Violence Against Women and Hmong Religious Beliefs

Pa Der Vang

Background of the Hmong

Hmong are an Asian ethnic minority group whose early history has been documented as mountain villagers in Chinese literature dated as early as 220 AD. This historical designation remains true today as Hmong who can still be found in their Southeast Asian homelands prefer to build their villages in the pristine highlands (Cha 2010). However, Hmong are now scattered throughout most of Asia living in both rural and urban areas. Hmong made their living as farmers and skilled tradesmen, and were known to shy away from the intrusion of host governments. Hmong kept their communities insular as a means to protect their culture and traditions by resisting assimilation into the dominant culture. Efforts by the Chinese Government to assimilate the Hmong resulted in several uprisings and rebellions by the Hmong. As a result of frequent conflict with the Chinese, many Hmong migrated from China to several parts of Southeast Asia including Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The vast majority of Hmong refugees in the USA are from Laos due to their participation in the US Secret War during the Vietnam War.

The US Department of State granted entry to Laotian Hmong refugees due to their involvement in the CIA’s Secret War in Laos (Vang 2008). The Secret War was an operation by the CIA based in Laos to stop the transport of arms through Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, thousands of Hmong men were recruited as soldiers to fight on the side of the USA.

While Hmong husbands were away at war, women and their children remained living with their in-laws. If husbands were killed in the war, the widows were often married to their husbands’ younger brother even if he was already married; a practice called levirate. In Hmong levirate marriages, widows were married to their younger brothers-in-law in order to keep the children within the family and to ensure that the widows and their children were taken care of physically and spiritually upon their deaths (Hillmer 2010; Lee and Tapp 2010). Levirate comprises only a small portion of polygamous Hmong marriages.

Although Hmong saw increases in polygamy as a result of their involvement in the war; polygamy also occurs as a result of men’s desire to have more than one wife or their desire to have a son with another woman (Lee and Tapp; Symonds 2004). The Hmong remain ambivalent about polygamy (Lee and Tapp 2010). Although levirate served as a community function to provide for widows and their children, men who engaged in polygamy outside of levirate were viewed as selfish and greedy (Lee and Tapp 2010), and community members maintained a sympathetic glance toward Hmong women in polygamous marriages. A Hmong woman whose husband takes a second wife may not accept the new wife and tension may arise between her and her husband. However, since husbands maintain the right to marry a second wife, the first wife’s pleading typically falls on deaf ears. She often chooses to stay in the marriage to avoid the
isolation, shame, and lack of clan ties that result from divorce. The second wife consents to the marriage because she wishes to be married rather than risk being a spinster and unattached to a clan. Polygamy is still practiced among Hmong Americans but it is difficult to determine its prevalence in the USA because it is rarely reported. Hmong do not register their polygamous marriage with the American legal system; rather, polygamous marriages are officiated in traditional weddings and typically go unrecognized by the American system. Husbands of polygamous marriages are usually legally married to one of his wives while the remaining wives are recognized by the American system as single mothers.

When the American effort in Vietnam ended in 1975, communist factions in Laos considered the Hmong traitors for siding with the Americans. Many Hmong men were targeted for imprisonment and execution. Thousands of Hmong fled to refugee camps scattered throughout Thailand. Hmong families waited from months to years in these camps to eventually be relocated to various host countries throughout the world, including the USA, France, Canada, Australia, and Papua New Guinea (Yang 2008). The first wave of Hmong immigrants to the USA included approximately 3500 Hmong by December 1975 (Yau 2005). Hmong families were scattered throughout the USA depending on the location of Voluntary Agencies (VOLAGs) that served as the initial sponsors of refugee families. VOLAGs received funds from the US State Department to provide resettlement assistance to the new families. Immigration to the USA continued between 1975 until 2004 when the final refugee site in Thailand for Hmong refugees, Wat Thamkroak, was closed. Since 2004, the immigration of new Hmong refugees has slowed substantially. Secondary migrations from other host countries have led to the growing Hmong population in the USA. The 2000 Census reported 102,773 foreign born who self-identified themselves as Hmong (Yau 2005), and finally, in 2010, the Census counted over 260,000 Hmong in the USA with over 70,000 Hmong in Minnesota, 80,000 in California, and 50,000 in Wisconsin. The median age of Hmong in the USA is 20 years with 57% of Hmong over the age of 18 (Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center 2011). Hmong continue to face challenges as they transition to life in the USA. Lack of education, low English proficiency, and few vocational skills continue to create barriers for Hmong refugees, making it difficult for Hmong to find gainful employment. The lack of gainful employment resulted in high poverty rates in the USA among the Hmong. Sixty one percent of Hmong obtained a high school degree (as compared to 85% in the total population) while only 14% obtained a 4 year college degree (compared to 28% in the total population; Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center 2011). The Asian American Center for Advancing Justice (Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center 2011) reported that 91% of Hmong over the age of five still speak Hmong at home with 43% of Hmong still reporting limited English proficiency. Hmong continue to be the lowest earners of all Asian groups at $10,949 per capita compared to $27,100 in the total population, with 26% of Hmong reporting poverty level incomes as compared to 10% in the total population (Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center 2011).

