

Animistic Relations in Nature: Spirits in the Natural World and the Underlying Process and Worldview that Influence Daily Life in Contemporary Hmong Society

Danny Vincent DeSantiago¹

Abstract

Hmong are an ethnic group from East and Southeast Asia who have a rich tradition of animism. Animistic worldviews are often recognized for their inherent human-environment relationships. While notable literature exists on the Hmong culture, those that explore their intricate beliefs about nature and provide a more recent account are scarce. This essay presents novel documentation on the spirit-associated relationships with nature of Hmong in contemporary society. In addition, the essay also explored the diverse ways in which those spirits influence daily activities and the animistic worldview that drives them. Methods were based in ethnography, narrative inquiry, and grounded theory approaches using in-depth interviews, unstructured interviews, and participant observation in Thailand and California. The results revealed numerous nature-related spirits for Hmong in both urban and traditional settings. However, data also suggests possible decreases in the knowledge and practice of historically described beliefs which I suggest result from modernization and geopolitical factors. I argue the Hmong's dynamic correspondence with the spirit world drives various degrees of daily life influences. These influences are driven by a collection of emotional and physical factors that are engendered by an animistic worldview characterized by intimate relatedness and personhood attributed to the spirits.

Keywords: Animism, Spirits, Nature, Nature relationships, Traditional worldview, Hmong, Modernization, Thailand, California

Introduction

Nature has often influenced the development of humanity's spiritual worldview. Many indigenous animistic worldviews have long been recognized for the inherent human-environment relationships they cultivate. Over a century ago, Edward Burnett Tylor published his esteemed work, *Primitive Culture* (1871), that put forth some of the first anthropological thoughts about indigenous belief systems. Although now considered misconstrued¹, it paved the way for numerous scholars to develop more comprehensive understandings of this long-misunderstood system. Since then, countless others have completed intriguing literature on animistic cultures, that in turn, have derived valuable epistemes of those peoples and human society as a whole (Bird-David 1999; McCoy 1982; Oswell & Maposa 2010; Petersen 2001; Rappaport 1984, 1999). One such animistic culture is the Hmong: an ethnic minority from East and Southeast Asia.

¹ Science & English Literature Educator

Although well-studied, much of the nuances and contemporary state of their intricate spiritual practice remains undocumented and understudied. Out of this gap, I began the investigation with an open-ended question: What spiritual entities constitute Hmong beliefs about nature? However, a secondary question evolved: How does the spiritually animated environment in Hmong worldview influence daily life activities?

This essay revealed that numerous nature-spirit relations manifest themselves in both contemporary traditional and urban lifestyles. Forests, plants, animals, and entire landscapes are animated by spirits even in the most urban settings. The Hmong's dynamic correspondence with the spirit world drives various degrees of daily life influences. Some are as subtle as a word spoken, while others are as pronounced as one fearing to leave home. I argue these influences are driven by a collection of emotional and physical factors that are engendered by an animistic worldview characterized by intimate relatedness and personhood.

Animism has been an ambiguous term in anthropology and is largely debated.² A commonly reiterated definition is as such: the belief of divinity in natural phenomenon and objects (Hunter & Whitten 1976: 12). This definition, as Nurit Bird-David argues, is based on the archaic "Tylorian representation" that the only true knowledge is that of science, and thus animists childishly misunderstood the world (Bird-David 1999: S68). This idea of animism as a failed science steams back to Hume's *Natural History of Religion* where he argues animism simply represents the natural tendency for humans to conceive all beings like themselves. In addition, historical anthropological approaches to animism have been grounded in the "principles, philosophies, and conclusions of modern science," (Swancutt 2019: 1) as opposed to the experience of animists themselves. Despite this, the concept of animism has made a comeback in scholarship.

Scores of late literatures have made compelling revaluations and revivals of animism as an alternative ontology to the world (Swancutt & Mazard 2018; Brightman, Grotti, & Ulturgasheva 2012; Pedersen 2001; Arhem & Sprenger 2016; Astor-Aguilera & Harvey 2018; Harvey 2014). A compelling understanding is found in Bird-David's (1999) concept of *Relational Epistemology*, which describes animism as a composite relationship between the human and non-human persons (S77-79)³. Katherine Swancutt identifies two seminal themes found in the animistic traditions of the world: (1) the spiritual immanence that encompasses beings and things in the world, as opposed to the transcendence view commonly found in theistic religions; (2) the attribution of personhood to entities in the world where beings or things are understood as people just like humans due to the souls or spirits within them (Swancutt 2019: 2). I argue that the findings are consistent with the personhood and relational concepts described in the aforementioned neo-animism literature (e.g. Bird-David 1999; Swancutt 2019). There is no agreed definition of animism, spirits, and other various terms to define the spiritual entities of the rich indigenous traditions of the world. Therefore, this essay will use these terms interchangeably to describe the spiritual phenomenon of the Hmong experience.

