

## Research Report

### *The funeral ritual of the Hmong in the resettled context*

The Hmong are an ethnic minority group living in the mountainous regions of southern China, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. Traditionally a migratory people because of their shifting agricultural way of life, their final diaspora commenced in 1975 when some 100,000 people—about one third of the Hmong population in Laos—fled to the refugee camps in northern Thailand, having suffered 20 years of dislocation and death due to war. Although some 50,000 Hmong still languish in the camps, many others were resettled in the United States, France, Canada and Australia, where the Hmong population is now about 1000, of whom 400 live in Melbourne.

The traditional Hmong way of life was centred around shifting agriculture in mountainous areas; ancestor worship and an animist belief system; a social structure based on kinship ties through the clan system; a rich oral tradition of mythology, stories, ritual texts and extemporised sung poetry; shamanic healing practices; and a strong sense of their ethnicity, or 'Hmong-ness', in spite of the far-flung geographical locations of their numbers. The Hmong also define themselves in terms of things they do not have: a long tradition of being stateless and leaderless in cohabitation with a dominant majority population, and the absence of a written form of their language.

Fundamental to being Hmong is the performance of the three-day funeral ritual, in which the soul(s) of the deceased is provided with an elaborate set of instructions for its journey to the world of the ancestors. Without these instructions, the soul cannot make way for those yet to be born, and it cannot be reborn into its own clan. The musical instrument used in the mortuary ritual is a bamboo mouth organ with 6 pipes, called the *qeej* (pronounced 'keng') in transliterated Hmong, or *khaen* in other ethnomusicological literature. The *qeej* also has a secular repertoire which is played at the Hmong New Year festivities—a time of intense courtship. This instrument is emblematic of 'Hmong-ness' both to the Hmong themselves, and now to the mainstream community: when multicultural events are staged, a Hmong man in full traditional dress playing the *qeej* is always

required.

The music of the *qeej* 'speaks' to the deceased. The Hmong language is a highly complex monosyllabic tonal language with seven basic tones. Vocal tones are converted into musical pitch clusters on the *qeej* in a complicated manner which also involves the use of poetic or 'flowery' language, archaic and borrowed language and onomatopoeic syllables. The language is embedded in the melodic, chordal and drone structures produced by the bamboo pipes. The task at hand is to reveal the nature of the Hmong processes of converting vocal tones to musical pitches in the instrumental repertoire.

It takes some years for a musician/healer to learn the complete text which must be performed during the funeral. Until recently there was no Hmong man in Australia who possessed these skills. In 1983, the Hmong-Australia Society launched a 'Cultural Programme' lobby with the federal government, arguing for a special intake of Hmong from the camps who possessed certain abilities: to be able to play the *qeej* for the funeral ceremony; to be able to play other instruments; and to be able to 'call souls' (conduct shamanic rites). They were successful. In 1988, six families were selected for migration to Australia from the camps, including four *qeej* players.

One of these, Mr Xeem Thoj (Seng Thao), had fled from northern Laos to Ban Vinai camp in northern Thailand in 1979 and arrived in Australia in 1991. He recorded the funeral texts, both sung and played versions, for me in 1992. These recordings have been transliterated and translated and the first section, called *Qhuab Kev*, or 'Showing the Way' (to the soul of the deceased), has been transcribed. This constitutes a corpus of some 82 pages of music and text with translation. The Melbourne Hmong are concerned to have a complete rendition of the ritual in an accessible form before the current practitioners are themselves deceased. The audio and video recordings of Mr Seng Thao and the printed text will, it is anticipated by the Hmong, be used in the education of the next generation, when they have the time and if they have the motivation.

A further aspect of the research is the documentation of the effects of forced and voluntary migration, and of prolonged periods in temporary asylum, on the funeral ritual and music of the resettled Hmong people. This aspect locates the research in the fields of migrant music studies, refugee studies and urban ethnomusicology which have emerged as some of the most important, and urgent, issues to face ethnomusicologists in the last decade of this century.<sup>1</sup> Apart from yielding information of intrinsic value, these areas of research can contribute in new ways to other ethnomusicological discourses of long standing, such as the nature of stability and change in oral traditions, the connections between language and music, and the processes of change in transplanted traditions. Research in these areas has hardly begun in Australia.

Some non-musical changes to the Hmong funeral ritual in Australia are readily identifiable. For example, the sacrifice of an ox during the ceremony has largely been abandoned: it is not appropriate to or permitted in high-rise housing commission flats; the ceremony has had to be abbreviated because of Australian regulations about the duration of the storage of corpses; the 'village' is not notified of a death by the traditional discharge of a rifle three times, but by telephone; there is no choice of gravesite, which was traditionally determined by geomantic considerations; and so on. Musical change is more difficult to identify. It is clear that the funeral practices of the Hmong are disappearing in Laos, because of the policy of both pre- and post-war Laotian regimes to annihilate the Hmong people. The ritual can in effect only be recorded outside Laos, and most readily amongst Hmong people who have resettled in western countries. However, an examination of the texts of the ritual which has been documented from different groups of Hmong in a variety of places and over a time span of nearly one hundred years has revealed a remarkable stability in the content of the funeral texts. Those versions of the funeral which have been compared range, for example, from southwestern China in the 1890s;<sup>2</sup> to Thailand in 1981;<sup>3</sup> to French Guyana in 1985;<sup>4</sup>

to my recordings in Melbourne in 1992.<sup>5</sup> What is required for a satisfactory comparison in this area is access to more versions of the music of the ceremony, not just its text.

A final aspect of this research is that listening to or discussing the funeral ritual is for the Hmong an extremely dangerous process. If conducted in a private home and not at the time of a death, the soul of a living person may inadvertently be sent to join its ancestors. For this reason work must be conducted either out of doors (young Hmong in Australia learn to play the *qeej* in their local park) or in an institutional setting.

My research would not be possible without the assistance of members of the Hmong community in Melbourne, in particular Mr Vangmar Virathone and Dr Pao Saykao.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Adelaida Reyes-Schramm, 'Music and the Refugee Experience', *The World of Music* 32 (1982), pp. 3-20, and 'Explorations in Urban Ethnomusicology: Hard Lessons from the Spectacularly Ordinary', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 14(1990), pp. 1-14.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel R Clarke, *Among the Tribes in South-west China*, (London: China Inland Mission, 1911), and David C Graham, 'The Ceremonies of the Ch'uan Miao', *Journal of the West China Border Research Society* Chengtu 9, 1937.

<sup>3</sup> Gretel Schworer-Kohl, 'Sprachgebundene Mundorgelmusik zum Totenritual ben den Hmong in Nordthailand und Laos', *Bericht uber den Internationalen Musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress* (Bayreuth), pp. 609-618.

Jacques Lemoine, *Kr'ua Ke. Showing the Way* (Bangkok: Pandora, 1983).

Lemoine, 'L'initiation du mort chez les Hmong', *L'Homme* 12 (1972), pp. 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Yves Bertrais, ed., *Kab Ke Pam Tuag* (France: Collection 'Patrimoine Culturel Hmong', 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Falk, 'The Hmong in Melbourne', *Tirra Lirra* 4.2(1993), pp. 3-43.

Catherine Falk, 'The Hmong: Music and Ritual', *Tirra Lirra* 4.3(1994), pp. 9-13.

Catherine Falk, 'Roots and Crowns: The Funeral Ritual of the Hmong in Australia', *Tirra Lirra* 4.4 (i.p.)

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