant she could be herself. She said about being married and after:

When I got married, I couldn't be me, you know, even around my husband I was like, I could never speak my mind. I swear I was **so** depressed, because I could never communicate with him, because everything that I wanted to say to him, everything that I felt, I had to like, play it off, it's nothing, like: 'I'm not mad', and you are ready to kill him, you're feeling like: 'God why is he doing this to me'. And I was just so depressed, because I couldn't, I couldn't show my feelings, and I'm not supposed to be angry; I'm not supposed to have any kind of feelings. I swear, when I was married I was just so mad, but I could never show it, or they were like: 'We didn't know you were mad', because I'm not supposed to show it; you're not supposed to know that I'm mad. But, yeah, I think for me, I always had an image to portray, and you know I didn't like that because I felt like I was lying to myself a lot, lying to myself, lying to people, about how I feel. I mean, sometimes it is good, because you don't want to create a scene, but sometimes it is like: 'Gosh I wish someone, I wish I could just get out of this'. And so I guess that is why **I like me now**, really, because I can voice my feelings, and I can voice my opinions, and it would count now! Whereas when I was married, it didn't really count because I was supposed to hold it in anyways, and when I was a teenager under my parents, they don't care anyways too so, being who I am today; it gives me a voice.

The need for individualism and recognition based on personal achievements, especially for young women, seems to be a big difference between the first and second Hmong generation. During my fieldwork period I was surprised to hear of so many stories where Hmong mothers had not been supportive of their daughters' individual wishes or needs,

and instead encouraged them to conform to the kinship and marriage systems and the male prestige structure where recognition is relational to their father or husband. Like Phoua, in the foregoing chapter, many very traditional Hmong mothers in the first generation are so used to the male prestige structure and domination that it has become natural for them to think within those frames. Bourdieu (2000) explores male domination over females through symbolic violence, a soft and imperceptible kind of violence, unnoticed by the dominated and implemented through symbolic channels of communication, prestige notification or agreed upon principles (Bourdieu 2000:10). The social construction of gender differences has become naturalized and thereby accepted as nature's way of dividing the two genders. Bourdieu writes that the reason for this duality of doxa, the fact that this domination is mostly accepted and seldom challenged is to be found in the fact that it is being taught through the school and the state, where the principles of domination, practiced by all, are developed (Bourdieu 2000:9, 12). In the case of the Hmong we can translate schools and state with clan and kinship structure, since they are the dominating institutions with equal influential power. Therefore, when young women like Yee seek change and a redefinition of her female role, these are the institutions she must fight. Influenced by American values and ideas of personal freedom and growth, Yee realized that she could not easily obtain what she wanted by staying in her marriage. As with Xiong, Yee had to be defined out, of or into the margins of, the Hmong structure to realize herself, but where Xiong found a way to still be accepted, Yee will probably, regardless of her new won freedom, experience stigmatization as a divorced woman. I often heard from young married girls that they were not allowed by their husbands to spend time with divorced friends, because they were a bad influence, or, as Thao writes "Divorced women are thought to possess certain moral defects..." (Thao 1986:82). We might say that the difficulties that Yee will experience are a result of her having a different and more Americanized "cultural stock" (Barth 1993) than more traditional Hmong in the first generation, and some young people in the second generation who are influenced by the "cultural stock" of their parents. Since the kinship and marriage structures and the male prestige structure are so dominant in the Hmong community, equal to the dominant view of schools and the state in our own society, change might be a slow process. Still Yee says:

Being divorced actually gives me my independence, I swear, I think it was

Nou who told me that divorced women are like men, you know; they actually have a say in everything. Although they are looked down upon, they actually can say things; they actually can have a voice and an image, because before you are married you really never have a say in things, and when you do get married you are just Mrs. so-and-so. When you are divorced, even though you are so-and-so's ex-wife they don't know him anymore, so you establish your own identity. Also when you are single you are so-and-so's daughter or so-and-so's niece or whatever, but until you are divorced, or until you have established your own identity, you are just someone else's thing, you're not ever your own person, but as for me right now, I feel that I'm my own person; whenever they call to do family gatherings, they know how to call me too, I'm not so-and-so's wife, or so-and-so's daughter, **I'm Yee.**

Yee has taken a step out of the male dominated Hmong culture, empowered by the new society she is living in and her education, but it is not necessarily the easiest choice.