Notable literature exist that describes Hmong spirit-nature relationships. Depending on the type, the Hmong refer to spirits as *Dab*⁴, *Neeb*, or *Dab neeb*.⁵ The sacredness of space and land has been recognized in Asia for centuries. This concept known as geomancy, is defined as a system of "conceptualizing the physical environment which regulates human ecology" by selecting auspicious environments (Yoon 1980: 341). The Hmong hold strong geomantic beliefs, as Tomforde (2006) has highlighted in a term

she calls *Cultural Spatiality*, which describes the Hmong socio-cultural and cosmological identity to a landscape that she argues exist in both the physical and mental space. Landscapes also play an important role in the afterlife. It is essential for those passed and still living to select suitable burial grounds for the deceased (Her 2005). Tomforde (2006) identifies this concept as *Looj mem*: a Hmong term that describes the spiritual quality of land. I have found these concepts to be a prominent experience in the Hmong's nature-spirit relationship.

Nicholas Tapp is considered one of the primary authorities on Hmong culture and spirituality. His manuscript, *Hmong Religion* (1989), describes a great deal of Hmong spirituality and cosmology. He provides detailed accounts of various spirits of the cosmos, the home, and in regard to this essay's topic: spirits associated with nature, to a lesser degree. Huang & Sumrongthong (2004) provide comprehensive accounts about the guardian tree spirit: *Ntoo xeeb* and its value to Hmong society, whereas other sources also elaborate on the hostility and misfortunes brought by spirits (e.g. Lee & Tapp 2010). The natural world is animated with countless spiritual entities protecting and sometimes harming the Hmong. These spirits are fundamental in the Hmong's engagement with the world. Shamanism is a vital aspect of the Hmong spiritual experience. A shaman (*Txiv neeb*) is one who has the power to communicate between the Earth and spirit realm (Conquergood 1989: 6). Their purpose is to interact with the spirit world (*Yaj Ceeb*) when necessary to maintain balance and harmony for physical and mental health (Gerdner 2012: 4). In relation to this article's central claim of spirit-nature relations, shamanism is often strongly associated with nature (Eliade 1988: 339; Fournet 2020: 15). Shamanism provided valuable insight into notable Hmong spirit-nature interactions, which were largely absent in literature.

While there are other scholars who have researched, to a degree, Hmong spiritual entities (Chindarsi, 1976; Leepreecha 2004; Her 2005; Lee 2005; Lor, Lee, & Yang 2013; Gerdner 2015; Piraban 1990), much of the nuances and changes of this enigmatic epistemology and ontology in the contemporary world remain undocumented both in and outside of Asia and do not elaborate on how the unique relationship influences Hmong in daily life. Most notably, few elaborate on the distinct nature relation in Hmong spirituality. In addition, this literature provided valuable data on historical animistic beliefs to aid in evaluating how Hmong traditional beliefs have potentially evolved over the years.

This research is based on fieldwork in both urban and traditional environments of California and Thailand (October 2015–July 2016). The findings are divided into four parts that each describe spirit nature relationships that emerged from the data: Spirit Relationships in Landscapes; Spirit Relationships in Animals, Nature Relationships in Shamanism, and Spirit Relationships in Agriculture and Ethnobotany. Acculturation and globalization have radically changed Hmong society, and thus, old traditions come in conflict with the new world around them. These realities generate a dynamic evolution of traditions and beliefs trying to adapt and assimilate and thus warrants further research to fully understand the ramifications. In this regard, this research hopes to raise awareness about the diverse spiritual beliefs that are fundamental to understanding Hmong social and cultural structure.

Methods

Conceptual Framework & Positionality

This research is based on narrative inquiry (Patton 2014) and ethnographic work in Thailand and California (October 2015-July 2016) using unstructured interviews, in-depth interviews, and participant observation with a total of thirty-four participants. However, the project also adopted grounded-theory approaches to address the secondary objective. In terms of positionality, I disclose that I share no affinity (biological or social) to the Hmong community prior to this project. Reflexive practice (Paulus, Lester, & Dempster 2013) was done in analytical memos to be mindful of potential bias. For example, analytical notes were taken after correspondences and transcriptions to distinguish what was seen in the data, what was not seen, and my interpretations. This allowed me to avoid subconscious assumptions of participant responses based on literature and pre-conceived notions. Patterns and themes were identified from the raw data themselves. In addition, I identified expectations for many interview questions beforehand to analyze in comparison to the raw data. This allowed me to be cognizant of potential bias encroaching in what participants actually said.

Participants & Field sites

Field sites were chosen to be able to draw on perspectives from both traditional and urban environments. Thailand sites (N=23) were in the Chiang Mai province at two villages located in the Suthep-Pui National Park: Doi Pui and Kun Chang Khian. Doi Pui is frequently visited by tourists while the latter is more remote in the nearby mountain where few tourists find their way. Farming both cash crops and subsistence is the primary occupation of almost everyone in the sites. Participants in California (N=11) were recruited from the following organizations and events: Annual Hmong New Year Festival (Sacramento & Stockton, CA), Hmong Story 40 Event (Fresno, CA), National Hmong American Farmers (Fresno, CA), Hmong Student Association of Berkeley (Berkeley, CA), and two Berkeley farmer markets (Berkeley, CA).

