Hmong Ethnoastronomy

K.D. Tyree
California State University
Chico, California

Not much is known of the appearance of the Hmong as a people. They were first identified as a separate people, called Miao or Meo, in China. In the earliest Chinese literature, accounts make reference to them as residents of central China in the areas of the Yellow and the Yangtze rivers at about 2300 B.C. The so-called "Miao (or Meo, meaning "barbarian" or "sons of the soil"),

could not be pacified, were exiled to the province of Kansu, where they apparently disappeared. Some of the Miao were absorbed, but others migrated southward or westward as the Chinese advanced. *(Graham 1954:1-2).

With the Han civilization expanding outward from the Yellow River valley, minority ethnic groups like the Miao

...which once shared the fertile heartland with the Han Chinese were pushed back to the periphery of expanding Chinese civilization. ••• these minorities never embraced the Chinese language, mores or ethnic identification. ••• they often chose rebellion or flight rather than submission to the political domination of the Han Chinese *(Sutton 1984:1).

Most of the Miao left China around 1825-1830 for the mountains of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Burma in search of more desirable farmland and less political dominance (see Figure 1). These people resented the name "Miao" and began to refer to themselves as "Hmong" meaning "free"1.

Practicing slash and burn agriculture, the Hmong were a nonliterate society until the 1950's when Christian missionaries devised a Hmong language alphabet and eventually a translation of the bible. A few Hmong then had the luxury of obtaining a sixth-grade level education1 prior to the Vietnamese War.

It has been estimated that there were about 350,000 Hmong living in Laos in the mid-1960's. They isolated themselves in the rugged mountains in order to preserve their culture and traditions and were known as the
HMONG MIGRATION FROM CHINA

BURMA

CHINA

VIETNAM

LAOS

Mekong River

THAILAND

CAMBODIA

Gulf of Thailand
"warrior race of Laos . . . " (Dommen 1985:6). The National Geographic reported "crack Hmong guerrillas became the undeclared muscles behind U.S. foreign policy" which was financed by the CIA during the Kennedy administration. Probably as many as 30,000 - 40,000 Hmong guerrillas died in the CIA's "secret war" in Laos (Garrett 1974:80).

As the United States pulled out of Southeast Asia, the Communists, knowing the Hmong's connections with the CIA, sought to exterminate the entire Hmong culture. Very few Hmong survive in Laos today. About 50,000 Hmong live in Thailand refugee camps (see Figure 2), and 70,000 have been resettled in the western world (France, Australia, Canada and the United States; Gordon:1984).

Hmong Directionality

Life on Loation mountain slopes may have led to the two directional ways organizing the physical/geographical world outside their house. All things are either up the mountain or down the valley/to the river (see Figure 3). These directions are quite opposite from each other yet do not necessarily match any specific N/S/E/W orientation. Johnson indicates that

in their traditional life, the Hmong did not seem to feel any need to indicate the directions we mean by north and south. Much more important to them was whether one location was farther up the mountain than another, or in the direction of the valley from it, and these expressions for uphill and downhill have been adapted in various ways to indicate north and south (1986:19).

Although my consultants generally agreed with Johnson's comments, they occasionally used the term quam teb (above + earth [meaning soil, water and stone]) for "north" and qab teb (under/bottom/end + earth) for "south". Other linguistically linked terminology which may involve the N/S adaptions spoken of by Johnson, include quam tsev (above + house), interpreted by one consultant as either "back of the house" or "up the mountain", and qab tsib taug (no direct translation possible) again, as either "front of the house" or "down the valley/to the river" (see Figure 4).