What Yee has done, and what makes her persevere through the hardships, is to define herself differently than the Hmong standards, as defined by the male prestige structure, by that she brings a new contextual meaning to Hmong conceptual values. This is a brave move. I heard of several young girls who could not bring themselves to take the same step, or who could simply not put their mind outside the male dominated doxa and therefore believed they had to abide by the consequences created by men. For instance, True who was only fifteen when she got married, the Hmong way - which is not legally binding in the U.S. - wanted a divorce from her unfaithful husband when she was twenty-one. They (True, her husband and her in-laws) went to the elders who told her that she could not get a divorce, and if she demanded it she had to pay her husband and his family \$12,000. True, who did not have that much money, cried to her sister and said she felt she had no one on her side; still she stayed in her unhappy marriage. If True had dared to define herself differently she could have left her husband, and there would be nothing he, or the elders, could do about it. She would probably be disgraced in the Hmong community, like Yee was, but she might be able still to find personal happiness if she used a different cultural stock available to her through the knowledge, concepts and values of American society of which she was a citizen.

It must be a difficult task for a woman in a man-dominated culture to try to create new functional values on old categories (Sahlins 1981); before these new values become established or create new material patterns (Barth 1993) through the individual actions of other women, they will exist, I believe, only in the margins of the old and powerful

social structure. Still, young Hmong women are on a transformational path, and the last section in this chapter will show both some of the dilemmas of the generational conflict visible in the U.S. and how the Americanization of the young girls and their increased new and differentiated knowledge push male domination into a corner.

## **The beginning of a new structural state?**

One of my first experiences with the Hmong generational conflict was at a community meeting, staged by non-profit organizations working within the Hmong community, to talk about discipline and the challenge of raising children in the U.S. There were the more representatives from the organizations present than from the Hmong community, probably because the Hmong in general guard their privacy and like to find solutions without meddling from outsiders.

One of the women at the meeting was crying and said that she did not know how to raise her children anymore; they went out without telling her where they were going, and they didn't call her. On top of being worried she missed her children, and she did not know how far she could go in disciplining them. If she hit her children the children would threaten to call the police. She said that the roles had changed after they got to the U.S.; here, the children were in control of the parents and not the other way around.

A father, also attending the meeting, had a thirteen-year-old son who would break windows when he did not get his way, and he did not go regularly to school. He was worried that his son might be using drugs but was afraid to call the police to get help; his son was stronger than he was and could hit him, he said.

Several parents that I talked with during my fieldwork found it hard to discipline their children and felt they did not get the respect they thought they were entitled to, as their children would not listen to what they were saying. Since the sons were the future of the household they tried not to be as strict with them, and when it came to the daughters, the mothers were blamed if something went wrong; sometimes, they said, it could lead to divorce. The biggest fear of the parents, which I discussed in the previous chapter, was that their daughter would get pregnant before she got married, because, if she did,

it would be “a big problem for the parents”.

Hmong parents I assume interpret their own situation according to what it used to be like in Laos and Thailand; in fact a community leader told me that during the first ten years he spent in the U.S., from 1976-1985, the Hmong community did not have any problems with their children, because the children listened to their parents and did what their parents wanted them to do. Today, he said:

They change, young people smoking, go out; even parents say don't go out late at night, they break the rule, go out, never come back home. After gone a couple of nights, they come back, they go for a week, a month, two months (laughing), three months; they don't come back home. They live like that. For our culture and society, when we see our children like this, parents cry in home; parents almost die in home. We never face any person like that in our life; why my children disappear for one month?...so terrible for Hmong family

I will assume that the reason Hmong parents did not have any issues with their children the first ten years they were in the U.S. is because the children had not reached their teens yet, and the two generations still used the same language, the same frame of mind and the same keys (Barth 1993) when communicating and when interpreting each other's actions. Then as the children grew up and started school, they got exposed to the American language and society to a greater extent than their parents, who were more stuck in their old ways. The old man told me that he believed it was the easiness in American society that lured the children away from their families and their responsibilities. Several Hmong parents stated to me that their children only thought about themselves and the present; they did not think about their families or the future. While members of the second generation had many thoughts about the reasons behind their conflicts with their parents, including their own role in it, members of the first generation did not express to me any insight into *their* role in their daily conflicts with their children<sup>3</sup>. Today, the social memory of parents who came to the country in their teens or early twenties is very different from the social memory of children who were born and raised in the U.S. The two generations do not only bring different capacities to their encounters; they interpret each other's actions with different cultural stocks and keys (Barth 1993), and so understand the same situation very differently. Since parents

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<sup>3</sup>It should be mentioned again that I talked to far more members of the second generation than of the first generation.

and their children often do not find common denominators (Hylland Eriksen 1998) of how to communicate, the results are often dysfunctional and unequal relations and interaction rituals. These dysfunctional relationships and the fact that the first and second generation do not understand each other and, thereby talk past each other, often lead to revolts by the second generation.