Participant demographics were heterogenous because this work intended to describe the contemporary Hmong experience as a whole. Previous studies have shown that spiritual practices are commonplace regardless of age, sex, or degree of acculturation (Plotnikoff et al. 2002). For this reason, I concluded specific age and gender demographics were not of significance to the objectives. I obtained a diverse sample of participants in age (18- 70), status (college students, working adults, farmers, herbal healers, and shamans) and living situations (traditional villages and urban environments). All participants in America were either first generation of immigrant parents, or immigrants from Laos or Thailand themselves. Nonrandom sampling was done to ensure there were participants with in-depth knowledge and experience of the spiritual epistemology (e.g. shamans) as well as those who are particularly adapted to contemporary living styles (e.g. first-generation college students). These diverse perspectives provided valuable data towards suggesting conclusions about the collective Hmong experience.

A Note on Traditional Beliefs & Christianity

It is important to mention that this essay reflects traditional spirituality and arguably does not regard the Hmong Christian worldview since many of them have often renounced their old traditions and maintain a worldview based in Christian theology. This narrative was evident in various interviews with Christian participants. Participants who were raised in strictly Christian environments and had little to no knowledge of the animistic tradition were disregarded since they could not contribute any significant information towards the essay's objective.

However, the distinction between traditionalists and Christians is not always rigidly dichotomous. Many Christian Hmong will continue to practice traditional beliefs (Gerdner & Xiong 2015:6). Several participants who identified as Christian elaborated on their participation and other Christian's participation in traditional animistic beliefs.⁶ Therefore, not only are they knowledgeable about animistic spirits, but the traditional ontology of the world appeared to still be a prominent aspect of their spiritual worldview. The interplay between these two belief systems is a complex topic beyond the scope of this essay's objective, however, the point to be made here is I found this to justify not completely disregarding some Christian narratives.

Data Collection & Analysis

Various procedures were taken to ensure comprehensive data was collected. In-depth interviews were audio recorded and lasted from forty minutes to two hours. Many of these participants were followed up with unstructured interviews as further questions evolved. Conversational unstructured interviews were made with additional community members. Participant observation allowed me to view how spiritual activities are currently practiced and talk with participants during the time activities were unfolding. Research integrity was taken to the fullest extent to ensure participants were provided with adequate informed consent. Village clan leaders granted permission to access village sites in Thailand prior to fieldwork. This study was approved by the International Review Board (IRB).

Many steps were taken to ensure data validity. In Thailand, almost all interviews were conducted in the Thai language. Although I speak advance level Thai, the project was assisted by a translator in the field who is fluently bilingual. The interviews in California were all done in English.⁷ After interviews, I engaged in member-checking through follow-up unstructured interviews and brief summaries with participants. In village sites, clarification of translation accuracy was done during the interviews and after meetings at the end of the day with the help of the translator. Interviews were later transcribed verbatim for further analysis and clarification. Thai language interviews were transcribed by fluent bilingual Thai-English speakers first in Thai and then in English. One potential setback was the possibility that information from interviews in Thai language was lost in translation since they were not in Hmong language. I tried to attend to this in three ways. First, proper Hmong pronunciation of names of spirits or spiritual concepts were clarified by native Hmong speakers beforehand.⁸ Second, interview questions were simplified enough to avoid errors when translated from English to Thai. Finally, I had fluent bilingual Thai-English speakers translate interview questions and these were discussed with the translator to clarify meanings and to avoid biases, such as leading questions.

Data collection in terms of the objectives was broken into two parts. First, I asked about various spirits and beliefs associated with nature as described in literature, while also attempting to reveal undescribed ones. Second, open-ended questions allowed participants to freely elaborate on a topic with anecdotes and personal experiences. To reveal spiritual influence on daily activities, many questions were asked about emotions, feelings, and perceptions about particular spirits and about physical outcomes created from those beliefs.

Data analysis was conducted largely following the framework of Miles and Huberman (1994) of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. For identifying particular spirits and beliefs, I extracted the mention of particular names of spirits and identified whether they were familiar or not with spirits and beliefs described in literature. Data was coded for four key themes regarding nature associations: landscapes, animals, agriculture, and ethnobotany. Nature relations in shamanism emerged as another prominent theme itself. Two key themes regarding influences on daily life activities emerged from the data: behavioral and emotional change. These two themes were further separated into subcomponents: Behavioral: restrictions, alternatives, and novelties; Emotional: fear, worry, and relief. I further identified a subcategory titled, consequences that also emerged as a relevant and reoccurring theme towards addressing spiritual influences. After coded, frequency of codes was documented, and key anecdotal evidence and narratives were used for data display and to draw conclusions.

Results

Spirit Relationships in Landscapes

I believe there is always a spirit of the land, and I believe that there is a guardian somewhere of that land, and if you are good to it, it will be good to you.

—Hmong Shaman, personal communication

Mountains play a fundamental role in traditional Hmong culture and are important at both an individual and societal level. This narrative constantly appeared in both interviews and observations. The Hmong TV Network site in Fresno, CA contained a large mural depicting a traditional scene of Hmong villages scattered throughout a mountainous landscape. Countless photographs and traditional Hmong quilts (*Pajntaub*) depicted mountain scenes at the Hmong Story 40⁹ event in Fresno, CA. Numerous participants described how mountains need to “hug” around villages for its health and prosperity (Fieldnotes, 2016).