It is difficult for many Hmong to condemn violence against women for fear of disrupting the patriarchal and collectivist traditions and values that form the foundation of Hmong culture. Hmong culture is patriarchal, patrilineal, and collectivist. Men are considered leaders of their families, clans, and communities (Lee and Tapp 2010). Hmong say that, “Nine girls are not as worthy as one son” [cuag leeg ttkais soo tis cuag ib leeg tub]. The births of boys are prized in Hmong families for many reasons. Hmong men carry on the clan name and families are organized according to paternal lineages. In addition, men oversee and perform cultural and traditional rituals that have major implications for the well-being of clan members from birth to death. Therefore, Hmong believe that Hmong men hold the culture and its people together (Lee and Tapp 2010; Symonds 2004).
Because Hmong culture is collectivist, individual Hmong identity is woven with Hmong group identity in which a Hmong person is not considered to possess personhood unless he or she is connected to a clan. If a Hmong person is not connected to a clan, upon their death—as a result of spiritual clan rules that state no one belonging to a specific spiritual clan may taint the sanctity of their spiritual clan by facilitating the funeral of a deceased from another spiritual clan—few people are willing to facilitate their funeral and burial. Therefore, Hmong individuals feel a strong desire to maintain association with their own clan as well as the Hmong community as a whole.

**Hmong Culture and Religion**

It is difficult for Hmong animists to separate culture and religion (Her 2005). The patriarchal elements of the culture are infused into religious practices. It is difficult to determine whether cultural and religious practices formed the foundation for this patriarchal society, or if patriarchy led to the cultural and traditional religious practices that center on and elevate men. In addition, one cannot say for certain whether or not animism is the foundation of Hmong culture, but it is certain that animism has a strong presence in Hmong culture (Lee and Tapp 2010). Although many Hmong have converted to Christianity (Lee and Tapp 2010; Vang 2010), it is difficult to determine the number of Hmong Christians in the USA due to the lack of data. Hmong began converting to Christianity well before their arrival to Western nations as a result of the work of the Chinese Christian missionaries in China, and eventually French Christian missionaries in Laos (Lee and Tapp 2010, p. 40). In America, Hmong Christian churches exist in large numbers with congregations growing in membership each year (Vang 2010). Vang (2010) reported that although no empirical study has been conducted to determine the prevalence of Hmong Christians in the USA, it has been estimated that as many as 50% of the Hmong in the USA considered themselves Christians. Many but not all Hmong Christians have ceased the practice of many animist traditional rituals such as animal sacrifice and spirit callings (Vang 2010). Some believe that if one is a Christian, all animist traditions must not be observed, however, because animism is infused in many Hmong cultural practices, some families do not delineate between the two.

Although many Hmong have converted to Christianity, animism is recognized as the most commonly practiced religion among Hmong (Livo and Cha 1991). Animists believe that all objects, both animate and inanimate, possess a spiritual essence (Livo and Cha 1991). Hmong animists honor the spirit of the deceased and are in constant communication with the dead. The ancestral spirits of each clan are believed to oversee each household (Lee and Tapp 2010). Since clans are patrilocal, men pass down their clan names through the birth of sons and men are considered permanent members of the clan by birthright. Due to their permanent position and status in the clan, Hmong men are responsible for maintaining and carrying out religious and cultural rituals specific to each clan. Daughters, on the other hand, are seen as “other’s wives” and are transferred to another clan upon marriage (Lemoine 2012, p. 16). Daughters “borrow their mother’s wombs” to give them life and their destiny is to find a home with another clan (Lemoine 2012, p. 16). This is not to say that Hmong parents do not love their daughters and sons equally.

Lemoine (2012) states that Hmong men have a monopoly on religious performances while women are completely excluded (p. 17). Examples of Hmong men’s dominant roles in religious practices can be seen during funerals. Funerals are major events for the Hmong where the deceased are honored and their spirits carefully led into the spirit world. During the funeral, men (t’iv qhuab ke/t’iv taw ke) are in charge of communications with the dead to lead the deceased into the spirit world (Lee and Tapp 2010, p. 40). Along with chanting, men (tug t’iv qeej) play a traditional bamboo pipe instrument (qeej) to lead the spirit along this journey (Lee and Tapp 2010, p. 40). Only men are allowed to play this instrument at funerals. On this journey, the deceased must retrieve his coat (placenta) before enter-
ing the spirit world. In the past, the placentas of baby boys were buried at the center post of the house because males were perceived as the center and strength of the family while the placentas of baby girls were buried in the parents’ bedroom under the bed (Lee and Tapp 2010; Vang 1997). Furthermore, at funerals, only men are allowed to make gift offerings to the spirits and to settle debts with the deceased (Lee and Tapp 2010; Symonds 2004). For this reason, parents value the birth of sons over daughters since only sons can ensure that upon their death, parents will have all the riches and nourishment they need in the spirit world (Lee and Tapp 2010). Female relatives of the deceased may make offerings but only via their husbands, or if widowed, through male relatives (Symonds 2004). Even single daughters of the deceased are prevented from offering gifts to her deceased parent since women are considered the property of other spiritual lineages; even if she is unmarried it is expected that eventually she will enter the spiritual household of another clan (Lee and Tapp 2010). The spirits of a different clan have absolutely no role in facilitating the delivery of the deceased into the spirit world since it would go against cultural rules surrounding spiritual health. Therefore, clans are hesitant to perform funerals for divorced women who belong to no clan.