Finally, in regard to N/S orientation, it was brought to my attention that many of the Hmong men, when hired by the CIA during the war, were instructed in "true" N/S direction via the western compass. One of my male consultants, suggested that after learning to use a
Hmong Homelands and Refugee Camps.
"CARDINAL" DIRECTIONS FOR THE Hmong

OAUM TEB
(above + earth)
"up the mountain"

N

QAB TEB
(under/bottom/end + earth)
"down the valley/to the river"

NHUB P008
(sun + fail)
"the sun has dropped"

NHUB TUAJ
(sun + present/gift)
"coming through the door"
TWO EXAMPLES OF A HMONG HOUSE STRUCTURE

FIGURE 4

(Vang and Lewis: 1984)

(WLLY CALL TSIB-I'AUG)

(Lewis and Lewis: 1984)
compass, his map reading skills and, consequently, the ability to find his way around larger urbanized areas of Laos led to his eventual abandonment of the Hmong traditional terms "up the mountain" and "down to the river". "North" is different now than what it used to be", Xang relates (personal communication:1988).

The sun plays a prominent role in the word-play and flexible naming of the terms "east" and "west" (see Figure 3). To the Hmong, "east" is nhub tuaj (sun + to come) "4. My consultant suggested to me that the inference here is that "the sun is growing or coming through the door"; however, I can find no linguistic correlations between "growth/grow" (kev hlob), or "door" (qhoj rooj) with the word for "east". Johnson (1986) also denotes that another phrase used is hauv ntuj (origin/beginning + sky) as "beginning of the sky." To the agricultural society of the Hmong, the sun was an important and prominent feature.

The word for "west", nhub poob (sun + fall or drop) appears to be more of an action-word giving the connotation of the sun dropping (like a ball would drop or a crop would drop/fail). Other informants have used the word qab ntug (under/bottom/end + sky) (Johnson: 1986) which is interpreted to mean "end of the sky". Occasionally, where there is a bright sunset, the Hmong will sometimes say, "qab ntug daj rhuv" or "the end of the sky is bright yellow".

It should also be noted here that another informant, Tong Ly (younger than my other informants), suggested that the traditional Hmong views and the language inference of "east" and "west" are "word-pictures of sunrise and sunset" rather than a strict location on the horizon (personal communication:1988). The above information also presents us with the possibilities and problems that might occur when a Hmong house, for instance, is situated on the west face slope of a mountain. Does this mean "up the mountain" (north) and "sun to come" (east) are the same direction? My informants were not able to relate any situations in which this might have occurred.

Sun (Nhub) and Day (Nhub No)

My consultants made no mention of the sun's different horizon rising and setting points and did not appear concerned with the sun's overall movement across the sky during the day nor during the year. Vang & Lewis, describing the farmers' attitude while working, explains the
Hmong used to say, "when you work, don't work like a green snake that's almost dead. (Keep your head down and your eyes on your work.) Don't bend your head backwards to watch things. Don't watch the progress of the sun too much (tsis txhob ntsia lub hnub heev heev). A person who works in the wrong way will end up without enough to eat, enough to drink like all the others in the village (1984:155).

Although this describes a subtle aversion to sun-watching, it may be more indicative of a work-ethic, lesson-giving device than an actual comment about the sun. Indeed Mai Lee Yang ascribes motion to the sun with her use of the word sab (half, between, side), which sometimes precedes the various above mentioned Hmong east/west phrases to describe the terms for "noon", or "afternoon" (personal communication:1988). Also, the words signifying "day" or "today" are nbun no, they literally mean, "sun + cold". Does this phrase infer that before sunrise at dawn the sun is cold and, as it moves upward into the sky, becomes hot? My consultant, Xang, could not explain the use of the words "sun cold" for "today"; however, it is interesting that "legends tell of a time when Hmong lived in a cold land with ice and snow, and where night lasted for half the year" (Vang & Lewis 1984:6). The sun affects all life. Storyteller Nhia Lor Yang explains why there is day and night:

Long ago, there were nine suns and nine moons. When it was night, it was night for a very long time. When it was day, it was daytime for a very long time. The people of the worked could not work enough to have sufficient to eat, and they were angry. They made a cross-bow nine dag (unit of measure, the distance between the tips of the fingers when the arms are held shoulder high, stretched out to the side; about five feet) long and eight dag wide, and went to shoot the suns. The suns and the moons were very afraid and were not willing to come out. The earth was dark for seven years and people of the world could do no work to get food to eat. They said, "What kind of animal can go and call the sun and the moon to come out?" They sent the bull to call, to see if the sun and moon would come out, but they would not. They sent the tiger to call,
to see if the sun and moon would come out, but they would not. They sent the bird, the lib-nyug (similar to a hawk) to call, to see if the sun and moon would come out, but they would not. They sent the rooster to call, to see if the sun and moon would come out. The rooster called and called, and the sun came out for a little while (daytime), and then the moon came out for a little while (night). Since that time there has been daylight and nighttime, so that people can work, and have enough to eat, and they have lived until now (Vang & Lewis 1984:17).