Landscape was found to still be a significant factor in funeral traditions. Suitable *Looj mem* is usually determined by elders who analyze the landscape for features primarily concerning how the site is situated around surrounding mountains and hills (Fieldnotes, 2015). This significance of mountains to a burial site was exemplified elegantly from a Hmong Farmer:

It has to have a lot of mountains, just like people, they respect you and bow to you, mountains are like people, if you see a lot of curve coming down, it is like they are bowing to you, so if you put a person right there, future generations will have many people bow to that family.¹⁰

In fact, it is believed to be more important in death than in life (Female Villager, personal communication, December 2015). Interestingly, the term *Looj mem* was not familiar to many participants in Thailand (or California), yet it is a fundamental practice as shown with my participation in a funeral ceremony at the Kun Chang Khian village. The site was particularly chosen for its location in nearby mountains. To get there, all attendees drove about twenty minutes outside of the village in the nearby forest up narrow dirt roads (See *Figure 1*). The shaman and other knowledgeable elders selected this site for another deceased elder where they performed an elaborate ceremony (Elder Male Shaman, Shaman's Son, personal communication, January 2016). These examples found across communities suggest the everlasting importance of the traditional mountainous landscape engrained in both physical and mental space.



Figure 1: Funeral ceremony for elder in the forest near Kun Chang Khian village. Photo by author.

Forest and plants are believed to have their own spiritual entities. These spirits have the power to create significantly beneficial consequences in the Hmong worldview. Many Hmong interviewed in both California and Thailand claimed to still acknowledge the concept of guardian spirits as described by Tomforde (2006) and Huang & Sumrongthong (2004). Each geographical area has a guardian spirit. This supreme spirit can ensure the prosperity and protection of all the people who live in its territory (personal communication). The literature (Tomforde 2006; Chindarsi 1976; Huang & Sumrongthong 2004) states that in the village, guardian spirits known as *Ntoo xeeb*, will reside in large trees on carefully selected spots by shamans. Despite this, the two villages I visited did not have a guardian spirit in the form of a tree. However, a shaman of Kun Chang Khian reported that they used to have one long ago, however, due to some conflicts with development from the local Thai government, the tree had to be removed (Elder Male Shaman, personal communication December 2015). The particular name *Ntoo xeeb* was unfamiliar to most participants in California and no one had any accounts of it being practiced.

While guardian spirits can provide invaluable benefits to the community, they can quickly turn hostile in the advent of disrespect. A shaman in California described a number of serious disasters that resulted from a displeased guardian spirit, such as car accident deaths and hunting mishaps which in one case, resulted in a person being shot. A spirit may manifest illusions to victims that lead to accidents, such as tricking hunters

into thinking another human is an animal so they will shoot them. If one acts irresponsibly in the environment, they may, “do whatever it takes, to make a traumatic event happen” (Young Male Shaman, personal communication, June 2016). Spirits who roam forests are always considered evil and extremely dangerous. These forest dwelling entities are called *Dab* and many Hmong greatly fear them. One of the most feared and dangerous forest spirits is *Dab ntxaung*. It is said to “drink the blood and eat the internal organs” of an unsuspecting victim. No human can survive an encounter with it (Village Homestay Owner, personal communication, December 2015). Since harm or benefit is determined often by how one interacts or carries themselves in the presence of spirits, a conscious follower will perform particular or alternative behaviors in order to not offend them. A female shaman in California followed thoughtful procedures to cut a small tree in her driveway. She communicated to the spirit her reason for needing to cut the tree and performed a small offering ritual with *Nyiaj*¹¹ and incense (Sacramento Female Shaman, personal communication, June 2016).

Large bodies of water are often considered sacred places animated with powerful spirits according to many participants in both Thailand and California. Powerful dragon spirits¹² inhabit large bodies of water, such as lakes or rivers (Fieldnotes, 2015-16). The Doi Pui clan leader stated that Hmong in the villages will hold an annual ceremony at the head of the water for this spirit (Doi Pui Clan Leader, personal communication, December 2015). However, these spirits can also be hostile if disrespected. For example, one participant described a frightening situation of his brother almost drowning in a lake. This was believed to be the result of the offended dragon spirit, which later on, required a shaman to performing a cleansing ritual. The participant exclaimed how “spooked” his brother was about the ordeal, and the cleansing ritual’s purpose was to reconcile with the spirit and bring back harmony (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, March 2016).

It is common for many Hmong to alternate or refrain completely from certain behaviors due to spiritual presences in the surrounding environment. For example, a Hmong graduate student shared a childhood experience when she was yelling and commanding “nature” to do things, such as rain. However, her mother, viewed it as a serious danger that could potentially evoke real nature spirits. She described her mother’s worrisome perspective as, “things you say could really come to life, so don’t say it” (Graduate Student, personal communication, March 2015). Another student spoke about significant mental and behavioral preparation she had to make before a trip to Thailand. According to her mother, this was due to the fact that Thailand is the location of their home village and the site of not only her living kin, but also passed kin. Therefore, more spirits would be present and could harm her if she acted, spoke, or thought inappropriately (Female Undergraduate, personal communication, February 2016). One participant also described the need for strict awareness in behaviors whenever his family was outdoors. Loud noises at night and calling out for things as simple as “calling children to come to eat” can foster the attention of unwanted presences (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, March 2016). Making emotional distress public and calling out for the deceased can result in evil spirits responding (Hmong Woman, personal communication, June 2016). Hmong appear to alternate, restrict, or find new methods of doing activities in order to avoid provoking spirits. However, in addition to alternating behavior, proper communication with spirits is just as important. When Hmong enter the

territory of wild spirits, it is customary for them to announce their presence and intentions. Taking or harvesting certain products from the land can require one to make an offering in return (Male Villager, personal communication, January 2016). Numerous respondents reported unexplained deaths of people who did not respect the spirits or acting naïvely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Spirit Relationships in Animals

Many animals have spirits with significant meaning and power that can be manipulated for human benefit, or it can result in misfortune if mishandled. The following is a collection of the various animals and their associated spirits as described by Hmong in both Thailand and California.