Women’s roles at funerals are to guard the body of the deceased and to provide cooked food for the guests and family (Symonds 2004). Although men also cook at funerals, this is one of the few times women’s formal roles are mentioned in a text on Hmong funerals where women are referred to as “women who cook” (niaw va mou) (Lee pao lao 2013a). The sister of the deceased is referred to as “sister aunt” (mnuam phauj), the sister of the deceased male and a symbolic female figure who must oversee the funeral of her brother. Mnuam phauj is given recognition when she receives word of her brother’s death, but she must in turn prepare a meal and provide a stipend for the messengers who delivered the news of her brother’s death (Lee pao lao 2013a). The sister of the deceased is mentioned again in the funeral process when the sacrificial animal is divided and distributed as gifts to family members. In addition, the mother of the deceased is honored during the funeral. Other female family members may communicate their preferences regarding the funeral proceedings, however, in general, women must ask their husbands, or if widowed, a male relative to speak on their behalf (Symonds 2004). Due to men’s predominant role in the funeral, men are prized by Hmong parents because only men can give their parents and clan members proper funerals upon their death.

Cultural traditions and religious practices influence an individual’s roles within Hmong society where individual roles are prescribed in order to maintain the social order. Outside influences that disrupt these social roles, or individual efforts to reject prescribed roles may cause disruptions to community efforts to maintain long held traditions and often result in strong reactions from families and other members within the Hmong community.

**Case Scenario**

The case scenario below provides an insight into the life of one Hmong woman. This case study will serve as a reference for the discussion of Hmong cultural and religious gender-related practices, and aspects of the Hmong culture that might be helpful in understanding violence against Hmong women. The names and any unique individual references in this story have been changed to protect the identity of the persons in this story. This is just an example and does not represent all Hmong American marriages.

My name is Sheng. When I was 14 years old, I met a 19 year old Hmong man (T.Y.) at a Hmong New Year celebration. He lived four states away so for the first two years all we could do was write letters to each other. He came to see me during Christmas and summer breaks. When I was 16, T.Y. came to visit me one last time and took me to his uncle’s home because his parents’ home was too far way. His uncle blessed us at the front door with a rooster. This was done in order for the spirits to accept me into his family. Because I was blessed at the door, I had consented to marriage with T.Y. and it would be too late to change my mind later. Traditionally, a Hmong girl who enters a man’s home and is blessed at the door is consenting to
powerless and could not help me. She could not get in the middle of her cousin’s marriage for fear of upsetting the family. His mother would say to her relatives that I was an awful daughter-in-law. My parents told me I needed to be a better wife and to be patient.

At age 22, I left the marriage. It was not easy. By this time, my parents had moved fairly close to where we lived, so I drove myself to my parents’ house. When I arrived at my parents’ house and told them what happened, they responded by saying that I had shamed them and that I needed to go back and beg my husband to take me back. My parents were not only afraid that they would lose face; they were concerned that I would be without a spiritual home; that no one could bury me later. My parents would not be able to perform my funeral because I was no longer a member of their spiritual lineage. Eventually, my father-in-law called my parents to inquire about what to do next. T.Y.’s father could ask that I return to their son or they could let me go if I refused to return. The elders agreed that they would let us try to figure things out. I stayed at my parents’ home for two days and was lectured relentlessly. On the third day, my mother asked me to leave because I would not obey her wishes to return to my husband. They stated that I was no longer their daughter. I stayed with a friend for a week until I was able to secure an apartment of my own.

For one year, I lived my life on my own. I could not afford childcare so my son lived with his father. After that year, because I refused to return to my husband, my father-in-law called my father and said “We are letting her go. She is free to marry whomever she wants.” My father-in-law was letting me go from his spiritual household without asking for a return of the bride price. If he were to demand a return of the bride price, my parents would have had to enter into negotiations and make reparations with his family. Because my father-in-law had released me from his spiritual household, I was considered a lost soul. No Hmong person would be able to bury me in the future unless I joined another clan through marriage.

When a Hmong woman marries, the male head of household, typically her new father-in-law, must grant her permission to enter his house. Permission is granted via a cleansing ceremony (lwm qaih) where a rooster is used to sweep away her past and any bad spirits that she may have brought with her (tu sub/lwm sub) (Leepaoaloa 2013b). Hmong families fear that women from other clans may bring sub (bad spirits) into their household. The notion that Hmong women may possess bad spirits is consistent with the idea that
Hmong women are inferior and must be connected to a clan whose spirits may protect the women from *sub*. Following the *lwm qab* ceremony, she is transferred from the spiritual lineage of her birth parents to that of her new husband’s clan. As a new wife, she is expected to join her husband’s family as a new clan member; and throughout her life, she will demonstrate her commitment to the clan by obeying and emulating the practices and lifestyle of her new family and his clan. Her membership in his clan will guarantee that, upon her death, the living will honor her life by performing the prescribed funeral rituals to lead her to the land of the spirits. If she is a disobedient wife, she can be cast out of her husband’s clan through divorce. Since an individual must belong to a spiritual clan line and women are considered the property of her father-in-law’s clan, it was difficult for Sheng to leave the marriage. The elders prohibit a woman from exiting a clan without their permission, since it would be neglectful to allow someone under their care to leave the protection of their spirits. Her father-in-law and his clan could risk criticism from her parents for allowing her to leave the clan without his consent. Without the consent of the elders, she would not be able to join another clan through remarriage. In Sheng’s case, her birth parents feared that if she were to leave her husband’s clan, no one would be able to facilitate her funeral in the future.

