

BRIDGING THE SHORES
SEGMENT C-3: COURTSHIP AND WEDDINGS
Producer: Bull
Length 4:26

Lead:

It's a given that romance is as much a part of Hmong life here as it was in Laos. The main difference being that some customs have changed. [FADE UP SINGING AND AMBI OF BALL TOSSING GAME] Take for instance the ball tossing ritual, a common courtship event at Hmong New Year celebrations such as this one in Madison. While an elder sings a traditional love song as couples shoot a ball back and forth to each other....

...there's a whole new twist. Yee Why Thao explains.

YWThao01: "The shooting ball game is where you're supposed to come and find your date, and men usually come out and find their wife but not today, all the marrying womens are shooting balls, it's a new tradition for Hmong America...." (:15)

Now largely a game just between the girls, the boys -- including some sitting on the sidelines -- prefer getting dates through online chat rooms, friends, and parties over playing ball. And as Brian Bull reports, weddings are also seeing some changes....

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[FADE UP FAST ON DINING]

In the basement of a Madison apartment building, a group of girls serve a wedding feast of pork boiled with ginger, to roughly 30 men at a long table. The men pass small paper cups of beer from one end of the table to the next, a ritual that will be repeated through the evening. Guest Fuechou Thao explains:

FThao01: "So I'm going to bring it to you. The culture is that we notify the next person that the drink is coming. If you don't do that they will say (Hmong phrase)...they will make you drink an extra cup." (*laughs*). (:20)

Near the table stand bride-to-be Pawoua [POW-wuh] Vang, and her fiancée, Kahamla Thao [KAHM-lah TAO]. He wears an embroidered vest with geometric designs. Pawoua is dressed in a traditional Hmong gown and turban, mostly black with a green sash and silver trim. They say tonight is the Hmong portion of the wedding.

PawauKahamla01: "Tomorrow it'll be all Christian, until Sunday". (*Kahamla*) "There's going to be like a priest there, and walking down the aisle, and it's just up to me what I want.."
(*Pawoua*) (:11)

In the middle of the table sits a wedding negotiator, called the mej koob [may-KONG]. He bears an umbrella, which represents protection, luck, and wealth for the couple. He and another mej koob will discuss the suitability of the couple with Pawoua and Kahamla's parents later tonight.

PawuaKahamla02: "Well, they're going to talk about what I did wrong or right, what I'm supposed to do...(Kahamla)"..."This can last until 5 o'clock in the morning if it's horrible, but if it's good, nice and simple...just until midnight or 1." (*Pawoua*) (:15)

As the couple and several friends and relatives prepare to leave for the negotiation, the mej koob concludes the dinner with a song.

MejKoobSong: [BRING UP FOR A FEW SECONDS, HOLD UNDER UNTIL WAGNER MUSIC]

The song informs the couple of their responsibilities to each other, and blesses their union.

The next day, the ceremony continues on a different tune....

[CROSSFADE HMONG SONG WITH WEDDING MARCH]

At a local banquet hall, Pawoua and Kahamla approach a Christian minister, who waits for them under a trellis decorated with flowers. Pawoua wears a white dress, while Kahamla sports a tuxedo. They're followed by bridesmaids and groomsmen. Traditional vows are exchanged, and then the minister– to the delight of everyone – tells Kahamla that he may now kiss the bride.

Pt. 2, 39:00 “Wooooooo!!” (applause)

Pawoua is happy. Which is good, considering last night's negotiations between the mej koob and the couples' parents went past three o'clock in the morning.

Pawua02: “I didn't really know why they were negotiating very long, but it took awhile because the parents have to agree with one thing and another...” (:10)

Crystal Lor is a friend of the couple. She says more Hmong couples are doing half Hmong, half Christian weddings these days.

CLor01: “My side of the family, we're like Hmong culture, we're shamans. And then my husband, he's Christian, so I kind of like it being both, it's pretty cool. I guess it's just love.” (:09)

One aspect of the Hmong wedding – known as the bridal dowry or nurturing charge – is still widely practiced...and widely debated. That's money that the groom's family pays for receiving the bride. Mai Zong Vue is a community liaison who says this practice has gone out of control in the United States:

MVue01: “In the 80s when we first got here, we're looking at 3, 5-hundred dollars of nurturing charge. And now we're looking at averaging about 5-thousand (dollars). And people start to put a price on their daughter's head.” (:14)

Vue says she'd like Hmong families to go back to the traditional payment of three silver bars as used back in Laos. She adds critics say the payment dehumanizes the bride, to the point where she's seen as a possession. But as weddings become more Americanized, this controversial custom may disappear.

[FADE UP SOFT ROCK LOVE BALLAD]

As for Pawoua and Kahamla's wedding, it's all good. As the party swings into full gear, the couple smile next to an immense, three-tiered cake. Pawoua says she and her husband are ready to settle into married life, start a family, and embrace everything that goes with it.

Pawua03: “Getting everything together and staying awake.” (*laughs*) (:04)

For Bridging the Shores, I’m Brian Bull in Madison.