The tiger has several intriguing spiritual associations and was found to still be common knowledge for both young and elder Hmong in California and Thailand. The first association is regarding a spirit called *Poj ntxoog*. This spirit has various explanations and legends as told through Hmong folklore. All participants attest *Poj ntxoog* to be a spirit in the form of a young girl with long dark hair dressed in ragged cloths whose encounter can be detrimental, or even fatal. Participants say this spirit can be seen either with a tiger or it can shapeshift into a tiger. She is a trickster who resides in natural landscapes, such as jungles or farms (Graduate Student, personal communication March 2015). A Hmong farmer described his terrifying encounter with *Poj ntxoog* back in his Laotian village. Him and a friend were returning home along a forested trail when they were suddenly encountered by two *Poj ntxoog*. Although there are procedures to follow to avoid adversity¹³, in sheer terror, he quickly fled the scene. The following day, his mother immediately arranged a shaman ceremony to “save his soul.” The farmer claimed that his friend died because he did not consult the shaman and properly resolve the issue with the spirit (Fresno Hmong Farmer, personal communication, June 2016). Although all participants agree on the tiger association with this spirit, further details on the origins and why this relationship exists with the tiger was unknown to them.¹⁴

In addition, a second participant described the relationship between the tiger and a spirit called *Tswv xyas*: an evil tiger-man hybrid spirit.¹⁵ The legend is a man with mystical powers was able to turn himself into a tiger to steal cows, but he became stuck in this hybrid form. In result, he now can only turn back into a man at night and remains as a tiger during the day. If provoked, this spirit can kill people and take their souls (Male Villager, personal communication, January 2016). These hostile spirits make Hmong cautious about their actions in forests.

Many other animals are associated with spirits or have spiritual powers as well. Dogs can serve as guardians when a person needs protection from sickness (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, March 2016). Praying mantises are believed to be intelligent and have clairvoyance. It may answer certain types of questions and the answers are based on whether the right or left arm is raised (Sacramento Elder Female Shaman, personal communication, July 2016). According to one respondent, shamans will use mice as a medium to connect to the spirit world in the early stages of training (Young Male Shaman, personal communication, June 2016), and a Californian farmer stated that disturbing a mouse home or inflicting harm on them can result in severe consequences for that person and their family (Fresno Farmer, personal communication, March 2016). Deer are strongly connected to spirits because spirits prefer to disguise

themselves as deer in forests. According to one shaman, snakes represent immortality because of their ability to shed skin and some Hmong believe that a man encountering a snake can mean his female partner is pregnant or soon to be (Sacramento Elder Female Shaman, personal communication July 2016).¹⁶ On the contrary, these beliefs are not consistent across all Hmong. The Doi Pui clan leader, said a snake found in a home is a bad omen in which they need to call a shaman to cleanse the place of the negative presence brought by the snake (Doi Pui Clan Leader, personal communication, December 2015).¹⁷

Nature Relationships in Shamanism

The consequences and behavioral influences experienced by a shaman can be extremely pronounced due to their heightened awareness of divinity. Shamans were shown to exhibit strong relationships with spirits in nature. Correspondence with spirits can be in the form of visions, dreams, or concrete interactions in the physical world. Prophecies are often expressed through symbolic representations in animals.

Prophecy through dreams and visions were illustrated by the experiences of a young male shaman who predicted several critical events. He described an unforgettable vision he experienced as a child during a family trip to a lake. While playing with a cousin around dusk at the water's edge, he saw a frightening sight. On an island at the center of the lake, stood a giant black figure, which as a youth he described as a "gorilla" leaning against the tree. His heart "instantly dropped", and he ran in fear back to his parents. After arriving home, he began to feel ill and that night he had a peculiar dream about himself in the jungle where a tiger lent his fur to him and told him to wear it returning home. After telling his mother about the dream, she frantically contacted a shaman to perform a ritual as it signified something negative. The participant explained that the tiger lending his fur indicated he has something that belongs to that spirit and it would eventually return to retrieve it, thus he would be risking grave consequences.

He had another more recent event regarding his stepfather who is blinded in one eye. One night, he dreamt of a crow with one eye hanging out who approached him and was frantically flying side-to-side until it collapsed to the floor in great distress. In the dream, he felt immensely distraught. Upon waking up, it immediately occurred to him that the crow symbolized his step-father due to the eye injury connection and it signified a great misfortune about to happen. Within two days of the dream, tragedy struck. Upon exiting a bus and crossing the street, his uncle was struck by a car and had to be rushed to the hospital (Young Male Shaman, personal communication, June 2016).

