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Myths, Legends, and Folktales

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to share information
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The term folklore, literally "folk learning," is generally limited to knowledge that is transmitted from one generation to another byword of mouth or imitation. In societies without writing, all traditional knowledge can be considered folklore; but in literate societies, folklore refers only to a fraction of the total culture and consists principally of folk dance, folk medicine, folk music, and the various forms of folk literature—folk tales, legends, myths, and proverbs—and in Southeast Asia, sung poetry and dance.

Although much folk literature seems to be told and preserved primarily for entertainment, it also has an important educational function, imparting cultural values and behavioral norms to its audience. Some folk literature allows its audience to imagine behavior that is forbidden according to their own ethical codes. Certain North American Indian peoples told myths about a trickster called Coyote who committed acts that would have been considered shocking, sinful, or criminal if they had been done by ordinary mortals. Some scholars collect and study folklore as a (continued from front page) means of revivifying or preserving an old language or a vanishing culture. Others come to folklore through anthropological studies, and view it as another means of learning the history and culture of a people. Psychologists see folkloric materials as providing a window into the workings of the human mind. In most cultures folklore still plays a role in the formation of values and attitudes.

Myths may be classified according to the dominant theme expressed in the narrative. Some of the most important themes treated in myths are creation and origins, the birth of gods and divine beings, death and the afterlife, and the renewal and rebirth of the world. Myths often merge into legends and tales.

A legend is a long-told story or a group of related stories about a person or a place that is popularly believed to have some historical truth. Mythology, in contrast, frequently takes the divine or the supernatural as its subject. Legends represent in the popular memory a

Editor's note: This issue contains background information that relates to the sessions to be presented at the 11th annual Southeast Asia Education Faire. The specific examples are taken from the Hmong and Iu-Mien— lifted from my master's thesis, from a handbook prepared by the Southeast Asia Community Resource Center, and from Frank Proschan's Ph.D. dissertation. A friend and mentor once told me that the way to get into understanding cultural similarities and differences is to learn about one in some depth...insights transfer to others. Hope it works for you!

real happening that was extraordinary enough to be remembered and embellished. Many legendary figures were national heroes, figures like King Arthur, people to whose lives are attached cycles of legends that mix fact and fantasy and relate marvelous exploits, each bearing the hallmark of the hero's dedication to a particular set of worthy qualities. Thus Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table are renowned for their legendary courtesy and valor, Robin Hood and his men for their loyalty and defense of the downtrodden. Legendary figures in the United States include such people as Johnny Appleseed, Calamity Jane, and Butch Cassidy— as well as great historical figures whose names have become associated with exemplary tales: George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are among the most obvious. In current usage the term may also be applied to more contemporary narratives and to the people or incidents that have inspired such tales: Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley have all assumed legendary status in present-day America.

A folktale may be defined as a traditional oral prose narrative. Like other kinds of folklore, the folktale circulates by word of mouth in a consistent yet shifting form; since each new teller does not read from or recite a fixed text, the words are constantly being altered to some degree. If a collector records and prints a tale in a book, it becomes merely a printed version of a folktale, lacking the intonation, inflection, gestures, facial expressions, and audience responses that make the narrating of a folktale a living performance. A writer's paraphrase or embellishment of a folktale he or she has heard is a literary version of the folktale, considerably removed from the original and authentic oral version. What makes an oral story a folktale are the variants of the story that can be located over time and space. A story that is told only once does not qualify as a folktale because, although oral, it is not traditional. The length, subject matter, and form of folktales vary enormously. A one-minute joke and an adventure-laden romance requiring several nights to narrate can both be characterized as folktales, if they exist in oral variants. Since storytelling is a basic human need, folktales are told even in the midst of technological cultures saturated with electronic media. Modern Americans specialize in snappy jokes with punchline endings and urban horror legends that are told as true.

These categories apply primarily to storytelling in the Western world. The folktales produced by other societies often include animal tales, in which beasts and birds behave like human beings; dilemma tales, popular throughout black Africa, in which an unresolved ending is left for the audience to decide; and creation myths, which explain the origin of the Earth and its people. Frequently the storyteller draws no clear distinction between fiction and reality. Every society known to humankind tells folktales, which take an endless variety of forms. What unites all these forms is the artistry of a teller and the responsiveness of an audience. A folktale lives in the spoken word and dies on the printed page.

