

Brief Overview of Hmong Culture

*Prepared by Vangee Yang
Neighborhood House, St. Paul, MN
<http://www.neighb.org/>*

Family System

- It is based on a clan system. In each clan there is the Clan leader and then sub clan leaders.
- The clan leaders negotiate marriages/divorces and are also the mediators during disputes. However, their roles have changed because of the integration into the American society.
- A Hmong family consists of not only the immediate family members but extended family members- uncles, aunts, and clan leaders.
- Decision-making involves a collaboration between the head of the household and the clan leaders. Community versus individual.
- The head of the household is the father. He makes the decisions.
- Mother is the caretaker of the children and family.

Marriage

- Children live with their parents until they get married. Culturally, men marry between the ages of 18 and 30. Women marry between the ages of 14 and 18. This has changed as Hmong become more acclimated to Western culture.
- As a tradition, not law, parents from both sides must approve a marriage. This is true for persons of all ages.
- It is a taboo for a Hmong woman and Hmong man of the same clan to get married. Both parties will be cut of from their respective families.
- First cousins can marry each other, but an uncle or aunt cannot marry a niece or a nephew.
- After marriage, a woman takes her husband's name. She will be known as Mrs. Fong Vue and not as Mrs. Mai Shoua Her.
- Divorce is legal but not common. Both sides of the family handle family conflict.

Childbirth and Children

- Hmong husbands deliver the baby with the help of another woman. Then, he must stay home at least two or three days to care for his wife (in Laos).
- After delivery, a woman cannot go out to visit relatives or friends except her husband's blood. She must stay inside the house for one month. During this time, she can only eat boiled chicken with herbs and hot cooked rice.
- When an unwed girl becomes pregnant, the parents will build a temporary shelter for her outside of her parent's house where she can deliver the baby. During the first month after delivery, she cannot enter into anyone's home but must stay in the shelter. This is because of differences in the family spirits.
- Sons are valued more than daughters.
- The eldest son has a duty to perform the ancestor worship in the home.
- Brothers and sisters never touch or kiss each other.
- Boys and girls are not free to do what they want. Girls are under strict supervision.
- Sex segregation is the common social rule.

Death/Mourning

- When a person dies, his/her body will be buried underground. No cremation or autopsy is ever performed.
- The elders love their homes and land. They want to die at home near their family, not in a hospital or somewhere else.
- Some Hmong wear a white headband for mourning until the body is buried. (Only blood family). This is to protect and keep one's spirit within oneself.

Hmong Community Leadership

- Traditionally, all contact with outside communities, agencies and organizations goes through clan leaders.
- Currently, individual Hmong women and men, young and old are becoming more independent of the clan leader.
- Local Mutual Assistance Associations may or may not play leadership roles in their communities.
- When collaborating with the Hmong Community, don't assume traditional leaders will play key roles.

Health

Views/Perspective on Western Practices:

- There is fear that they might not be treated properly.
- Fear of the unknown. This was true for the earlier arrivals, when they would not allow physicians to perform surgery. However, this has changed in the past 10 years.
- Hmong are shy about their bodies, particularly Hmong women. This can be a conflict if it is not approach properly.
- Hmong has the tendency to turn to the traditional Eastern medicines before seeking professional assistance and Western practices.

Alternative practices:

- Herbs
 - Shamanism rituals
 - Home/Traditional remedies (it is important to understand this because Hmong use a method called coining- this has led to false reports of child abuse since it leaves a mark)
- There is a stigma with **mental health** in the Hmong community. To be diagnosed with mental health is not acceptable for many people in the community because it places a label on that individual as "crazy".

Spirituality

- It is based on Shamanism- ancestral worships.
- This is when you will have to respect the alternative approach of animal sacrifices and calling of the ancestors to cure someone who is sick/ill.

What to expect:

- They will see you as the professional and expect you to know it all. The saying: "You are the doctor, tell me what is wrong with me."
- There will be that fear that you are the authoritative figure, since most of these people have live in fear and close scrutiny.
- Will referred to family members that have been in the USA for everything- and expect them to make the right decision for them.