## **Xiong and Yee rebel against their fathers**

All the restrictions put on Xiong, illustrated in the last chapter, made her rebel against her parents in more ways than getting married to a white American; the pregnancy and marriage were the last resort. She said that in high school she often felt the need to lie to her parents to achieve the freedom that she wanted, and even though she resented lying, and resented being made the “bad guy”, she felt she did not have a choice:

I think that is one of the number one problems that I ran into; you know, it was like, it's not that I wanted to lie to my parents, cause my parents always asked me: 'Why do you guys lie to us so much? you know, why do you, you guys want to hurt us, don't you!' And I was like: 'No we don't, you guys put us in this situation where we have to lie to you, you know, because we want to have fun too; we are kids for God's sake, you know'. We want to go play; we want to have friends; we want to hang out and stuff like that. Like my parents too you know, it's like, I wanted to go play with my friends after school, because we all wanted to go play, you know; it was just kind of like, ok I want to do that, **but I couldn't do that**, you know; so during school I took that time where they thought I was at school, to go and do something else, because, I hung out with my friends during **that** time, because, at the end, you know, we had to go home too, because it was just like that; no one could go out and stuff like that.

The knowledge of how the American society works gave the young girls the advantage they needed to trick and lie to their parents. Yee told me that when she wanted to do something after school she lied to her parents and told them she had to take a test. Since Hmong parents are often not fluent in English and many do not know entirely how the school system works (Yang 1997), they cannot know whether their children are telling them the truth or not. Hang writes that in the Twin Cities the truancy rate is much higher for Hmong girls than for Hmong boys (70/30 in court cases), and that two of the reasons why girls are truant are that they want to ‘play’, and that, when they are

already considered “bad girls” it is easier to continue in the same track instead of trying to become “good”, which is almost impossible (Hang 1997).

Because of language issues, mistrust and bad communication, many Hmong parents, and especially fathers, resort to violence when trying to get respect and when disciplining their children. Xiong came to a turning point when she no longer could accept her father’s authority in form of violence, and so she fought back:

When I lived with my parents it was horrible, you know; it was like, we never communicated really, and my dad, you know, he would try to get through to us, and he tried to get through to us by force all the time, you know; either he would threaten us, that he would hit us, you know, or he would, you know, bam, hit us; it was just kind of like, when we were younger, you know, that scared us, you know, when he was like threatening us and stuff; yeah it scared us. We didn’t go play because of that, but as we got older, it was just something you got used to, you know; you were just kind of like, whatever, you know. If you’re gonna threaten me, if you’re gonna hit me, then just get it over with. I think, actually, I was the one out of my siblings that fought back, you know, because my dad would like hit us with his belt you know. I was really, like I had a temper problem too, you know, and I got it from my dad of course. You know, like one time, I remember, my cousin came up, and she wanted us to go out you know, because she was from California, and she wanted us to show her around, you know. And my dad and them, they wanted to go play with her instead, you know, and we were like no, we want to show her around, because she is leaving, and then we got into this big old argument and my dad was like, he took out his belt, and he like hit me, and I like grabbed the belt, you know, and I was like hitting him back and then he was like, and then my uncle and them came in, and they were all like: ‘How can you hit your dad back, he’s your father!’ And I was like, don’t hit me because if you hit me, I’m gonna defend myself, you know, and then I wouldn’t let go of his belt, you know, and I was holding on to it, and he was pulling it; it was just, it was horrible; it was like terrible. And then, so he left after that, but then after that he actually didn’t any more, you know, he would threaten us, but he never did it anymore. Because to me I was just coming to a point where I was like; don’t do that to me anymore; it is embarrassing, because I’m older now, you know, and I’m gonna do something back, you know. I’m not that little kid that sat in the corner, you know, and cried when I was in trouble, you know, I got angry about it now, you know. It didn’t make anything easier after that, you know; the communication didn’t get any better, but, you know, things didn’t get as physical any more. I was, to me, it kind of makes me laugh, you know, all those movies - we always make fun of like Full House, have you seen that? Because they sit down, and they talk to their dad, and in the end it is always happy, while I’m like: ‘Screw that’; no one talks like that to their dad!