Folktales of most of Southeast Asia show the influence of neighboring India and China. Stories from the Philippines reveal both the influence of the East and a long association with Spanish culture. Dragons, spirits, demons, and magic are common in Vietnamese folklore. Animal heroes include the water buffalo, fish, frog, and tiger. Craftiness and subtlety are highly regarded, especially when used against superior force. The same is true elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The mouse deer of Indonesian and Malayan folklore and the rabbit in Burmese tales are admired as clever characters. These animals resemble Brer Rabbit in American folklore. Other common Burmese folktale characters include Buddhist monks, ghosts, a dragon (the Naga), and the moon-goddess. Indonesians tell many hero tales that sound familiar to readers of the 'Mahabharata' and other Indian epics. And many tales of the Laotian and Thai peoples derive from those of India. Tales from Thailand center on priests, farmers, princes, and serpents. They show clearly a Buddhist influence and a respect for cleverness.

Southeast Asian Cultural Core

Frank Proschan, folklorist who specializes in mainland Southeast Asia, wrote a dissertation entitled *Kmhmu Verbal Art in America: The Poetics of Kmhmu Verse* (1989). In it, he discusses the central features of folklore found among the various peoples living in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, with an emphasis on the Kmhmu (Kammu, Khmu), who were the indigenous people of Laos.

Many writers have referred to Indochina the meeting ground of the cultures of India and China. While there are distinct borrowings from both Chinese and Indian cultures, Proschan argues for a core culture that is indigenous or aboriginal. The folklore of the various groups provides a window to the common cultural core. Przyluski, a researcher quoted by Proschan, said that folktales served as "primary evidence for this indigenous cultural core; folklore can reveal the Indochinese mentality before Indian and Chinese influence, constituting as it does 'a certain common foundation.'" The cultural core can be understood by looking for opposites or contrasts.

A central contrast is that of **land** and **sky**. It is a land of the monsoon, where there are two seasons: **wet** and **dry**, **monsoon** and **drought**. There **mountains** and **lowlands**. There is a Divine Fish (**dragon**) and a Divine Bird (**phoenix**). The **sun** opposes the **moon**. **Fire** opposes **water**. Within the social groups, there are two kinds: **us** and **them**, **those we can marry** and **those we cannot marry** (exogamous classes, marked by totems in the Kmhmu society and clan names in the Hmong society). The theme of alternating between opposites is seen in other cultural forms: songs with **alternating verses**; **ball tossing**; idioms and other language forms that consist of **parallel structures**; **kites** (birds) and **canoes** (dragons); origin myths based on surviving a great flood in a drum or gourd; stories of dragons defeated by a (usually bronze) sword; ceremonial bronze drum (symbol of rainwater which gives life to the land); the powerful and the powerless.

Lowland societies are characterized by irrigated rice farming. The water buffalo, like this one from the Philippines, is important to cultivating rice, and is associated with the "wet" lowland cultures. In mainland Southeast Asia, the lowland cultures are those who live in the river valleys—the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, and Lao. The Hmong, Iu-Mien, Kmhmu, Lahu and others are highlanders, a "dry" culture.

Alternating songs (or love dialogues) are practiced by the "majority of the populations in southern China and Indochina" (Porée-Maspero 1962). Granet writes (1919) that "the songs have their origin in antiphonal choirs composed, one of boys and the other of girls...The choruses were varied by extempore songs in which the young men and girls challenged each other... The love song contests take place, among other competitions, on the occasion of seasonal festivals at which the attendance is large. Granet was writing about cultural traditions in southern China late in the last century. Eberhard identified groups that practiced the love song traditions: the Miao (Hmong), Thai, Lolo, Tibetans, Tho (Tay-Nung) and Yao (Iu-Mien). A tradition that often accompanies the alternating verses are games played with a ball. These sung dialogues also have counterparts in instrumental love dialogues, in which the Jew's harp, flute, mouth organ, or other instrument produces "surrogate speech."

Thai Hmong toss a ball back and forth while singing extemporaneous "love dialogues," alternating verses of sung poetry to challenge and intrigue one another (Khek Noy, 1986).

Hmong folktale, 1900

The story of creation below, which appears in similar forms among the Iu-Mien and Khmu peoples (the former linguistically related to Hmong, the latter unrelated), was recorded by a missionary living with a Heh (Black) Miao group in Guizhou province for thirty-three years around the turn of the century (Clarke 1911). Although it is recorded in sung poetry form, the elements are remarkably similar to modern versions (Johnson 1981; Mottin, n.d.; Lewis 1992; among others).

Zie demanded his sister in marriage,
His sister spoke,
Spoke how?
Thus by rote I sing,
Still don't understand.