Males are rarely confronted in Hmong culture due to their status in the Hmong community. This explains why her parents and her husband’s parents failed to confront her husband in Sheng’s case above. His parents displayed support for him because they needed to ensure that their son would care for them in their old age, and send them into the spirit world upon their death. If they destroyed their relationship with their son, he could potentially refuse to care for them in the future and their reputation could be harmed. In addition, Hmong men are considered leaders and authority figures and their actions are typically tolerated by the larger community. The next sections in this paper will provide further insights about Hmong immigration, culture, and religion that shape Hmong women’s experiences.

**Effect of Migration**

Traumatic migration experiences have contributed to high levels of emotional, behavioral, and psychological distress among the Hmong refugees (Chung 2001; DIHSS 2001; Nicholson 1997; Westermeyer 1987; Williams and Berry 1991). Violence, trauma, loss of family members, and loss of home and place are just a few examples of the experiences endured by Hmong refugees, as a result of their involvement in the Vietnam War. Many Hmong witnessed the death of loved ones, suffered separation from family members and the community to which they were accustomed, and many were victims of violence themselves (Nicholson 1997; Ng 1998; Uba 1994). Many Hmong soldiers were captured and, if they were not executed, were imprisoned and tortured. Villages were destroyed and the Hmong who survived the attacks left behind their homes and belongings, and fled with only the clothing on their backs and what little amount of money they could sew into the linings of their clothes.

The distress associated with immigration trauma is linked to higher levels of anger, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among refugees (Chung and Kagawa-Singer 1993; Nicholson 1997; Perez-Foster 2001; Pumariega et al. 2005; Williams and Berry 1991). Prolonged trauma among refugees may lead to emotional withdrawal, lower ability to form attachment with others, anger, and responses to events that remind the individual of their loss and trauma (Haene et al. 2010). Hmong men are less likely to seek services for grief and loss and other psychiatric disturbances. Left untreated, the effects of their traumatic experiences may affect their relationships with their spouses, children, and other members of society. At the same time, few services are available for refugees suffering from the effects of their migration experience, especially for refugee men who suffer from the lack of skills to cope with the strong feelings associated with trauma and loss. Hmong men involved in domestic violence are often treated with Western treatment methodologies that have been normed on white males. The current services for men who batter, focus on gener-
al anger management and improvement of interpersonal skills rather than responses to traumatic loss and its effects on emotions and relationships.

In addition to traumatic loss, Hmong men suffered a host of losses related to social status and social networks. These include loss of social networks, loss of previous social and familial status, and role loss as a result of changes in family and social structures (Bliatout 2003; Hirayama et al. 1993; Lee 1988; Nicholson 1997). During the refugee resettlement process in the USA, families were divided and resettled throughout several states (Vang 2008). This caused a fragmentation in the social networks and social support that Hmong men relied on in their home countries. Traditionally, married men's leadership behaviors were witnessed and affirmed by members outside of the family, such as extended family members and those who lived in the same village. In addition, it was the responsibility of the men to forge relationships and maintain reciprocal exchanges with extended family members and community members. Since Hmong families and communities were scattered throughout the USA, Hmong men suffered a sudden role loss.

Traditionally, Hmong men entered into visible leadership roles in their families and communities upon marriage. As their communities were scattered, Hmong men lost these traditional leadership roles and the community networks that supported them in these roles. Hmong men had to forge new connections with other Hmong in their new communities which was challenging due to the clearly defined lines between clans. Hmong men who lacked family support, in turn, lacked social status and recognition. Large secondary migrations were observed among new refugees soon after their arrival in the USA as families moved to be geographically closer to their clans of origin (Vang 2008). In addition, due to low socioeconomic status and institutionalized racism, it is difficult for Hmong men to establish similar levels of social status to which they were accustomed. As visible minorities, Hmong refugees suffer racism and discrimination in the predominantly white American society. Hmong men are especially vulnerable because they must compete with white men for employment and leadership positions. Institutionalized racist social structures may result in a majority of Hmong men being marginalized and powerless in the USA. Only recently have Hmong men been able to enter political arenas and higher employment status as evidenced by the recent elections of Hmong men into legislative offices, and increased entrance into higher paying employment positions as a result of education attainment. Studies have shown that exposure to racism and discrimination can result in emotional distress and if not addressed, can be harbored as ongoing anger and resentment (Uba 1994; U.S. Surgeon General 1999). As our society lacks safe spaces for victims of racism to voice their emotional experiences, strong emotions are often taken out on their families and those closest to them.

Not only have Hmong men faced a role loss within the community, they often suffer role loss within their families. Hmong refugee families experience role reversals among children and parents due to the low English proficiency of parents who must rely on their children to translate communications with English speaking Americans (Lee 1988; Lee 2002). The parentification of children may render Hmong men powerless within their households. Hmong American children often assume responsibilities well beyond what is commonly seen in the USA, including translating and interpreting for parents and extended family members, taking on employment for income that is directed toward family bills (for young children employment came in the form of farming labor), caring for younger siblings including attending parent-teacher conferences in place of their parents and providing income for younger siblings’ activities (Lee 1988). Hmong men who were accustomed to providing for their families in their homeland found themselves in poverty, either relying on welfare or working in menial jobs and relying on their own children for support (Bliatout 2003). In addition, American values that encourage independence and assertiveness among children clash with the traditions of Hmong who honor elders as traditional authority figures in the household. Hmong men must relinquish their role as the sole authority figure in the household to make room for the autonomy of
their children. In addition, traditionally, physical punishment of children has been a long accepted form of discipline in many Hmong families. Hmong refugee parents who have little education have not had exposure to alternative forms of discipline. American laws that prohibit physical discipline of children result in feelings of helplessness and loss of control for Hmong parents who are not equipped with alternative parenting strategies (Lee 1988). As Hmong become educated in the USA, they gain parenting skills that do not fall in the range of physical punishment, however, for new refugee parents with low English speaking skills, their capacity to participate in parenting education is limited; thus, efforts to maintain customary practices remain strong.