Yee said that she had done the same to her father;

I did that to my dad too; he didn't whip me or anything, but I actually stood up to him and said; I'm not gonna take this. And you know, he knew; he knew how to feel embarrassed, and he knew that us as kids we have kind of an authority over him too, as well, that it works both ways, that like, even though he can make us feel embarrassed and even though he can make us feel ashamed and regretful, we can turn the tables on him. I think at that point he just stopped doing all those horrible things

Xiong and Yee did what many of my informants eventually did; they challenged the Hmong age and gender hierarchy. For Xiong it came to a point where she felt she was too old to be disciplined with violence, and so she hit back. The cultural inappropriateness of her action is indicated by the shocked uncle and aunt who walked into the situation and voiced that Xiong was in no position to retaliate against her father. The generational conflict between Xiong, Yee and their parents can in part be attributed to the divisive view of prestige. For the parents the age and gender hierarchy entitles them to respect, and the children's respectful and compliant action is a means to prestige in the Hmong community. As explained in the previous chapter, raising good, shy, quiet and proper wives-to-be is one of the main prestige criteria for Hmong parents, especially mothers; with actions like the one Xiong took, many parents fail this criteria. For young Hmong girls the prestige criteria within the Hmong structure feels more like prison rules; and being a 'good' Hmong girl feels very unachievable if they want to balance Hmong and American values. I found that young married girls who judge themselves after Hmong standards suffer from bad self-esteem and self-image, as they seemed to feel they could never be good enough. Girls like Xiong and Yee on the other hand fought to change the conventional gender view in their families, because as Americanized youth they wanted that which brought prestige among their peers; the right clothes, hanging out with their friends, dating boys - simply, they wanted to live the lives of average American teenagers. The different perception of right and wrong behavior was a huge and often escalating conflict between my informants and their parents, or their in-laws if they were married. Yang (1997) writes that adult, older men have a particularly hard time adjusting to their lives or accepting their new role in the U.S. There is a common knowledge, he writes, that "The traditional male role of decisionmaker is increasingly devalued as children seek more independence.

Furthermore, since youth often serve as intermediaries between adults and mainstream institutions because of their language skills, this again reverses traditional power relationships” (Yang 1997:1). At one of the mom support groups I attended regularly during my fieldwork period, one of the girls told me that she often had to help her mother-in-law find phone numbers and make phone calls, as the mother-in-law could not speak English. A different girl told me that she often helped her father-in-law with paperwork, or she did until her mother-in-law accused her of stealing from his paycheck. She told her father-in-law she did not want to help him anymore, but when she did her own husband got mad at her and said; “Why did you tell him that; it was his wife who blamed you!” The conflict seems to be present at several levels. Hmong men do not like it when their decision making power is challenged, but mothers-in-law are also losing prestige and status when their daughters-in-law can perform tasks which they cannot - tasks that concern the household, which is traditionally the domain of the mother-in-law. There is also a conflict between young wives and their husbands, as the second-generation wives will not as easily settle into their conventional roles, but expect more. The constant friction both between generations and in the young marriages led to both early marriage and divorce, as young girls sought to empower themselves.

## Summing up

My aim has been, in this chapter, to show how there is a continuous and reciprocal movement between more or less forced cultural patterns and structures - like the Hmong marriage, kinship and prestige structures - and the inventive new practices within these structures. This dialectical movement must be seen in relation to the new American context and how the second generation incorporates new meanings, interests and values in these structures.

It is too easy, I believe, to say that Hmong girls in the U.S. get married at an early age because that is what their culture dictates, that since the Hmong got married young when they lived in Laos and Thailand, the young Hmong girls are simply following in their parents’ footsteps. At the same time I do not want to write off the influence of the Hmong structure on the girl’s actions, since the girls operate with a specific conventional

knowledge of and concepts of the relationship between people and things. Still, as shown throughout this chapter, the two generations' different circumstances, their differential evaluation of their context and the conflicts that follow seem to have led to the beginning of a new era with new functional values imprinted on old categories (Sahlins 1981:68).