Then his sister spoke,
You want to marry your sister;
Lift up a millstone each opposite,
Let go to roll to the valley;
(If) they roll and make one,
<u>You marry your sister.</u>
If the stones rest apart in the valley,
(We) both go and rest in our own place.
So his sister spoke,
Spoke words thus,
Why don't you understand?

Let the stones go into the valley;
Did the stones make one (or)
Did the stones rest apart?
I who sing don't know.

The stones rested apart.
Zie contrived wickedly,
Put stones in the valley,
Called his sister to come
<u>To see the stones become one.</u>
A-Zie then spoke,
Now we two will marry,
Spoke words thus,
Why don't you understand?

His sister again spoke,
Spoke words nicely,
How did she speak?
Thus by rote I sing,
Still don't understand.

His sister again spoke,
Take knives each on a separate hill,
Throw the knives into the valley;
(If they) enter into one sheath,
We two will marry.
(If) the knives rest apart,
We will rest apart.
So his sister spoke,
Spoke words thus,
Why don't you understand?

A-Zie then hit on a plan,
Made up his mind what to do,
He would have his sister for wife.
Thus by rote I sing,
Still don't understand.

A-Zie then hit on a plan,
He made his heart wicked,
Made two pairs of knives,
He placed knives in the valley,
(They) rested apart.
Threw and went into the grass,
(He) called his sister to come
To see the two knives in a pair.
Now we two will marry,
He would have is sister for wife,
We don't you understand?

Would have his sister for wife,
The two returned home.
Who did they ask (about it)?
Commanded what?
So the two got married.
Thus by rote I sing,
Still don't understand.

So the two returned home,
And asked their Mother,
Their Mother then said,
Heaven has no people,
Earth has no people,
You two must marry.
Kill buffaloes, kill cows, receive guests,
Hang meat on the branches of the "Zan" tree,
Call your brother cousin,
Hang meat on the branches of the "Ma sang" tree,
Call your Mother mother-in-law,
So their Mother spoke,
Spoke words thus,
And the two got married.
Why don't you understand?

So the two got married,
Afterwards they had a child,
Had a child, what sort?
Thus by rote I sing,
Still don't understand.

Afterwards they had a child,
Had a child like a hammer,
Why don't you understand?

Had a child like a hammer,
Zie saw, did Zie love it?
Thus by rote I sing,
Still don't understand.

Zie saw and did not love it,
Zie saw and Zie got angry,
Why don't you understand?

A-Zie was full of anger,
Took the child and did what?
Thus by rote I sing,
Still don't understand.

A-Zie was full of anger,
Zie drew out a great knife,
Took the child and chopped it up,
Why don't you understand?

Zie took the child and chopped it up,
Where did he throw (the pieces)?
Flesh went and got a name,
What did they become and what were they called?
Thus by rote I sing,
Still don't understand.

He sowed them on the hill,
In the morning they became people,
Thus they got a name,
What they became so they were called.
Why don't you understand?

Same story, 1985

The corresponding part of a story recorded by Johnson (1985:113-120) typifies a modern version of the creation tale, told eighty-odd years later, by a woman from a different country (Laos) and a different but related language group (White Hmong), all without the assistance of a written record.

… So the brother said that he wanted to marry his sister and have her for his wife. But the sister was not willing, and refused him. However, she said, "If you really want to marry me, we must do this: you and I will each bring a stone and we will climb up on that mountain. When we get there, we will roll your stone down one slope of the mountain, and roll mine down the other side. The next morning, if both stones have gone back up the mountain, and we find them laying together on the mountaintop, then I will agree to be marry you."

After she said this, the brother and sister each took a stone and carried it far up to the top of the mountain. The sister rolled her stone down one slope of the mountain; the brother rolled his stone down the other mountain side.

But since the brother wanted to marry his sister, he got up during the night and carried his own stone and his sister's stone back up the mountain and put them together on the summit.

The next morning, when they went to look, they wanted to take someone along to be a witness, but unfortunately, there was no one to take. So the two of them, brother and sister, went back again alone, up to the top of the mountain. Lo and behold! They saw that the two stones which they had rolled down the two opposite slopes had come to rest together, in the same place, on the mountaintop.

When the sister saw this, she said, "We are really brother and sister, but these stones have come back and are lying together. Therefore we can be married, if you wish it to be so."

So the brother and sister married each other and lived together as husband and wife. Later, they gave birth to a child.

This child was like a round smooth stone.[2] It had neither arms nor legs. So the woman said, "What kind of a child is this, round and smooth like a stone! We will cut it to pieces and throw it away!"