The impact of migration on traditional gender roles among Hmong has long been documented. Traditionally, Hmong men held total power and authority over the women and children in their families. In addition, men were valued above women within Hmong society for several reasons. Men passed on the family lineage because children assumed their father’s last name. Men also assumed the care of their parents in old age. These traditional roles have been challenged as Hmong transition to life in the USA. As Hmong women become educated and obtain gainful employment, the knowledge, skills, and personal power women acquire through educational and work force environments threatens traditional gender roles. Hmong women gain insight into different life opportunities that they would not have had otherwise. Rather than seeing women’s successes as contributions to the family and community, many Hmong feel that women who choose to pursue their educations and careers are failing to fulfill their traditional roles as wife and mother. Women who earn more money or are more educated than their husbands are seen as threats to the security of the family because families fear that women may choose their independence over their families or control her husband. The time and resources women devote to their personal successes are often viewed as time and resources that are taken away from their men and children. Thus, women often suffer violence and abuse at the hands of their husbands due to irrational fears that women may forego their roles as wife and mother or control the man of the house.

Hmong men have suffered multiple losses including loss of social networks, social status, and control as a result of migration to the USA. Frequently, these losses have resulted in emotional and psychological distress, which has manifested as violence against the women in their lives. The following sections provide an insight into several aspects of Hmong culture and social structure that maintain a patriarchal social structure within Hmong society.

**Hmong Culture**

**Patriarchy and Gender**

Men are at the center of Hmong society where they are in charge of making major decisions, leading the family, and representing the family within the community. The roles of both genders are focused on helping men to fulfill these roles. With the help of their wives, men must maintain authority and competence. To support the men, women are socialized to be obedient and unquestioning of men’s authority. Women are socialized as caretakers. Daughters are taught caretaking skills at an early age including food preparation, household chores, caring for younger siblings, and serving family members and guests. For example, at an early age, girls must provide much of the care for younger siblings, girls learn how to cook meals for the family, and girls are taught how to greet guests and serve them food and drink. A girl who does not offer drinks to guests upon their arrival to the house are considered ignorant of customs (*tsis paub kev cai*). Girls are taught to “never cross over men” (*tsis tchob hla txiv neej*). This can be translated literally to not let your body parts such as an arm or leg cross over any part of a man to prevent close contact with men and to prevent women from intruding upon men’s personal space in a public setting. In addition, the saying “never cross over men” can also mean a girl must never talk or behave in a way that could be perceived as being above men. Thus, girls are prevented from interjecting when
Men speak, and girls must maintain the appearance of lower intelligence and less power than men.

**Men’s Roles in Patriarchy**

It goes without saying that Hmong men also have gender-specific roles within a patriarchal society. Men must learn the traditional cultural and religious practices, as well as pass these practices on to their children. Men receive heavy pressure to have many children, especially boys, in order to pass on these traditions. Thus, Hmong couples tend to have many children and more value is placed on male children because males carry on the traditions and the family’s last name. Men must actively participate at family events where they are in charge of butchering and preparing animals for meat. As stated before, men are also in charge of traditional rituals that honor ancestral spirits and elders, learning traditional chants, kowtowing to elders when it is called for, and socializing with extended relatives. Hmong men’s financial well-being is affected by their membership in a collectivist patriarchal society because they must designate a portion of their family’s earnings to be generously given to extended family during events such as funerals, marriages, and healing ceremonies. As the Hmong society is collectivist, Hmong men accept these responsibilities with the expectation that their benevolence will be reciprocated at a later date by other Hmong men. In this manner, men gain social capital and social status within their community. Men who fail to fulfill their traditional roles typically lack status among their families and community.

Men must also sit at the main table at family events. The table is symbolic in Hmong culture. It is a place where decisions are made, where money changes hands, where negotiations take place, and it is a place reserved only for men with status in the family. Typically, married men who have children may sit at the table. Along with being married with children, men must show that they are capable of carrying out traditions and leading their own families. Men who are not at the table are not considered respectable or honorable leaders. A Hmong woman whose husband is not at the table with the other men may feel ashamed that her husband is not an equal among other men. Therefore, a woman must assume a large role in her husband’s life to ensure that her husband is also at the table with other men. The husband’s role in the community reflects on the reputation of the family as a whole. Due to the women’s desire for their husbands to be perceived as leaders, many Hmong women uphold many cultural traditions that in turn oppress them as women. When a husband is respected in the community, his wife and their children also receive respect. In this manner, Hmong women may only obtain respect and honor via a man. Traditionally, a woman without a husband is rarely given honor and respect within the Hmong community.

Women’s roles are to support men in carrying out their duty to extended family members and other community members. A woman who fails to carry out her duty to maintain her man’s position at the center of the family and society may be subjected to physical and verbal abuse by her husband. She may also be looked down upon and ridiculed by her family and community members. It is considered very important that every man have a wife who is industrious and intelligent to support him emotionally and instrumentally so that he can carry out his responsibilities. The wife’s intelligence must not be outwardly or pretentious. Hmong women must lead from behind closed doors. It is considered a wife’s duty to support her husband in his roles and responsibilities without taking credit for his accomplishments. Hmong believe every man must have a woman to help him in order to succeed in life. A woman who fails to provide proper support to her husband is said to be a bad wife and this may bring shame onto her husband. The husband may physically punish her, ask his male relatives to reprimand her, or he may marry another wife. Parents train their daughters to listen to their husbands and to do as he says. Parents are known to tell their daughters before she marries “you must do what your husband says” (Yus tus tsiv hais li cas, ces yus yuav tsum ua li ntawv). Women are expected to accept and join her husband and
in-laws, and contribute to their well-being rather than cause disruptions to her husband’s family and their way of life.