Through looking at the girl's actions and their intentions behind their actions I have shown that the girl's use of Hmong cultural patterns is filled with a new meaning based on their differentiated interest in the specific cultural pattern, like marriage, bride price or divorce as an instrumental means to an end. Because of their exposure to American society the young girls have developed a cultural stock or an understanding of the Hmong cultural patterns that is different from its conceptual meaning within the context of the Hmong structure or community. This is the core of the generational conflict, since the girls actions and use of specific cultural patterns are different from the conventional organization of and the parents' understanding of the same cultural patterns.

The actions taken by young Hmong girls, or Hmong women in general, have the power to influence and eventually change the male dominated Hmong structure and cultural patterns; when shifting the contents or meaning of a cultural pattern they also revalue the relationships between participants in the social order (Sahlins 1981). This means in practice that if young Hmong women do not want their marriage to symbolize a union between clans, but rather their rebellion against male oppression and restriction, and they act accordingly, this will affect the relationship between marriage, kinship and prestige. If young women refuse to interpret the bride price as a transfer of their rights from one family to another, but rather see it as a symbolic protection of their happiness, this will again influence the relationship between marriage, kinship and prestige. When divorce is imputed not with disgrace but with empowerment and individualism for women, this will also affect the relationship between marriage, kinship and prestige. Through changing the connections between marriage, kinship and prestige Hmong women will redefine the relationship between men and women and between young and old. This process, though, will not only move in one direction, since structural transformation also involves structural reproduction. As Sahlins so cleverly wrote:

Powered by disconformities between conventional values and intentional values, between intersubjective meanings and subjective interests, between

symbolic sense and symbolic reference, the historical process unfolds as a continuous and reciprocal movement between the practice of the structure and the structure of the practice (Sahlins 1981:72)

## Chapter 6

### Summary and Final Remarks



Fieldwork is simultaneously an attempt to comprehend the interlock between and among the repeated and the unique, the determined and the improvised, the propulsions of ongoing contests, the trajectories of ambition and submission, the dynamic factors in the organization of organizations (Moore 1994:362)

This thesis has been a portrayal of an ongoing conflict between men and women within and across the first and second generation Hmong in the U.S. I have presented several levels of interaction, and also how different dimensions of time and place influence the present moment and the actions, experiences and interpretations of my informants.

First, there is a constant and multifaceted adjustment process between the Hmong as a refugee group and the American society: a continuous battle between two hegemonies

incorporating different rules and value systems. The problematic nature of refugees or immigrants bringing and executing cultural patterns within a new context is a highly relevant topic in every country receiving a steady flow of immigrants and refugees.

Second, I have shown how this adjustment process is affected by the diffusion of knowledge, ideas and values between the two hegemonies and how it creates a visible negotiation about individual autonomy between Hmong men and women. Every society has its own expression of how sexuality is ordered into cultural patterns (like kinship and marriage) and how this leads to specific social relations between men and women. I have shown how male domination within these sex/gender systems (Rubin 1975) and the unequal relationships that follow from them are not inevitable but follow from social organization. In a new context where the social organization is forced to change, it is possible to observe how the relationships between men and women might be changed accordingly through negotiation and agency.

Third, I have illustrated several continual and situational negotiations and conflicts between the Hmong first and second generation, and their different outcomes. These conflicts, which are in reality a defense (by the first generation) and a challenge (by the second generation) of the Hmong gender and age hierarchy, result from the two generations' different degree of integration and acculturation to, and acceptance and understanding of, American society, culture and language. It is also a result of the fact that the Hmong first generation mainly lives in the past, while the second generation dreams about the future. By showing how young Hmong girls give new meaning and put new intentions into old categories and how this might lead to both empowerment and misunderstandings, I illustrated the link between Hmong and American cultural patterns. I have shown in this thesis that understanding how a specific structure is implemented in different contexts and how practice is affected by structure makes it possible also to understand the interconnections and movements between the past, the present and the future.