So the two of them cut the round egg-like creature into little pieces. Then they threw the pieces in all directions. Two pieces fell on the goat house (*nkuaj tshis*), and these became the clan Lee. Two pieces fell in the pig pen (*nkuaj npuas*), and these became the clan Moua. Two pieces that landed in the garden (*vaj*) became the clans Vang (*Vaj*) and Yang (*Yaj*). In this way they founded all the Hmong clans.

Remarkably, the essence of the tale is intact. It's easy to see how the story-

teller arranges the episodes according to individual style. In the Hmong text, there are predictable phrases, and great creative license with the "matrix" text—all those words that surround the key elements.

Nicholas Tapp (1989) explores the way in which "real history" is encapsulated and transmitted through the oral tradition, how the core elements define group identity, and how current social conditions are blended into the historical themes. "Within an oral tradition," he says, " … individual variations and departures form, in a sense, the substance of the tradition, and provide much of its strength and resilience" (1989:136). The resilience of the oral tradition over time and place either reflects or creates a resilience of the people's conceptual systems, so that social and economic changes are accommodated without fracturing the group. This, it would seem, is of particular adaptive value in a group of people who have known change and disruption since the beginning of time.

Hmong alternating songs: stories with style

There is a regular structure to the songs that are sung, which has been described by Jean Mottin (1980) and Amy Catlin (1981, 1987). The singer is actually creating the song while singing, but there are certain rules that he or she must follow. A song has verses, each consisting of two parts or sides; each side contains a pair of rhymes that are semantically related and as much clever word play as the singer is able to devise.

The lines are of indefinite length, and may contain "fillers," that give the singer time to formulate the word play and rhyme. The rhyme scheme is the most important feature of the song, and the listeners figure out a "puzzle" which the singer presents. Since the listener does not know exactly when the second rhyming word will appear, there is a sense of anticipation and suspense that builds until the word appears. A song without four rhyming words in each verse (two in each side) is not a song. It may be that singers memorize certain core rhyme patterns, which can be added to and adapted into any of the different types of kwv txhiaj. The extent, cleverness, and fit of the additions are dependent on the singer's ability.

The songs contain many clichés (familiar phrases heard in other songs), Chinese idioms, and images taken from nature. The singer never uses personal pronouns like "I," "you," "us," but standard phrases instead, like "this young Hmong girl" (me), or "your father's son" (you). The songs contain an introduction, several verses which contain rhymes and word play, and a closing.

The opening line of a song contains standard words that identify the type of song to come, as well as the dialect of the singer, and perhaps the singer's regional affiliation. The words are sung on a long high pitch. The opening words may also be repeated at any time during the song, usually at the beginning of each verse and side, as the singer wishes. They may also be repeated here and there, to give the singer a pause. In the example, the opening words are *nij yais*.

Each song contains three to ten verses. A verse is *ib nqes*, which contains *ob txwg*, or "two pairs" of rhymes. Each verse contains two sides (*ob fab*, or "two sides"). Each side is identical, or very similar, except for the manipulation of the key words and rhymes. Soon after the last rhyme, the verse ends. In this example, the man sings one verse, and the girl an answering verse; singers who can actually tailor their answering verses to

what has gone before are the ones who gain a reputation for really knowing how to *hais kwv txhiaj*. One of the reasons that Yee Her was asked to perform publicly was because of her voice and composure, but also because she knew how to answer. The man playing the role of the suitor was also chosen because he knew how to formulate clever responses.

Rhymes are *ob lub suab sib phim*, or "two sounds that match." The rhymes are the most important elements in a song, but there is some flexibility in acceptability of rhyme (generally, a vowel sound and tone that match), but a failed semantic match makes the verse unacceptable. Since the songs are not written but composed extemporaneously, and since the "breaks" in the flow of words are dependent on breath, not meaning or phrasing, the rhymes are not necessarily at the ends of lines. In the example, only *teeb*/*yeeb* and *kub*/*hlub* are rhymes. (In the Hmong orthography, the final letter is not a consonant but a tone marker.) The rhyming words in a song are sometimes old Chinese words that cannot be literally translated, which makes translation of *kwv txhiaj* difficult. Likewise, rewriting a Green Hmong song in White Hmong loses the rhyme pattern to keep the semantic matches intact. The rhyming words are part of the word play or turns in meaning.