It is interesting to note that the rooster in this story only appears to call one sun (and moon) out, rather than all nine. But, the latter concurs with Sia's statement that "there is only one sun, it goes away at night and comes back in the morning" (personal communication:1988).

The sun's movement is often segmented into named days. Even though apparently not describing successive days of the week, Vang & Lewis present one set of days during the fourth month of the year:

During this month we watch for a day that will be a good one for burning. We Hmong count our days by using a cycle of animal days--monkey day, dragon day, rooster day, etc. Different days will bring different results in burning. If we burn on monkey day, the fields burn very fast, but not completely. If we burn on a dragon day, then the air will be too humid and not good for burning. We could then 'see a tiger'--patches of unburned growth, that from a distance, looks like markings of a tiger. A good day would be a cow day; the fire burns strongly and the growth is completely burned. We hope for a day that has a good wind and is hot enough. We all burn at the same time, for instance at noon on a set day. (1984:167)

The above animal/day representation will be discussed further with regard to the New Year's celebration.

The Sky (Ntuj)

In "La Creation Du Monde" Mottin (1981) suggests that
Hmong speak of several different "levels in the sky." Indeed, in the folktale Shee Yee and the Evil Spirits, we read of a hawk that it flew up three times, each higher than before: the first time ib nta ntuj (rather high into the sky, to the middle altitudes), the second time ib nta ntuj ntag (really rather high into the sky, indeed, even higher than the middle altitudes), the third time, to the extreme limit, clear to the other side of the world ("sab ntuj nraum ub lawm") (Johnson 1986:96).

Even though it appears as if the hawk flew to the other side of the heavens, the Hmong expressions used here only connotate the physical sky (where there are clouds and air).

The structure of the sky is portrayed in Mottin's information; he concludes that the heavens are held up by a column whose foundation begins on the earth. This concept is also found in Johnson's material."

The Hmong conception of the sky ("ntuj") is that of a circular disc supported by a central column, or an inverted bowl like an umbrella covering the earth. There is a door in the sky, leading to the realm beyond, which is the domain of "huab tais quam ntuj", the king of the region beyond the sky ("quam ntuj"), who is more powerful than other spirits which live there, but is inactive and indifferent (1986:22).

Expressions such as "suam ntuj" (on, above, on top of, up in the sky, or above the sky, in the heavens) and "quam ntuj" (the high heavens, heaven beyond the firmament) are other ways to describe the region or place of the kung of heaven. The latter phrases denote a spiritual or "otherworldly" sense rather than physical sense of the word "sky".

In Johnson's (1986:62) notes on Shee Yee and the Evil Spirits these names for other regions of the sky also appear: sauro ntuj and, interchangeably, quam ntuj (beyond the sky). These regions were places where legendary spirits had access to the earth, and to which legendary earthingling heroes had access, by means
of a door in the sky ("lub rooj ntug"), through which they could move back and forth during their exploits and adventures.

These places "beyond the sky" are not, as most consultants agree, the same place as the "abode of the dead" ("dab teb") or ("ntuj txias teb tsaus" literally, sky-cold-land-dark) where the souls of dead ancestors reside.

In Hmong belief, (the spirit world) is generally thought of as being a mysterious realm of unknown location but probably on the same plane as the world of men, or even under the ground. In any case, this land of spirits also communicates with the world of earthly people by a door (Johnson 1986:62).