Hmong came from an agrarian-based economy where families maintained farms and livestock and specialized in skilled crafts as a means of survival. Every family member contributed their labor to ensure the survival of the family. Daughters contributed largely to the survival of the family by assuming roles such as caring for younger siblings and elders, daily food preparation and storage, and household care. When daughters reached marrying age, men who wished to marry them had to pay a bride price as compensation to her parents for the loss of her labor and to acquire her labor into the groom’s household. The bride price is also considered compensation to her parents for raising her. This is called “the price of milk and burden” (ngi mis ngi nog). Some state that the bride price may protect the wife against mistreatment by her husband and his family. If the wife voluntarily leaves the marriage due to mistreatment, the wife’s parents are not obligated to return the bride price to her husband. However, if the marriage falls apart due to reasons such as adultery or lack of industriousness on the part of the wife, her parents must return the bride price to her husband so that he may marry another wife. Some also believe that the price indicates the value of the bride; the higher the bride price, the higher the value of the bride. The reasons a bride would fetch a lower bride price include premarital pregnancy (even when the father of the baby is the groom), being unattractive, lazy, or unintelligent. Divorced women are considered of no value and parents do not charge the husband a bride price. Instead, the parents state they give their daughter to the groom for free. Whether a wife came with a bride price, or if she was “free”, she is on the losing end. If she came with a bride price, folklore states that the husband’s family may complain that “We paid such a high price for you, so you must live up to that price.” If she was a free bride, folklore states “You’re such a bad person, no wonder you were free.” The culture sets the stage for the poor treatment of Hmong women where she must bear the blame regardless of the context. This double bind can be seen across cultures. For example, on one hand, in India, where the bride’s family must pay a substantial price to the groom, male babies are prized because families are often unable to afford the dowry that female babies may incur later (Shenk 2007). The dowry was prohibited in 1961 in India. On the other hand, in Hmong culture, where the tables are turned and the groom must pay a price to the bride’s family, male babies are still prized and the bride’s price is used punitively against women in their adulthood.

Collectivism

Hmong culture is highly collectivist where members are interdependent and view themselves as a part of a collective group. Hmong first identify themselves by the group with which they are most closely affiliated. A woman must first identify with a husband or, if she is single, her closest male relative such as her father, but a man must first identify with a clan. In this manner, Hmong women lose their identity with their first names upon marrying. They become Niam (meaning both Mrs. and Mother). Men, when first greeting another Hmong they are unfamiliar with, must typically state the clan with whom they are affiliated. For example, a man may introduce his name and then ask “Whose clan do you belong to?” (Nej yog leej twg pab?) A man can be subject to ridicule if he does not know the clan to which he belongs and a married woman is looked down upon if she introduces herself by her first name.

Each member of the family, extended family, and community are obligated to specific roles and duties in order to maintain harmony within the group. Members of the community are expected to follow cultural traditions, hierarchical rules, and specific social roles according to gender, age, and birth order. Individuals who deviate from these collectivist practices are viewed negatively by family and community members and may be subjected to verbal, emotional, physical, and social consequences which could stem from negative labeling, exclusion, and violence. This collectivist quality of Hmong society ensures that all members of the society abide by the social
order. Within this collective culture, women’s roles are to ensure that men can maintain their positions as leaders in the community and men’s roles are to ensure that all individuals under their control do not shame the clan. Men whose wives do not follow social rules accordingly are accused of not being able to control their women. Often, many men will resort to physical abuse as a way to control their wives. Many family and community members hesitate to condemn the violence. To do so would harm the relationship family members would have with the male relative and harm would be done to the harmony of the group. In other words, to voice objection toward your male relative could potentially harm relationships within the family or community. In Sheng’s case above, her cousin-in-law could not speak out on her behalf for fear of harming her relationships with her extended relatives. Causing harm to current relationships could result in harmful consequences to your future relations within the Hmong community. The Hmong hold very high the importance of maintaining smooth relationships with other families and individuals in the Hmong community. The type of relationships one has with families and members in the community could come into play later on when their help is needed or if one’s child marries one of their children. This is why many Hmong fail to report domestic violence to authorities because they fear the far reaching consequences.

Hierarchy and Clan

Hmong society is hierarchical with elder men at the top of the hierarchy. Gender determines power followed by age. Older males have the most power and authority. The eldest son follows his father in the chain of command. It is common for mothers and adult daughters to submit to the authority of sons and brothers. Children are the lowest in rank in the hierarchical structure (Leepaolao 2013a). Following this hierarchical structure, Hmong women must obey the men and elders. Hmong women who fail to obey the elders and men are accused of disrupting the social order and may be disciplined or punished by their family and members of their community. In the USA where physical punishment renders legal consequences, women are instead shamed and ostracized from the community. Often, Hmong women would rather follow the rules than risk being ostracized and isolated.