The word play is similar to English sayings or jokes that depend on puns or on words with double meanings for their value. In sung poetry, the turns in meaning are often synonyms, antonyms, reversals of elements of common word pairs (like "ice-cream" and "creamed ice"), or parallel structures (like "ring of silver," "ring of gold"). The listener uses the rhymes to mark the part that is played upon. In the example, one side contains *lub nkoj teeb* ("boat bobbing in the water"), and the opposing side contains *lub nkoj co* ("boat bouncing on the water"); the second word play in the verse is *ua luam yeeb* ("trade opium") and *ua luam pob txha tsov* ("trade tiger bone"). This particular example contains word play that is fairly simple, not as intricate or complex as in the following verse taken from an "orphan" *kwv txhiaj*:

Side A
Nij yai....ntoj lis nuag los txog rooj niag teb no, es
leej-kwv leej-tig twb tsis los es
haus cawv tuaj cawv twb tsis puag khob ais.
Lub ncauj tsis hais los nplooj-siab xav ywb-ywm tias:
"Nyob tsam muaj plaub muaj ntug,
tsis muaj chaw vam
tsis tau lub chaw mus **nyob**," os kwv-tij Hmoob.

Side B
Los txog rooj niag teb no, es
tsis muaj kwv tsis muaj tig, es
noj mov los mov tuaj tsis puag **caj**.
Ces tu-siab twj ywb-ywm tias:
"Tsis muaj kwv muaj tig,
nyob tsam muaj txiab mus muaj nkees
tsis muaj chaw nyob
tsis tau lub mus chaw **vam**," mog.

Ni-yai....I arrive in this foreign land,
but my young brothers and old brothers do not come.
*I drink wine, but the wine does not fill the **cup**.*
My mouth does not speak, but my heart quietly thinks that
if it could be that there are disputes and disagreements,
*then there's nothing to hope for, no place to **stay**, oh Hmong cousins.*
I arrive in this foreign land, but
I have no young brothers, no old brothers,
*I eat rice, but the rice does not fill my **throat**.*
I quietly feel sad that I have no young brothers, no old brothers.
If it could be that there is sickness and disease,
*then there is no place to stay, nothing to **hope for**.*

In this example, the rhyming word play is indicated by the underlined portions. Although the translations cannot give a very close approximation of the kind of manipulation, it is easy to see that this singer has the ability to keep several strands going until the verse ends with the second rhyme of the second pair.

Modern Hmong sung verse

The following lyrics are from a song—Khaws Cua Nab ("Gathering Earthworms")—written and performed by a young man living in Canada.[3] This first verse, while sounding very Western, contains elements of traditional *kwv txhiaj*:

Verse 1, "Side" A
Kuv khaws cua nab
I-pick up-earthworm
Ntuj teb tag **hmo**,
sky-land-completely-night
Kuv khaws cua nab
I-pick up-earthworm
Ntiaj teb txias **to**
world-land-cool-quiet

Verse 1, "Side" B
Luag lub caij pw tsaug **zog**,
others-clf-time-lie down-sleep
Ua cas yog kuv lub caij sawv nrhiav **noj**.
why-be-I-clf-time-get up-search-food
Luag lub caij pw saum **txaj**,
others-clf-lie down-on-bed
Ua cas yog kuv lub caij sawv khaws cua **nab**.
why-be-I-clf-time-get up-pick up-earthworm

Refrain
Khaws cua nab
pick up-earthworm
Khaws cua nab
pick up-earthworm
Khaws cua nab
pick up-earthworm

Xab Pheej Kim, Hmoob Lis,
Toronto, Canada.

The refrain is a new addition, as is matching the voice to instrumental music, played on a synthesizer. Within the verses, there are rhymes and simple word play, although the rhyme pattern is atypical, and the words are repeated, a construction that would draw little praise in *kwv txhiaj*. An important difference is the way in which the song's lyrics are predetermined, memorized, and matched to the music, rather than individually and extemporaneously composed.

Mien verbal dueling

The Mien people have an oral tradition of extemporaneous singing (or chanting) that has almost disappeared. The songs use a language that is different from ordinary spoken Mien, and follow a structure that takes time to learn. The verses of the chant alternate between sides, creating a duel of verbal skill. One of the major types of verbal dueling takes place between the bride's side and the groom's side during a marriage. Another type occurs when visitors come to a village, usually between male guests and female residents of the village.