A shaman may be able to directly communicate with spiritual entities in fashions similar to humans. Environmental location can play a pivotal role in a shaman's ability to properly communicate with their *Dab neeb*. The elder female shaman in California was instructed by her *Dab neeb* to travel to an oceanside early in the morning because this was the time the "portal opened for the spirit world and human world." Only then could she receive communication from a dragon guardian spirit. Correspondences can be extremely pronounced as she expressed during another time camping with family:

They have guardians who guard there [the campsite in the forest], so as soon as I approach the area, they know me because I do a lot of spiritual work and so they suspect that I'm here already and they send workers to greet me, so I usually tell them we are going to camp here in your [Guardian spirit] area so can you protect

us. I usually tell them how long we will stay and when we have dinner, I usually call them.¹⁸

Correspondence can also be overwhelming to the point of restricting activities and fearing to partake in daily life. She also claimed to be capable of hearing the voices of spirits in animals and plants. She vividly described a number of occurrences when she had to unexpectedly return home from trips due to the plethora of voices from spirits in nature tormenting her. She has had to abandon camping trips, day trips, and other similar situations in wilderness areas for fear of it getting worse at night. In the beginning of her shamanic journey, these experiences terrified her to the point of not wanting to leave her home (Sacramento Elder Female Shaman, personal communication, July 2016). The young male shaman also expressed intimate communication with spirits during camping. He states,

I will always try to make an offering and say 'Oh this is yours, we are here, we don't mean any harm on your land or anything, we just want to sleep here for a few days, so whatever spirit is here, please don't bother us, please protect us, and if there is any animal that comes our way, please make it go another way.'¹⁹

Spirit Relationships in Agriculture and Ethnobotany

The medical ethnobotanical practice works in collaboration with spirits for healers to harvest resources, diagnose, and prognose patients. Fieldwork with herbal healers and shamans revealed a spirit association other than the *Dab tshuaj* (Spirit of medicine) as described by Tapp (1989: 63), which was not mentioned by any participants.

According to the herbal healers in Thailand and the elder female shaman in California, knowledge and status of this practice is acquired through an intimate collaboration with a spirit called *Yu waaj*. This spirit allows the healer to know the proper plant for an ailment and how to make the plant healing power potent. The patient must make a ritual and offering to *Yu waaj*. The offering consists of three incenses and 12 *Nyiaj* (Herbal Healer, personal communication, January 2016). Some herbs have special spirits and require offerings, otherwise they cannot be used. While there are species that any layperson can harvest on their own, others are restricted to only the healer's management otherwise that spirit might bring further illness in retribution (Female Villager, personal communication, December 2015).

However, the spiritual aspect of ethnobotany in California remains questionable. While I did find ethnobotany to still be a strong practice in California communities, in many cases it appeared to be largely desacralized from the spiritual relationship as described above. For example, I found various Hmong at the New Year events in Sacramento and Stockton California selling a plethora of medicinal plants. However, the two participants I spoke with reported that they do not perform any spiritual activities for dealing with herbals²⁰ (California Herbal Healers, personal communication, November 2015). Nearly all younger participants stated their parents and elders were heavily involved in using medicinal plants, but they could not recall any rituals in conjunction with it, nor have they heard of *Yu waaj*. Yet on the other hand once again, the spiritual aspect was not entirely absent. The elder female shaman in California recognized *Yu waaj* and had an altar for it (See *Figure 2*) while another participant

described the use of lemongrass in a shamanic blessing ceremony for the New Year (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, March 2016). It appears the contemporary status of this practice in California is in a volatile transition.

Although details of spirituality in agriculture were scarce in this study, several participants exemplified how their beliefs influence these practices. During a participant's stay at the village of another ethnic group in Thailand, she found that it had been changed three times by three different ethnic groups due to unexplained occurrences of crop failure and sickness. The villagers blamed the misfortunes on evil spirits who have cursed the site. She comments, "It can really affect where you live, the food, and what you grow" (Graduate Student, personal communication, March 2015). In the hillsides of Kun Chang Khian, a farmer cultivating crops on a terraced hillside



Figure 2: Alter for *Yu waaj* in a Sacramento, CA home. Photo by author.

had placed a small alter for wild spirits that she believes influences her agricultural fortune. The land she farms is their territory and, therefore, she must acknowledge their presence and give something in return to ensure a harmonious balance (Female Farmer, personal communication, December 2015). Despite these findings, none of the participants had knowledge of exact spirit names and rituals for those purposes, in contrast to the claims in some literature (see Lee 2005). It remains unclear if this is due to lack of research and knowledgeable participants in the topic, different beliefs based on geographical regions and Hmong sub-groups, or other factors.