Hmong organize themselves according to clans. In a clan system, families are organized according to kin. Clans are identified through last name, family lineage, and sacred spirit (dab). Members of each clan treat each other as family even if they are not directly related. Each clan consists of subsets of kin groups having the same last name. Kin groups identify themselves by the eldest leader of their clan who is often an eldest grandfather or uncle. The clan leader rises to leadership through a combination of having been born to a previous clan leader, benevolence, and demonstrated leadership. A clan leader will have spent most of his life participating in family and community functions and contributing to major family and clan decisions. The clan leader is not always one who has lived a life that should be emulated by others. Hmong men are perceived as leaders if they are willing to devote their time to resolving family and marital conflicts. They avail themselves to extended family members at a moment’s notice; often at the expense of their immediate family. Many times, clan leaders may have multiple wives. Traditionally, having multiple wives from different clans increased the kin relationships a man could have with different clans which elevated his social capital and social status within the Hmong community. Hmong leaders are also expected to place the needs of their nuclear family second to those of the community. Again, within Hmong culture, it is important to maintain the harmony of the whole community rather than to focus only on one’s own needs. Those who ignore the needs of the community to tend to their own immediate family’s needs are considered selfish and unreliable community leaders. Therefore, it is not uncommon that Hmong men spend a majority of their free time at clan meetings, funerals, weddings, and healing ceremonies while their wives and children must maintain the day to day functions of family life on their own. In addition, the safety of women
comes second to the demands the community places on their male leaders. Wives are expected to place their needs second to the needs of the community at large.

As previously stated, when a Hmong woman marries, she not only becomes a member of her husband’s clan but she also comes under the purview of the sacred spirits of her husband’s clan. She becomes the property of her husband, his clan, and his spirits. Her family of origin becomes guests in her life because they are of a different spiritual group. Women are not considered to have sacred spirits of their own, instead women must be affiliated with a man and come under the care of his sacred spirits (Symonds 2004).

If a woman encounters a problem in her marriage, the husband’s clan bears responsibility for resolving the problem. Family problems are resolved using the clan system of hierarchical decision making. The husband’s parents are consulted first. If the problem cannot be resolved by the husband’s parents, then an extended family member, such as a close uncle, is consulted. If the problem still cannot be resolved, an elder who is considered a leader of the clan would be consulted. Typically, several members of the family including extended family members convene at a meeting in the home of the husband’s parents to hear both the husband’s and the wife’s side of the story.

At any time in this process, the wife may involve her birth parents. Women are discouraged from involving their birth parents because it may indicate that the husband’s clan is ineffective at resolving the problem, or that they have abused her. If her parents choose to be involved, they may do one of two things. They may demand that actions be taken to right the wrong against their daughter, or they may ask the husband’s clan to resolve the problem. Parents may fine the husband’s clan or kho (heal her spirit). The practice of fining a family involves asking for monetary reparations. This practice is outdated and hardly enforceable. Spiritual healing requires the husband’s family to sacrifice an animal and conduct a spiritual healing ceremony for his wife. Fining a family or asking for spiritual healing are considered very extreme requests that may lead to long-term damage to the relationship between the two families since these requests may dishonor the husband’s clan. Therefore, birth parents are hesitant to request these types of reparations. Typically, birth parents state that it is the husband’s clan’s responsibility to repair the situation on their own and to ensure that the marriage stays intact and their daughter is safe. By doing this, the birth parents do not risk damaging the relationship with their son-in-law’s clan. Since the wife “belongs” to her husband’s clan, his clan bears primary responsibility for resolving the conflict. Any requests from her parents that suggest his clan is unable to manage the problem may cause harm to the relationship between the two families. Unfortunately, when it is left to the husband’s clan to resolve the problem, the husband and his clan typically fall back on patriarchal practices that lift the man’s status and minimize the woman’s safety.

Abuse of Women

Typically, a Hmong woman who is being abused by her husband is asked to be patient with her husband as stated above, to obey him, and to resurrect any “wrongs she did to cause the abuse.” The blame is typically shifted onto the female, while the male is considered to have the right to discipline his wife in the manner of his choosing. A Hmong woman who seeks help for abuse from mainstream providers is often encouraged to distance herself from her abuser. This includes moving her to a safety shelter, police intervention, obtaining a restraining order, individual therapy, and speaking up for herself. These actions go against the traditional Hmong method of resolving marital abuse where his family is heavily involved in resolving the conflict and women are to obey the requests of her husband and his family. In addition, Hmong value keeping the marriage intact and toward this end, all efforts will be made to keep the couple and their family together. Traditionally, women risk being ostracized from their community if they leave their husband for two reasons: they are accused of abandoning their roles as wife and mother and
since they no longer belong to a spiritual clan, and they are considered lost souls.