There are three types of verbal dueling between guests and hosts: *naanc zingh*, or autobiographical; *gouv*, or story-telling; and *zingh gen*, or adolescent socializing. The singing takes place at a bonfire lit by the hostesses near the guests' house, and the guests are coaxed, even pulled, from their houses to meet the verbal dueling challenge. The duelers are teams, not individuals, even though one person sings at a time and the messages may refer to one of the hostesses and one of the guests who are attracted to each other. If one of the team members cannot respond with a verse, another team member can sing the verse instead. In a village, many people would gather around to listen, and duelers who were talented gained a reputation that spread from village to village.

One verse of a song contains four lines, each with seven meaningful words (many that belong to a "singing" language not known by everyone). The meaningful words are surrounded with nonsense sounds that made the song sound beautiful. What follows is an example of one verse, with all the words—meaningful and nonsense—transcribed (the meaningful words are boldface):

1—*Ei* ***cor*** *na oh* ***hangh*** *ei* ***juov*** *naaz* ***ndaapv*** *oh ei ma'****dorng*** *na* ***yaang*** *oh ei* ***fouv*** *ohx.*
2—***Jiem*** *na ei* ***yiem baaiv heix nauz*** *oh* ***yaang*** *ei nah* ***jaai*** *(break, repeat) faa o ouix jiem na ei yiem baaiv heix nauz oh yaang ei nah jaai.*
3—*Ouix* ***yaang*** *nah oh* ***doyc*** *ah ouix ma'****siu*** *nah* ***kiqv*** *oh zei Ei ma'****siem yaang*** *ohx zaanv*
4—*Ei* ***zaanv*** *ouix* ***yaamc*** *nah eix* ***dorng jiem*** *yiex* ***seix*** *oui* ***siem*** *ei na* ***baaic*** *oh* (break, repeat) *ei faax ouix yaamc loh eix dorng jiem yiex seix oui siem ei na baaic oh.*

Now, taking just the first line, the singing language is written (a), followed by the spoken Mien equivalents (b), the word-by-word English translation (c), and the general meaning in English (d):

1(a)—Corh	haeng	juov	ndaapv	dorngh	yaangh	fouv
1(b)—Co-hoqc	yangh	caaiv	faaux	dorngx	njang	da'boung
1(c)—Begin	walk	step	up	place	bright	country

1(d)—We have just arrived at this beautiful country.

What follows are excerpts from the third type of guest-hostess song, the **adolescent socializing** song.

I. **Male guests sing**:

1(a)—Corh	haengh	juov	ndaapv	dorngh	yaangh	fouv
1(b)—Co-hoqc	yangh	caaiv	faaux	dorngx	njang	da'boung
1(c)—Begin	walk	step	up	place	bright	country
2(a)—Jiemh-yiem	baaiv	heix	nauc	yaangh	jaai	
2(b)—Jiemh-yiem	baaiv	hei	nauc	yaangh	jauv	
2(c)—God of beauty	display	market	make noise	living	area	
3(a)—Yaangh	doyh	siu	kiqv	siemz	yaang	zaanv
3(b)—Da'bung	dieh	buov	jienv	camv	hung	zaanv
3(c)—Country	table	burn	many	incense	cups	
4(a)—Yaamc	dorng	jiem	yiex	siex-siem	baaih	
4(b)—Mv	dorng	ih	mounh	baaux	nzung	
4(c0—Not	right	now	night	sing	song.	

1(d)—*We have just arrived at this beautiful country.*
2(d)—*This village is filled with beautiful playful girls.*
3(d)—*This country is full of burning incense in many cups on many tables.*
4(d)—*It is not proper to disturb this country tonight.*

II. **The hostesses sing in answer**:

1(a)—Juov	hyietv	siuh	yaang	gengx	zienh-singx
1(b)—Juov	hnoy	bouv	hung	gengx	mienv (gu'nyuoh)
1(c)—In advance	day	burn	incense	pray	spirit (household)
2(a)—Cui	dugv	jiemh	kwaa	taux	zinc	yaang
2(b)—Cui	dugv	jiem	biengh	taux	zaanc	dorngx
2(c)—Help	get	gold	flower	arrive	cheap	place
3(a)—Waangh-cio	bouc	dauh	mouc	kwaa	hinc	
3(b)—Waang	bouc	dorngx	mv maaih	biengh	hinc	
3(c)—Lonely place	station	place	no have	flower	shine	
4(a)—Zingx	dorng	jiemh	yiex	seix-siemh	baaih	
4(b)—Cingx	dorng	ih	mounv	baauv	nzung	
4(c)—It's	right	now	night	sing	song	

1(d)—*We have been burning incense to pray*
2(d)—*To help present gold flowers to our poor (village) place.*
3(d)—*In our lonely country, there is no flower which blooms*
4(d)—*So we must commence the songs tonight.*

