

BRIDGING THE SHORES
SEGMENT C-2: HMONG SPIRITUALITY
Producer: Moberg
Length 3:25

Lead :

As Hmong immigrants embrace their new country... many continue to hold on to their traditional customs, including their religion. As Glen Moberg reports, even the young are finding meaning in the old ways.

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Ying Lee 00:14 "The gong is used to call the spirit world and let them know that the shaman is on his way and needs their help."

Ying Lee bangs a gong... while sitting next to their father, Khousa Ge "Jay" Lee, a 52 year old immigrant from Laos who is also a shaman.

sound up

The panel discussion on shamanism is taking place at the University of Wisconsin Marathon County... focusing on how Hmong Americans balance the conflicting demands of a new country... and an old culture. It's a question that is troubling Ying Lee's brother... and Jay Lee's son... Jim Lee.

Jim Lee 00:10 "As I got older, I just kind of looked into the mirror, and started questioning, who I am, where we came from and what is our religion."

Jim is a 26-year old student at UW-Stevens Point who has made an important, conscious decision... he has rejected his western Christian upbringing to embrace instead the animist spiritual beliefs of his ancestors... a belief in Shamanism.

Jim Lee 00:18 "I believe I was baptized very young. I just kind of grew into it, not knowing much about it, just learning the books. I don't think it was so much Christianity that made me think it wasn't for me, it was more of an identity search."

sound up, factory

The identity search is being facilitated by Jim's father, Jay. We find the 52 year old shaman, family man and entrepreneur huddled over his sewing machine in a small shop with other Hmong workers. The company he owns is making boots for the U. S. military.

Khousa Ge lee 00:10 "Right now, I am the owner. " You're the owner of your own little company? "Right" "The workers in there, they work for you?" " Right, they work for me. Right now I have fifteen employees."

We sit down in a back room with Jay and Jim, to find out more about their religion, and its continuing hold on the Hmong community. Jim translates for his father.

Khousa Ge Lee 00:10 "As long as there is still Hmong in the community, then there has to be a shaman. But if there is no shaman, there will be a lot of sickness in the Hmong community."

When someone is sick, and western doctors have not been able to find a cure, the shaman is called... in a practice that involves chanting, divining, and sacrificing an animal.

Khousa Ge Lee 00:08 "There are horns that the shaman uses, and when tossed to the ground by the shaman, it tells the shaman the direction of where the soul has been"

Khousa Ge Lee 00:14 "A pig must be sacrificed, and what happens is after the shaman finds out where the soul is, then the shaman uses the soul of the pig to take the place of the lost soul, and the shaman can guide the soul back."

Jim Lee 00:35 "Do you really believe that your dad when he goes into a trance, can help bring a person's soul back into the body, using the sacrificed soul of a pig? Do you believe that?" "Yes I do." "And...why?" "Because, I've seen a couple of the shaman ceremonies, for the people who are sick, within days, they're just happier, they do feel better, they're alive, they want to eat, they want to do things, and they just... you can see the energy in them."

The Hmong people hang on to the old ways because they seem to work... curing the sick, and providing a stable framework for understanding life as they adapt to a strange, new world. Jim's father says that's the way it should be.

Khousa Ge Lee :"He believes that whatever your ethnicity is, your background, your culture, wherever you came from you should hold on to that."

And for many in the Hmong community... holding on to shamanism has proven essential... for it means holding on to their identity as a people.

For Bridging the Shores, I'm Glen Moberg in Wausau.