Teng Chu, in the story The Beginning of the World (Johnon 1986:16), is the one who lifts up the sky, stretches out the land and becomes lord and master of the universe (the heavens and the earth). However, it is elsewhere noted that other names for this lord and master are Ngao Njua and her husband Na (Mottin:1981), Ngao Njua and Shee Na (Johnson:1986), and Ntuj (Mottin:1981). With regard to the latter name, Johnson (1986:16) relates, "the Hmong myths collected by Jean Mottin in Thailand have "heaven" or "the sky" ("ntuj") creating the earth, so Mottin takes Ntuj to be the Hmong Creator God". While Ntuj may or may not be the official name of the Hmong creator God, Yang & Lewis (1984:130), when speaking of the birth of a new baby state,

"It doesn't matter whether it's a boy or a girl; Hmong say that it's your fortune, your luck, or your blessing from the sky ("ntuj"). (Emphasis and parentheses mine).

Other sky sayings listed by Yang & Lewis (1984:78,36):

-Xav luaj ntuj, Xu luaj nyuj
  (wish big as sky, miss target big as cow) = Aim for the sky; Hit the cow.
  Niam txiv piv tam lub ntuj; Tub ki piv
-tam lub teb
  (mother father compare as sky, children compare as earth) = Parents are like the sky; Children are like the earth.
star (Nhub Qub)

Storyteller Tong Ga Vue in Grandmother's Path, Grandfather's Way (Vang & Lewis 1984:21) explains why there are stars in the sky.

Once there were no stars in the sky like there are now. Long ago the king of heaven had a daughter, named Princess Nou Kou (nhub qub or "star"). She had a big goiter on the side of her neck. Nobody liked her, and there wasn't any young man to marry her. She did not have a husband. She ran away to build a house deep in the heart of the jungle and she lived there alone. She had only a dog to be her companion.

She lived there for a long time. There was a mother ghost who came along and saw her. The mother ghost loved her and took care of her. The mother ghost gave a lot of silver and a lot of gold to Princess Nou Kou, therefore, she was very very wealthy.

One day she went to buy things in the village and she used the gold to pay for the things she needed. She returned to her home, and all the gold was already there, waiting for her. So she took the money and gave it to the villagers, a few pieces to each one, but the silver and gold always came back to her. She was the only person to have silver and gold. She wanted to give away her wealth to other people, but she couldn't; the pieces always came back to her.

One day, she took the pieces of silver and gold and threw them everywhere—to the top of the mountain, to the foot of the mountain, every place—the pieces stuck where they landed. She threw all her pieces of silver and gold, and suddenly, there was a great sky full of blinking stars. That's why the sky has stars flashing and twinkling.

The silver pieces became white stars, very clear and bright enough to see well; the gold pieces became yellow stars, not quite clear and not quite bright enough to see well.

This explanation of bright and not-so-bright stars is
interesting when compared to the literal translation of the Hmong word for "star", nhub qUb, which means "sun old". Could it be that the Hmong, even many hundreds of years ago, had a better understanding than that of their western European counterparts in regard to the commonality between "our star--the sun" and "the other stars--out there"? Or, are the stars "sun old" because, through time, they have moved farther away from the earth or appear to be "burning out"? My consultants only concluded that some stars are definitely "brighter than others" (Lee, personal communication:1988).

The latter association with the brightness of stars versus the brightness of other objects in the sky is summed up in the Hmong saying:

Ib ntuj7qub pom kev tsis cuag ib lub txhais hli, Ib leeg tub tsis cuag ib leeg txiv.
(One sky star see way not equal one quarter (part) moon, one son not equal one father) = A starry sky does not light your way as well as quarter moon; One son does not equal a father" (Vang & Lewis 1984:79).

Constellation names were not available from my consultants. Through an interpreter I was told that "some Hmong elders might know something about the stars but, we did not know about that" (Lee, personal communication:1988). Xang did, however, point to the belt of Orion and explain that some Hmong talk about "stars that connect or come together", nhub qub kwv ntas (stars that are lineally arranged and close in proximity). He also pointed out many sets of "stars that connect" in the night sky.