III. **Male guests sing again**:

1(a)—Jiux-coi	meic	gaengz	ging	jiex	mbounx	
1(b)—Jiuc-coix	mv	gaengz	boungh	jiex	mbounx	
1(c)—Onion	not	yet	meet	never	fog	
2(a)—Cingz	cov	meic	gaengz	gingz	jiex	sorng
2(b)—Maeng	miev	mv	gaengz	boungh	jiex	sorng
2(c)—Green	plants	not	yet	meet	never	snow
3(a)—Miec	gaegz	ging	jiex	horqc-dorngz		noic
3(b)—Mv	gaengz	boung	jiex	horqc-dorngz		gu'nyouz
3(d)—Not	yet	meet	never	school		inside
4(a)—Kaux	fin	yienx	daaix	zaangc	giu	yiaouz
4(b)—Kaux	siev	dorz	jouv	faaux	jiaoh	mingh
4(c)—Depend	girl	lead	way	up	bridge	go

1(d)—*Never before has the onion met the fog.*
2(d)—*Never have green plants encountered the snow.*
3(d)—*We have never been to school.*
4(d)—*We have to rely on you to show us the way.*

IV. **Hostesses respond**:

1(a)—Jiux-coix	yaac	daaih	ging	jiex	mbounx	
1(b)—Jiux-coix	yaac	daaih	boungh	jiex	mbounx	
1(c)—Onion	be	come	meet	before	fog	
2(a)—Cingz	cov	yaac	daaic	ging	jiex	sorng
2(b)—Maeng	miev	yaac	daaic	boungh	jiex	sorng
2(c)—Green	plants	be	come	meet	before	snow
3(a)—Faix	fiuv	kauv	wurn	taux	jiem	seix
3(b)—Faix	di'dien	hoqc	nzung	taux	ih	zanc
3(c)—Small	little	learn	song	to	now	moment
4(a)—Siev	koi	jiemh	kouv	douc	nzauh	waang
4(b)—Siev	koi	jiem	nzuiz	jaev	nzauh	waang
4(c)—Please	open	gold	mouth	loosen	sad	lonely

1(d)—*The onion has met the fog before.*
2(d)—*Green plants have met the snow before.*
3(d)—*You have been studying songs from childhood until now.*
4(d)—*Please open your golden mouths, sing to help us escape our sorrow.*

V. After many more verses, the male guests reveal that they like someone in the village:

1(a)—Liepc	kiqv	zienz	fiem	waax	yunh	bounc
1(b)—Liepc	jienv	zien	hyiaov	lorz	auv	m'nyei
1(c)—Lift	-ing	true	heart	find	wife	my

2(a)—Feix	coux	kwaa	hgoi	yaamc	ziux	ziao
2(b)—Ha'dau	dorngx	biengh	hgoi	mv	ziux	yie
2(c)—Where	place	flower	bloom	not	shine	me
3(a)—Jiem	nhyietv	wuic	bwaangh	kuv	kwaa	ziux
3(b)—Ih nhoi	zuc	boungh	longx	biengh	ziux	
3(c)—Now	day	right	meet	good	flower	shine
4(a)—Feix	duqv	maaih	yunz	zeoc	duqv	linh
4(b)—Haih	duqv	maaih	maengc	zeoc	duqv	longc
4(c)—Possible	get	have	life	right away	get	marry

1(d)—*My heart soars in search of a wife.*
2(d)—*No flower bloom shines on me.*
3(d)—*Today a good flower shines on me.*
4(d)—*Wish we can marry you right away.*

VI. **Hostesses sing**:

1(a)—Ceov	setv	zinc	kwaa	yaamc	njaang	laangc
1(b)—Gu'naaiv	waaic	zaanc	biangz	mv	njaang	aengv
1(c)—Thing	broke	worthless	flower	not	light	shine
2(a)—Yeoc-nziex	luangz	zou	sienv	sueiv	hei	
2(b)—Mz-nziex	torn	torn	ginv	siev	piex	
2(c)—Maybe	boy	boy	picky	girl	useless	
3(a)—Yorc	waanz	yaamc	sienv	baengz	zinc	setv
3(b)—Si gorngv	mv	ginv	aiv	zaanc	yie-buo	
3(c)—If talk	not	picky	low	worthless	us	
4(a)—Nyunc	dunx	ziangz	sorng	meic	dunx	heo
4(b)—Funx	tingc	ziangz	i-hmoungv	mv	dunx	gwangc
4(c)—Count	sure	real	couple	not	do	break-up