There is no surprise that the Hmong, or refugees and immigrants in general, continue to relate to and use the cultural patterns and structures they grew up with when arriving in a new country or context. It is impossible to start anew without being instructed by recollections of the past and to place action and objects within a 'system of

expectations' (Connerton 1989). On the other hand, this social memory is often not shared across generations and might cause conflict and misunderstandings. As described in chapter 4, the perseverance of Hmong cultural patterns in the context of American society affects young Hmong girls in several ways. Since they are considered 'other people's women' Hmong girls often feel alienated from their families, and they feel that they are worth and appreciated less than their brothers. Since they are raised by their parents to become good wives Hmong girls are given a restricted repertoire of roles and statuses to play with; this limits their chances of expressing themselves and developing skills unrelated to their status as daughter or wife. When they do get married Hmong women are defined in relation to their husbands, who also have the power to decide how they should live and behave. Their responsibilities as daughters (or wives) restricts them to the home and influences the girls' chances of getting a good education or attending activities outside of the home, as these are not seen as relevant prestige criteria in the Hmong culture. The age and gender hierarchy makes communication difficult between generations and between men and women, and it takes away young women's autonomy, or right to speak up for themselves. In addition the Hmong have certain 'beautification' criteria and practice a strict control of young girls' sexuality, which puts the girls under a lot of pressure as to how they have to look and act. The beautification criteria and the 'holding on' to daughters' sexuality and public exposure are tied to the prestige and reputation of the family, and young girls are held responsible, regardless, for the shaming of the family; this puts them under enormous pressure. The tradition of the bride price makes many girls feel like property, or like a 'thing' their fathers' can 'sell', and it takes away their feeling of selfhood. In addition, women, and men for that matter, who do not conform to cultural expectations by getting married at the appropriate age are considered anomalies and as polluting and are treated accordingly.

It might seem, therefore, that young Hmong girls are bound to reproduce the cultural patterns they are exposed to through the pressures from their parents and the Hmong community and that this can explain why Hmong girls in the U.S. get married and have children at such a young age. However this is not the case, as I see it. The situation I observed was far more complex than what could be explained by the idea of the girls just following tradition. Rather, cultural patterns and social structures were being used and changed at the same time by the young girls, who infused new meanings into old

categories and placed them in new contexts, giving them new actionable references (Sahlins 1981; Moore 1994). These transformational moves not only carried in them the seed to change the cultural patterns and the old categories; they simultaneously carried the seed to change the relationship between women and men, young and old.

In my second analytical chapter I illustrate how structural patterns and individual agency articulate with each other. Young Hmong girls simultaneously use, negotiate and recreate the cultural patterns of kinship and marriage and thereby also negotiate and change the age and gender hierarchy that follows from them. Their actions are intentional, but the change follows both from intended and unintended consequences of particular actions. I illustrated how marriage was given both a new intentional value and a new actionable reference. In Xiong's case this changed the relationship between her and her parents as she was defined as being outside of the Hmong community but could still participate within it. In the case of other Hmong girls, their intentions with marriage as a strategy to attain individual freedom were not understood in the Hmong community, where marriage was interpreted according to conventional values, which often meant that the girls just went from one 'prison' to the next. The traditional bride price is an important part of the Hmong marriage ritual and dictates Hmong gender views since it is tied up with the kinship and prestige structures. When young Americanized girls start to question the symbolic and referential value of the bride price, this is an important step in the negotiation and transformation of conventional Hmong gender values and relations. I illustrated how a slow process of change has been started by young girls who will not accept the cultural fact of being 'owned' by their in-laws and thereby refuse to give into the demands and the expectations that the role of a wife dictates. This, I believe, will lead to a snowball effect on the relationship between kinship, marriage and prestige and the relationships between clans and between men and women, since the cultural patterns are so intertwined. Traditionally, in the Hmong community divorce is a disgraceful and seldom event, and the fault has almost always been put on women. In the context of American society Hmong women have learned that divorce can be a window to freedom, individual happiness and autonomy, despite being disgraced in the Hmong community. I have illustrated how a divorce initiated by a mother in the first generation can empower her daughters in the second generation. The example with Mayli and Noukou shows how girls have many more possibilities when



they grow up on the outskirts of the male dominated kinship, marriage and prestige structure. With Yee I also illustrated that a Hmong woman cannot easily become her own person unless she refuses to be tied to a dominant male. Unintentionally, Yee found that after her divorce she no longer had to wear a 'mask'; she could speak her mind, and people *saw her* and did not just relate to her through her husband.