The most intriguing comment regarding the stars was the information regarding "the leader star" nhub qub coj cev. It seems there is a star which is very bright and always rises just before the moon every evening. This lone star, it is said, leads the moon across the sky nightly and is not visually identified as either Venus or Jupiter by the interpreter (Lee, personal communication:1988). I have yet to understand the concept of "the leader star" and what star or stars it may correspond with on Western star maps.

Moon and Month (Hlis and Hlis Ntuj)

The Hmong appear to place primary importance on the movement of the moon for their calendrical cycles, keeping track of the days per month, months in a seasonal
cycle, and the number of months in a year. When I asked several Hmong people to share with me "things in or of the sky" they always referred first to the moon (Lee, M. Yang, personal communication: 1988).

Through an interpreter, Sia expressed that as a child of about thirteen she learned from her father and mother "all about the moon" (Lee, personal communication: 1988). She continues to relate the cycle of the moon:

the third day of the month, it is a small sliver, we say it is hlis xiab (moon + waxing), the moon is growing. By the eighth day of the month, we say the moon is xiab yig (waxing + eight)-this is what you call "a half moon". I know it is the fifteenth day of the month when I see all of the moon, it is filled up (like a pitcher of water is "filled up")-we say the moon is hlis nra. After the fifteenth day the moon begins to "leak out" hlis nqig. By the twenty second day of the month the moon is "leaked out halfway". The twenty seventh day of the month is the same as the third day of the month except the moon shape is reversed (and the moon is still leaking, instead of filling up). The 29th, 30th, 1st and 2nd of each month, even if there are no clouds in the sky, the moon is all "leaked out" and I can not see it."

When shown pictures/diagrams of the different phases of the moon, my interpreter felt it made no difference whether the moon was, in Western terminology, waxing or waning. The size of the crescent or half-shape rather than its side or angle determines the day of the month for the Hmong (see Figure 5).

Grandma Sia, also noted that there are twelve moon-cycles in one year. The moon-cycles or "months" are called hlis ntuj (moon + sky); this appears to be a linguistic representation of the Hmong understanding of the cyclical nature of the moon's travels over the course of a roughly 30 day period.

There appears to be no synthesis of the lunar and solar cycles. Neither Sia or Xang could recall a year-period in which there were more than twelve moon-cycles. This information may have been affected by, or be attributed to, a lengthy "escape-journey" through the jungles of Laos: "••••. In the deep jungle like that, the trees are so big and high and dense, you never see the
THE MOON CALENDAR

3RD DAY  8TH DAY  15TH DAY

HLIS XIAB
"The moon is filling up"

22ND DAY  27TH DAY  29TH-2ND DAY

HLIS NQIG
"The moon is leaking out"
sunlight. " (Johns & Strecker 1986:233). In addition to the long escape-journey, the Hmong also experienced a general cancellation of all ceremonial activities relating to the New Year as well as a prolonged stay in Thailand refugee camps in which western calendars and watches were introduced, probably further limiting reliance on natural phenomena. One wonders what cosmological information may have been lost in the past two decades of extreme cultural hardships for the Hmong.

Hmong folklore regarding the moon is varied. My interpreter, having a subtle appreciation of western stories and myths concerning the moon (eg., "the man in the moon", "the moon is made of green cheese"), translated the following story as told by Grandma Sia.

Niam nkauj kub kaws
(The Special Frog Princess)

Once there was a girl frog-princess who lived on the moon. She was very hungry. She ate and ate very much food. She laid down on the moon and fell asleep. While she was sleeping a tree grew out from her stomach. It grew bigger and bigger. She found that when she woke up she could not get up because the tree made her stick to the moon (pinned to the face of the moon). Sometimes when you look at the moon (with its many dark and light shadows) you can still see the frog princess. She is still there. (parentheses mine, for clarification)

Although the story does not exclusively express a specific assignment of female gender for the moon, it contrasts with what Johnson (1986:19) reports:

While western affective connotations might ascribe masculine gender to the sun and feminine to the moon, the Hmong conception is quite otherwise. The male, considered braver, is given night work, while the female is allowed work by day. In real life, the Hmong consider that boys and men are braver than girls and women, less afraid of the dark and of things like snakes, baby mice and earth worms.