Discussion

The primary objective of this paper was to identify the spiritual entities that constitute Hmong animistic beliefs about nature. To achieve this, I documented spirits by name, nature association (e.g. landscape feature, organism), and coded data under five nature-related themes. Analysis revealed that a diverse array of spirits still exists in the contemporary Hmong worldview of nature in both urban and traditional environments. A number of the documented spirits and beliefs (*Pog ntxoog*, *Tswv xyas*, *Zaj laug*, *Dab ntxaung*, *Looj mem*) are consistent with previous literature (e.g. Tapp 1989), while an additional undocumented entity (*Yu waaj*) was also described. Entire geographic

features to individual organisms maintain spiritual significance in the Hmong episteme. However, numerous more spirit names mentioned in literature were also unfamiliar to participants. Although this absence, many elements of nature contain their own fundamental spiritual force without particular reference. This was shown in many examples, such as agriculture, mountain, guardian, and forest spirits. Perhaps contemporary practice is transitioning from recognizing individual spirits to simply recognizing the spiritual essence alone to better suite changing lifestyles.

One potential, yet significant factor that could account for the inconsistencies described in literature are from socio-cultural changes and geopolitical conflicts over the years. In regard to agricultural spirits, Hmong environmental management has had to adapt to the various new landscapes and political authorities it found itself in contact with throughout the diaspora (Lee 2005). Hmong were historically swidden farmers and often lived more nomadic lifestyles before they were forced to settle in the respective refugee zones of host countries. This creates a radically different interaction with the environment: one based more in politics and legalities than cultural-spiritual norms. This is extremely pronounced in California and takes the center of attention of Hmong trying to farm there (and arguably affecting ethnobotanical practice similarly). These struggles are well known in both California and Thailand (Delang 2002; The Refugee Farmer Project n.d.). This could have potentially taken a toll on spiritual practices in the field, or in the least, made them less intimate and dynamic. In the new politicized environments, it is government authorities Hmong must communicate and negotiate with, not spirits. Similar reasons seem probable for the unfamiliarity of other spirits in literature. The Hmong, along with most traditional societies are in the process of significant globalization and commodification. Commodification seemed to be extremely pronounced in the ethnobotanical practice and for many Hmong, has lost its spiritual association.²¹ Activities traditionally influenced by spirits such as, choosing burial grounds and living space, and harvesting botanicals all are under the scrutiny of similar social-cultural and geopolitical challenges in the rapidly changing world around them.

Much is to be said about the spiritualized landscapes and geomantic practices found in the fieldwork. The results appear consistent with literature. In agreement with Tomforde's (2006) *Cultural Spatiality*, the findings suggest mountains play a fundamental role in both physical and mental landscapes. Connection to the ancestors is profoundly significant to Hmong. Vincent K. Her (2005) has suggested an explanation regarding the Hmong's spiritual journey to return to the ancestors after death, which involves a physical transfer back to ancestral homelands. Perhaps this is one possible explanation for the prominence of mountains observed in the findings, as ancestor spirits bridge a connection of Hmong to the mountains. This was exemplified in various examples, such as the young participant who needed to mentally and physically prepare for a trip back to Thailand. Locality is interconnected with spirituality, history, identity, and cultural knowledge (Feld & Basso 1996). Putting the literature and findings of this essay together, there exists a powerful example of a fundamental nature-spirit relationship.

The secondary objective of this paper was to address how the spiritually animated environment in Hmong worldview influence daily life activities. To fulfill this goal, data was analyzed around the theme of behavioral change. First, the narratives revealed spirits create a system of new and alternative culturally appropriate ways of performing

activities, while also completely restricting others. New mannerisms in nature are created, such as speaking appropriately in spiritual territory, and alternative spiritually specific methods of doing activities are required, such as that found in herbal medicine. Some influences can be as subtle as the words spoken, or as restrictive as convincing one to not leave home. Animistic beliefs arguably influence the actions Hmong choose in a plethora of activities throughout life.

In an effort to more precisely comprehend how the influences are engendered, several explanations are found in physical and psychological factors. Influences draw from the positive and negative physical consequences that Hmong can reap from spirits based on chosen behaviors. As shown in various anecdotes, Hmong may become gravely ill or even die from behaviors that offend spirits. On the contrary, good fortune, health, and physical protection can result from appropriate interactions. The Hmong have no doubt that all of these potential consequences are the result of how they interact with spirits. As was shown throughout the results, spirits also evoked various emotional responses from followers. Emotional responses are arguably related to the potential consequences previously mentioned. The reoccurring emotions that emerged from the data were fear, worry, and relief. It was clear from interviews that Hmong take interactions with spirits seriously.²² The data exemplified numerous instances of these emotions as a result of spirits. Based on the factors mentioned heretofore, many Hmong will wisely choose both mental and physical behaviors and thus, daily life actions are distinct from how they would be in spirit absence.

A final note deserves mention in regard to animistic ontology and epistemology. I found the Hmong to engage with spirits in ways that were consistent with contemporary animistic theories (e.g. Bird-David 1999; Swancutt 2019). The Hmong correspond with spirits in a mutual relationship similar to how they would with human persons. These relationships were characterized by negotiation, reconciliation, and general communication. The Hmong actively engage with spirits. These interactions are dynamic and require mindful communication. For example, in the offerings for *Yu waaj* and the great dragon spirit, or in the intimate conversations the shamans held with *Dab* and guardian spirits when in the wilderness. The Hmong are constantly entwined in a relationship with nature in which spirits serve as an intermediate enforcing it. As demonstrated in the results²³, the correspondences are often similar to how they would be with human persons. This worldview of animism speaks a lot towards how those nature spirits evoke significant influences.