In the last section of chapter 5 I portray a more general conflict between the first and second generation Hmong, as a result of their different rate of adaptation to American society, their different language skills and the different knowledge about how American society operates. When young women stand up and challenge the age and gender hierarchy it is simultaneously a threat to the Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige system. Young girls do not only oppose the domination they feel by their fathers, but also the domination they feel from their in-laws and their husbands. I wonder if the actions taken by young girls in the second generation and the new actionable references and intentional values they impose on old categories can be the reason for the escalating violence against women in the Hmong community. I would like to end this thesis with some speculations and final remarks: remarks that might widen the scope of the material and theories presented here, that might pose new research questions and that might relate the situation of the Hmong to other patriarchal refugee or immigrant groups settled in a Western country.

In the Hmong community in the Twin Cities there is an escalating presence of runaway girls, rape, domestic violence and divorce (Foo 2002), and I wonder if this is connected to the steadfast effort of Hmong men to hold onto a kinship, marriage and prestige system that is becoming obsolete in the context of American society. I wonder also if these incidents or this unfortunate trend has to do with how Hmong men view and see it as their right to reproduce the principles of sex and gender. In October 2005 the *Star Tribune* presented several articles about the sexual abuse and exploitation of Hmong girls. Young girls who run away from home to escape the traditional responsibilities often become the victims of Hmong gangs who rape them and force them into prostitution. Single Hmong women and their daughters fall prey to male relatives, and some working women are forced to perform sexual services before they receive their paycheck (Foo 2002). Even though sexual assaults on women in general are not

uncommon I wonder if this trend within the Hmong community, in addition to the escalating domestic violence, could be connected to the frustration and threat many Hmong men feel, as they are slower in adapting to American society than Hmong women. More Hmong women than men find work outside of the home and learn English; they more often complete higher education and become professionals, and women more often than before control the family's finances, as AFDC<sup>1</sup> checks are made out in the mother's and not the father's name (Yang 1997). As a result many Hmong men feel they have lost their role as the head or pillars of the family and as breadwinners and that they no longer receive the respect they are entitled to, culturally (Yang 1997). Do Hmong men use sexual violence and violence in general in a desperate attempt to retain power and to 'put women in their place'? Ilean Her states in "Shamed into Silence" in the *Star Tribune* (p. A10, October 11, 2005) "that the broader Hmong community and some of its elders has not been willing to address the problem". Instead the Hmong community will protect the males accused for the offence and blame the victim who is often forced to marry the man who raped her, who is shunned and stigmatized in the community and held responsible for their and their family's ruined reputation. Hmong parents it seems, instead of communicating with their daughters about the reasons they ran away from home, blame American culture and society and the fact that they cannot discipline their children the way they are used to from Laos and Thailand; a father of a runaway girl said that "Kids that grow up in the United States are like animals - uncontrollable" (*Star Tribune*, p. A8, October 11, 2005). Are the rapes, the violence and the stigmatization of Hmong women a result of the lesser value placed on them? Is it a result of the desperate attempt of Hmong men to hold on to a male dominated sexual system and the blaming of women a continuation of the kinship, marriage and prestige system? The organization of sex and gender and the relationship between men and women often seems to be naturalized (Bourdieu 2000) in every specific culture or society, through cultural patterns like the Hmong kinship, marriage and prestige system. Changing this organization or the relationships that follow from it, therefore, might be viewed as culturally disruptive and damaging - particularly by the dominant group, who are most often the men. But if some women decide to act contrary to 'established' cultural patterns, and the gender views they

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<sup>1</sup>Aid to Families with Dependent Children, a U.S. Federal Assistance Program

organize, because they can no longer see the value of their conventional function, it does not mean that their actions are less 'cultural' than the actions of the dominating males. Instead it shows the transformative power of individual action upon old categories and the relationships between people who live by them.



*My Dad the Mekong and Me the Mississippi*

he fought through a war  
helping his clan

I forget the war  
not giving a damn

searching the woods  
for family that night

searching my mind  
for anything right

he crossed the river  
nearly drowning for freedom

I've never had  
to look for freedom

he crossed a thousand miles  
to learn a language he did not know

I crossed no land  
yet his language I do not know

remember the past  
he says

I can't  
I say  
I was never meant to be there

join me here

I say

I can't

he says

I was never meant to be here

By Peter Yang (with permission)

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