

BRIDGING THE SHORES

SEGMENT D-3: Hmong Funeral Rituals & Repatriation

Producer: Bull

Length 3:50

Host:

At the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, many elders visit the archives to reconnect with their past. Center director, Lee Pao Xiong, says sometimes they do in unexpected ways.

HmongArchivesTale: “We had an elderly woman that borrowed one of the tape about the Hmong in Vietnam. A week later she came back and she started crying. And I said, “Why are you crying, Grandma?” And she said, “You know, we left Laos in 1975. And we thought that my youngest brother died. And so we did all the ceremonies and everything, and I just saw him in this video”. (laughs). And so I told her, “Well, Grandma, now you know where he’s at, go and find him.” (:30)

Not everyone is so lucky to have a lost relative turn up alive. Many Hmong in the U.S. left friends and relatives buried back in Southeast Asia, though complex funeral rituals were done to ensure the deceased a prosperous spirit journey. But an incident at a Thailand cemetery has shocked many Hmong-Americans, who thought their loved ones would remain at peace. Brian Bull reports....

[FAST FADE UP WITH QEEJ, DRUM, AND WAILING]

At most Hmong funeral services like this one in St. Paul, musicians play a drum and a bamboo reed instrument called the qeej {KHENG}, near the body of an elder. Several women stand close, wailing. The elder’s body is wrapped in ornate robes, and a crossbow at her side provides protection for her spirit. The family has slaughtered a rooster and cow, to give her soul guidance and a dowry in the ancestral world. At her grave, they’ll also burn gold foil – symbolizing money – to make sure she doesn’t go back poor.

[FADE OUT FUNERAL AMBI]

Such heartfelt and painstaking dedication to the funeral tradition is why many Hmong-Americans were horrified when video footage appeared a few years ago, of nearly a thousand Hmong graves being exhumed at the Wat Tham Krabok refugee camp in Thailand.

[CLIP OF EXHUMATION: AMBI OF DIGGING, OFFICIAL ON BULLHORN, ETC.]

The footage shows Thai workers unearthing and breaking apart caskets, revealing the bodies of Hmong buried at the camp’s temple. One body’s clad in thick robes, signifying a prominent elder or leader. The workers unceremoniously strip the body, then cut it apart with knives.

[CLIP OF CARVING AND SCRAPING]

Kor Xiong is the Wisconsin coordinator for the Hmong Grave Desecration Committee.

KXiong01: “The families really honor by giving a lot of clothes, and this person probably have many family that really loved that person. You can see that, in the video, it really drive us sick. It just tear apart.” (:15)

The committee represents 19 states. Members dispute claims from Thai officials that the bodies were a threat to the local water supply and had to go. Xiong says many Hmong Americans are distressed over the eventual cremation of their relatives' remains.

KXiong02: "The Hmong believe that if the body burned, the body have a hard time going back and finding the spiritual worlds. So it's very hard for the family, it's like a lost soul." (:10)

Xiong says a lost soul can cause illness and ruin for relatives, even those now living in the U.S. The National Hmong Graves Desecration Committee is working with the Thai government to buy land in the country for a reburial. Committee members have met several times, including at this 2007 conference in St. Paul with human rights advocate Barb Frey....

HGDCmeetingAmbi: "...this may be the last time that any government in this world or any other people think that they are justified in digging the graves of Hmong people." [HMONG REMARK, APPLAUSE, FADE UNDER] (:16)

The U.S. State Department, United Nations, and politicians like U.S. Senators Herb Kohl of Wisconsin and Norm Coleman of Minnesota have tried to help. Hmong leaders hope to eventually rebury 211 remaining intact bodies by 2009, with the help of a qualified shaman.

Such preparations won't be easy. Chia Vang of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's history department says there are very specific rituals a shaman must do to safeguard the soul, even if the initial burial is successful.

CVang01: "A year later, there's a ritual to call them back, to respect them and to remember them. So, death is very important in life. So because of the traditions and the ancestral worship, it's very important to continue to worship people even though they're no longer here." (:18)

Vang says the complexity of the practice has discouraged many from taking it on here in the U.S.

CVang02: "Only people who are invested in preserving the culture will learn." (:05)

So even as Hmong delegates fight to properly bury relatives left behind in Thailand, others strive to simply preserve the funeral tradition here in America. Both attempts will depend on the community's dedication to those traditions.

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