Limitations

The animistic tradition of Hmong lore is diverse and complex. The Hmong are a diverse ethnic group that is divided into various subgroups. These group distinctions could perhaps provide more thorough descriptions and explain why certain Hmong may not be familiar with a particular spirit name, which previous literature and this study did not take into account. Although I took substantial measures to avoid issues from language barriers, the fact that participants in Thailand did not use Hmong language could have potentially created some discrepancy in translation. With the limitations described heretofore, generalizations are taken with precaution.

Conclusion

While this research has identified intricate nature-spirit relations in contemporary Hmong society, the data also suggests a significant number of historically described spirits are less common. However, spirit-nature relations also manifest themselves through entire landscapes, such as mountains, bodies of water, and forests where their spiritual essence is nameless, yet fundamental to towards the Hmong's epistemology of the nature world. The discussion explored the underlying emotional and physical factors that drew out various degrees of influences on the Hmong's daily actions. The narratives revealed an intimate animistic ontology characterized by relatedness with and personhood of spirits which I argue drives the behaviors of Hmong. Finally, the data showed a rich spirit influenced ethnobotanical tradition whose status in urban California appears to be juggling between both tradition and modernization. At present, several questions remain unanswered: do the spirits in literature that were unfamiliar to participants no longer constitute contemporary Hmong beliefs due to loss of traditional knowledge? How does globalization and commodification of Hmong society and culture affect spiritual practices? Future research in these areas would help cultivate a fuller picture of the complex factors that go beyond cultural-religious studies. Like many indigenous worldviews, the Hmong tradition at present is in a state of rapid transition that threatens its continuity. It is becoming increasingly recognized that animistic ontologies and epistemologies of the world are valuable alternatives towards western human-nature relations, yet research in this domain, especially for the Hmong, is currently lacking. An investigation of Hmong spirituality is not only fundamental towards interpreting Hmong culture and society, but also a vital piece in the much broader picture of understanding the animistic worldview of nature.

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¹ See Bird-David 1999: S67-S69.

² See Bird-David 1999 for a detailed overview of the evolution and debate on the concept of animism.

³ To elaborate further, Bird-David argues an animist understands and interacts mutually with the environment from the perspective of its relatedness and thus, views other living and non-living things in the environment as "persons" who make up the oneness of a being (1999).

⁴ For the remainder of the essay, italicized words of particular terms are in the Hmong language, which is based on the RPA (Romanized Popular Alphabet) of Smalley, Bertrais and Barney, 1953.

⁵ *Dab neeb* primarily refers to shamanic spirits derived from ancestors. However, literature also describes *Dab neeb* to be from multiple sources (see, Tapp 1989: 61). In addition, the term can also mean “stories” or “folktales.”

⁶ Most of those participants have spent the overwhelming portion of their lives as a follower of traditional beliefs.

⁷ This was valid since all participants spoke fluent English or were accompanied by a Hmong who was bilingual in Hmong and English.

⁸ The idea here was that as long as Hmong were clear on the spirit or concept in their native language, they would know exactly what to elaborate on.

⁹ Hmong Story 40 is an exhibition to celebrate and showcase the history of the Hmong people in California and abroad (see hmongstory40.org).

¹⁰ (Fresno Farmer, personal communication, July 2016)

¹¹ *Nyiaj* is a common offering item that serves as money to spirits and is burned for the spirit to receive it) (Tapp & Lee 2010).

¹² Sources identify this spirit as *Zaj laug* (See, e.g., Tapp 1989: 61).

¹³ One result that can happen from such an encounter is what Hmong call *ceeb*. This is described as a soul being so severely shocked that it leaves the body. This can lead to various illnesses and cause the victim to develop a pale complexion, which Hmong can use an identifier that a harmful spirit was encountered (Fresno Farmer, personal communication, June 2016).

¹⁴ *Poj ntxoog* is scantily described in research, however, a handful of articles give brief descriptions, such as that of French ethnographer, Guy Morechand (1968). He also gave consistent descriptions of *Poj ntxoog* in relation to the tiger.

¹⁵ He recalled hearing the story in his youth where elders described it as some type of big cat, such as a lion or tiger. It is likely to be a tiger since they are native to and once common to those environments.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that Hmong shamanic worldviews and experiences with nature can vary greatly and are often unique to the shaman. At least this was the case found in the five shaman participants of this study.

¹⁷ It appeared from the data that a shaman’s perspective of nature may not completely correspond to that of laypeople.

¹⁸ Sacramento Elder Female Shaman, personal communication, July 2016.

¹⁹ Young Male Shaman, personal communication, June 2016.

²⁰ It is important to mention that one of these participants was a Christian, which is obviously the most contributing factor. The other participant did not want to disclose their spiritual identity.

²¹ Based on the interviews from herbalists in California, intense commodification seemed to be what was happening with the ethnobotanical practice. They were using it to make income, and the fast-paced interactions between the herbalist and client were based on money with no time for rituals even if so desired. This appeared to be the main the reason other herbalists did not agree to an interview; there was no time to stop and talk.

²² Consider the great lengths Hmong were found to in order to appease spirits (e.g. herbal medicine ritual and burial ground geomancy).

²³ Good examples are the shaman’s correspondences with spirits in quotation on page 17.

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