Mainstream providers must consider the collectivist and patriarchal nature of Hmong culture in their plans for treating the abuser and his victim. The severity of culturally specific consequences that Hmong women face is rarely understood by the mainstream providers who are unfamiliar with collectivist cultures. The loss of family role and community connections is detrimental for both the victim and the abuser due to the collectivist nature of the culture. Hmong women victims are caught in a double bind. If she chooses to leave her husband, she risks being ostracized from the community; however, if she stays in the relationship, she faces continued abuse. If a woman elects to leave her abuser, it is important that the victim secure new support systems and community connections once she has left the marriage. She will likely be ostracized from her community and face shame and blame from her family members and the Hmong community. She is not likely to feel safe and few Hmong will reach out to her. It is important for providers to connect the victim to community resources and social supports such as an advocate, a safety shelter, stable housing with strong neighbor and community connections, and connections to other Asian women who are in similar situations. If the woman elects to stay in the marriage, it is important for her to have a safety plan in the event of future abuse; in addition, the victim must receive education regarding her options, her right to autonomy in the individualistic context of the American legal and social structure, and information about how cultural practices will continue to impact her if she stays. Typically, Hmong men have a strong desire to have the wife return to the home in order to keep the family together. Hmong men face shame and often lose community connections if they are unable to keep their families intact since a strong family contributes positively to the reputation of the clan. As mentioned above, Hmong men need to be connected to a wife and children in order to be respected by clan and community members. Hmong men whose wives leave them are viewed as incompetent because they are unable to control their wives or keep their families intact. For this reason, Hmong men will try very hard to prevent wives from leaving, often with deadly consequences. Hmong men may feel betrayed by wives who attempt to leave because women who leave are accused of destroying the family.

Using Cultural Strengths in Treatment

Hmong in the USA are survivors of war and trauma. Their migration experience has had damaging effects on many Hmong’s ability to cope with the transitions as they adjust to life in the USA. It is important for providers to acknowledge the effect of war and trauma on refugees and to address the impact of grief, loss, and trauma on Hmong men.

Due to their collective orientation, Hmong value family and the connections that stem from familial relationships. Family is necessary for Hmong who value kinship and community. A large intact family with strong ties to their extended family signifies strong male leadership and collaboration between man and wife. One’s individual membership in a family and a strong identification with family increases one’s social status within the Hmong community. Highlighting this value with Hmong men, speaks to their leadership and contribution to their communities and will serve as motivation for Hmong men to mend their relationship with their spouse.

The collective nature of Hmong culture also leads to Hmong’s strong desire to save face. Actions that could lead to the disintegration of the family system could harm one’s reputation and bring shame not only to Hmong men but to their family and clan. Hmong men may not be criticized by their community for the breakup of their family, but they may still lose their social status within their clan and their community. As stated before, a Hmong man must have a woman supporting his efforts within the community or he could be considered as having less competence and authority. A Hmong man could lose face if his community no longer honors and respects his authority.
It is important to address the role loss suffered by Hmong men. The loss of previous social status, the loss of community networks, and the loss of the role of provider and authoritarian within their nuclear families can have detrimental effects on how Hmong men view themselves. Role loss and loss of status can harm self-esteem and confidence and result in longstanding emotional pain. Mainstream providers must assist Hmong men in understanding the impact of role loss on their mental health. Not only must Hmong men grieve the loss of their previous roles, but Hmong men must also develop skills such as cognitive flexibility that may help to reframe their situations and to adjust to their new roles. They must find ways to come to terms with the absence of their previous role and status, and develop new skills so that they can be successful in their new roles. In other words, even though their previous networks are now absent and their roles as leaders in their traditional community may no longer be relevant in the USA, Hmong men can still find ways to forge new networks and gain leadership skills within the context of their new homeland by acquiring education, work skills, and participating in civic engagement. It is also helpful for Hmong men to gain awareness of their roles within patriarchal society, and to examine the effects of patriarchy on the women in their lives. As Hmong men inherently care about their daughters, it is pertinent for Hmong men to see the impact of patriarchy on the lives of their daughters within the context of American society. It is difficult for Hmong men to accept the loss of traditions and cultural practices that have maintained their status for most of their lives. Culture loss is not an area that is adequately addressed in the literature (Dow 2011).

Hmong men, who are given the responsibility of preserving Hmong cultural practices and passing them onto their children suffer a loss of the traditions and values as their children and spouse may resist their attempt to pass on these values as a result of acculturation to Western society. Hmong men may feel dishonored and disregarded, triggering strong emotions. It is important to set a context for Hmong men that can help Hmong men understand the changing nature of culture. Again, providers must assist Hmong men in developing cognitive skills to accept and adapt to the changes in Hmong culture that are a result of interaction with American society.

Finally, mainstream providers must be able to see the situation from the viewpoint of their clients when treating Hmong men. Typically, mainstream interventions are designed with Western clients in mind. Westernized treatment methodologies are designed and applied within a framework of individualism, progressive attitudes regarding gender roles, and less emphasis on spirituality and religion. Hmong culture is highly influenced by collectivism, strict patriarchal norms, and animism. It is essential that mainstream providers incorporate these cultural themes in their treatment of Hmong men who batter.

**Conclusion**

Consistent with animist tradition, Hmong concern themselves with maintaining strong ties to their spiritual lineage. The belief that each member of the Hmong community possesses a spirit that must be led back to the land of the spirits upon death is an ingrained belief that contributes to members’ desires to maintain membership with the Hmong community and their spiritual lineage. In order to maintain membership with a spiritual lineage, members must follow social rules specific to gender, age, and familial roles. Hmong women who fail to obey men and elders may risk consequences such as physical, verbal, and emotional abuse. A Hmong woman who chooses divorce rather than endure violence voluntarily severs her ties with her husband’s spiritual lineage, leaving her without a spiritual clan to facilitate her funeral in the future. This behavior is discouraged, resulting in women having to endure abuse rather than leave their abuser.

The patriarchal nature of Hmong society places many burdens on Hmong men. They are obligated to fulfill cultural traditions and practices that uphold and maintain their spiritual lineage. It is necessary for Hmong men to marry and keep their family together in order to fulfill their cul-
sist Hmong men accept and adapt that are a result.

Hmong culture is strong. Hmong men con-

References