The moon therefore, regardless of gender, is still a most important facet of time-keeping for the Hmong.
In Laos, on the 30th day of the twelfth month (tsiab peb caug) the Hmong finalize preparations to welcome the New Year through ritualistic ceremonies commencing at about 4:00 in the afternoon. It takes much preparing to celebrate our New Year. We have a big party for one or two or sometimes seven days only. It is our national holiday. There is always a lot of food and drinking (Lee, personal communication:1988).

Midnight of the 30th day of the twelfth month is the beginning of New Year for the Hmong. For many of the farmers, it is the only time away from the fields all year and, therefore, the New Year's celebration is full of spirited festivities, blessing-giving and dynamic rituals. The Hmong also observe the type of "animal-year".

They listen to find out which animal is going to open the year. The year is named for the animal that cries out first, such as 'cow-year', 'lee-nyu-year' (similar to a hawk, or 'rooster-year'. Everyone in the village gathers together in one house to listen to find out what animal makes the sound. If it is the cow that bellows first, then the coming year will be good, but there will be hunger, since the cow eats so much. If it is the bird, the lee-nyu, that cries out first, then the coming year will bring trouble, sickness, death and other misfortunes. If it is the rooster that calls out first, then the coming year will be called the rooster-year, and it will be a good one. A rooster year is good because the rooster is one that leads the sun into the world each day (Vang & Lewis 1984:159).

The New Year, although based on the calendrical cycle of the moon, is a festival that welcomes the new sun. Even today in the United States, the Hmong celebrate this important holiday between November 25th and December 25th depending on the probability of fair weather and the availability of a large facility to house the entire community.

Birth and death ceremonies are also tied to the Hmong understanding of the cyclical nature of the moon
and the sun. Although the birth of a child entails many ritualistic practices and taboos before and after birth not mentioned here, it is noteworthy that the Hmong "believed that the gestation period for a female child was nine months, while ten months were required for a boy" (Barney in Sutton 1984:11). In death, the Hmong acknowledge the sun as helpful in the travel of the soul. "The Hmong believe that the spirit of the dead person should depart as the sun sets, so that the soul will not come back often to make a nuisance of itself" (Anon 1981:43).

Other Sky Phenomena

Rainbows are a fearful sign in the sky for the Hmong. Vang & Lewis (1984:93) write that "rainbow" is zaj sawv (dragon-standing up). One of my consultants was aware that there were Hmong folktales of "dragons in the sky" but, dismissed it as nonsense (Lee, personal communication: 1988). Without mention of dragons, another consultant, Pa Ku, related that whenever a rainbow was seen

I was very sad and my mother told me not to look at it. We always know that when a rainbow comes many people would be dead. You know, much rains come before a rainbow and all the people that are at river die because water in river goes too fast. So Hmong people do not like rainbow. When I first came to United States I was in Michigan and I liked it because I never see a rainbow but, now that I am in Redding (CA) I see many rainbows and I am scared (personal communication: 1988).

Another sky sign, an eclipse (dab noj hlis/lub hnub = spirit + eat + moon/sun), believed a threatening force in many cultures, is also a sign of fear for the Hmong. Though the Chinese, even prior to the 8th century B.C., could record and predict eclipses, "they believed them caused by a dog or dragon, trying to eat the darkened planet, and attempted to drive the animal off with gongs and fire-crackers" (Brendon and Mithrophanow 1927:8). So too, when two consultants experienced an eclipse of the sun (presumed to be "sometime in 1965-66" at around "9:00 or 10:00 in the morning") (Lee, personal communication: 1988), there was the continual sound of gunfire and noise throughout the mountain villages. Pa Ku shared what she remembered of her frightening childhood experience:
When I was about three, I was down at the river. Everything started to get dark. I looked at the sun, it was turning black. My mother call all of us to come home--hurry fast. She told us not to look at the sun, we must hide in the house. Many people shoot guns at the sun, they try to make the sun come back. Pretty soon the sun was not dark anymore. I don't know what happened (personal communication: 1988).

Xang, too, recalled what happened; he added

To see what was happening to the sun, many people looked in a large bucket filled with water to see (the reflection) the sun. You could see better the dark sun (personal communication:1988).

It is unclear to me why many of the Hmong chose to look at the eclipse through reflected water unless there was knowledge of harmful light or spirits (?) projected during an eclipse or possible cultural taboo as mentioned earlier by Pa Ku.

In conclusion, the Hmong, though their origins are not fully understood, have attempted to remain an independent and "free" people. So, too, their cosmology remains uniquely Hmong. The rugged life on the mountain slopes and hillsides have caused them to form what Westerners might call, extremely "subjective" cardinal directions to describe the world around them. Direction is evaluated by whether something is "up the mountain", or "down to the river".

The sun, the day, the stars and the sky are all part of a daily cycle that begins when "the sun comes through the door".

The moon, however, appears to be the most important sky sign for the Hmong. Not only is the moon's cycle a daily calendar-keeping device but also determines the date set for the most important national holiday, the New Year. Calculated differently for males than for females, the moon cycles also determine the length of human gestation.

Finally, some sky signs are not pleasant--such as rainbows and eclipses and there are many taboos surrounding the appearance of these unexplainable phenomena for the Hmong.
Notes

Acknowledgments

Research in Hmong astronomy was extremely difficult in that, except for folktales and sayings from Grandmother's Path, Grandfather's Way (Vang & Lewis:1984) and a few tidbits found in Hmong creation stories (Johnson:1985, Mottin:1981), virtually nothing had been written specifically on Hmong ethnoastronomy. I am indebted, therefore, to the following consultants and interpreters for their friendship, time, enthusiasm, and patience with my many (sometimes absurd) questions:

"Grandma" Sia Yang
three of her sons: Xang Lee, Chai Lee and Tong Ly
daughters-in-law: Pa Ku Lee, Mai Lee Yang

While this paper is by no means a conclusive discussion of the cosmology of the Hmong, it represents a beginning investigation of things of the sky. I acknowledge the many linguistic differences between the White and Blue Hmong dialects (see: Bliatout, et ale 1988:14) and note that my consultants and interpreters may or may not exemplify the mainstream of White Hmong culture either in their homelands or in this, their adopted, country (Vang, personal communication:1988).

1. Many sources say this, but there is some debate. In usage, Hmong use the term "Hmong" (or "hmoob") as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hmong Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>haiv hmoob</td>
<td>Hmong of another clan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peb hmoob</td>
<td>we Hmong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmoob dawb</td>
<td>White Hmong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Hmong" refers to the people who consider themselves to be Hmong (as opposed to Chinese, Mien, etc.). It is not always translated as "free" in the usual sense, nor it is clear who originally translated "hmoob" as "free" (Vang & Lewis, personal communication:1989).

2. The Lao language, however, rather than Hmong, was used for all education classes.

3. One notable exception regards the N/S orientation of the house. If a Hmong family decided to reside in a flatland or non-mountainous area, as happened often during the Vietnam War, the front door of the home was orientated east. (Lee, personal communication:1988).
4. "tuaj" can mean "to come" (to a place other than home), or to grow or sprout (as horns, feathers or hair) (Vang & Lewis, personal communication:1989).

5. Nyiajpo Lis, an Australian Hmong, has written some novels using this orthography for nhub, but the usual way is with the "n" first, spelled hnub (Vang & Lewis, personal communication:1989). Author's note: All of my local consultants preferred to spell their word for sun, nhub, therefore it was used exclusively throughout the text.

6. When speaking of the "sun", the Hmong use the classifier lub preceding nhub (sun); nhub by itself generally means "day" (Vang & Lewis, personal communication:1989).

7. Xang Lee prefers to substitute lub nhub (sun) here for ntuaj (sky). His change suggests, "the sun can never equal the moon" (personal communication:1989).

8. This term is also the same word used to describe the "subsiding" waters of the Mekong a few days after heavy rains (Lee, personal communication:1989).
References Cited


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