1(d)—*We are ugly and worthless.*
2(d)—*We are afraid you don't like us.*
3(d)—*If you don't dislike us worthless persons*
4(d)—*You can count on us to marry you and not divorce you later.*

VII. **Guests**:

1(a)—Feix	waac	koih	daaiz	nziex	sienv	sueiv
1(b)—Feix	waac	gorngv	daaiz	nziex	ginv	m'buo
1(c)—Plain	word	say	come	worry	picky	you
2(a)—Faix	faix	siuh	yaang	zienh	meic	cui
2(b)—Faix	faix	buov	hung	mienv	mv	cui
2(c)—Small	small	burn	incense	spirit	not	help

3(a)—Bangc	kaux	fioh	fim	zoix	seix	zaangc
3(b)—Bangc	kaux	fio	fim	yiem	seix	lung-ndiev
3(c)—Depend on	be	good	living	life	world	

4(a)—Tinh	pai	ceix	nzounx	zingx	faangh	boungh
4(b)—Lungz	bun	ceix	daaiz	cingx	mingh	boungh
4(c)—Heaven	give	create	come	be able	go	meet

1(d)—*How can you say we don't like you?*
2(d)—*We have been burning incense since we were small to pray for your attention but the spirits have been of no help.*
3(d)—*Because we have been good living in the world.*
4(d)—*Therefore, our fate has brought us here to meet you.*

VIII. **Hostesses**:

1(a)—Tingx	zuqc	siemh	zingh	zien	kwaax	douv
1(b)—Moungx	haiz	meih	buo	zien	hnamv	hnyiov
1(c)—Listen	hear	you	(plural)	real	love	heart

2(a)—Nziex	zingh	jangv	guov	fiox	maaih	kor
2(b)—Nziex	meih	jangv	da'bung	lorh	maaih	auv
2(c)—Maybe	you	wide	world	find	have	wife

3(a)—Caqv	cie	lorgc	maaz	taux	waang	guov
3(b)—Dorngc jauv	ndortv	doic	taux	waang	da'bung	
3(c)—Wrong	way	fall	group	get to	lonely	country

4(a)—Kungh	kouv	saah	lorh	wangv	zwangx (zinc)	yaang
4(b)—Kungx	nzuiz	gorngv	ha'nzyaauc	nduov	yie	buo
4(c)—Plain	mouth	say	play	trick	I	(plural)

1(d)—*We hear your words come from a very true heart.*
2(d)—*Maybe you have found someone elsewhere already.*
3(d)—*You just came to this place by accident.*
4(d)—*Only plain words to trick us.*

The verses continue until one side cannot respond or gives up to go to sleep.

(Transcription and translation by Kaota Saepharn)

Paj Ntaub, Hmong "flower cloth"

The men's upper garments do not reach their waists and their trousers do not cover their knees. Where their upper and lower garments meet they bind embroidered sashes. … They hold fifes which consist of six tubes, two feet in length. … The flounces [of the women's clothes], sleeves and collars of their clothes all have embroidered borders. The embroidery uses fabrics inferior to those of the Chinese, but their ancient patterns are uncommonly delicate and have nothing of the modern style. … Their skirts are minutely plaited like butterfly wings. The young men wear no shirts with their trousers and the maidens no trousers under their skirts. Where their skirts and upper garments meet the maidens also bind embroidered sashes. [Lin Yueh-hwa 1940:xxxx]

Lin Yueh-hwa (1940) translated this description of the Miao in China in 1684, yet it could be used to describe Hmong today in Laos or Thailand, or in the United States.

In the United States, the Hmong have become well-known for their elaborate and colorful needlework, and this beautiful skill stands in stark contrast to the traditional lives of the craftswomen. In Thai Hmong villages, the contrast is startling: a fuschia-banded baby-carrier or girl's skirt fanned out over a bamboo "clothesline," against a backdrop of browns and blacks, a work of art standing against weathered split bamboo walls. A woman with earth-stained fingers pulling a pristine white and fuschia sash from a plastic bag, taking almost invisible stitches with a tiny needle, never leaves a smudge on the fabric. Inside houses that have dirt floors, no lighting, and cooking fires, the colors of the jungle beyond are vibrant, as they show through the splits and gaps of the bamboo walls. The colors of the poinsettia, the poppy, the roosters, and the parrots take the breath away. The hilltribe women capture this contrast in their stitchery.

Hmong skirt (above) contains batik, applique, cross-stitch. Story cloth, a recent innovation, uses familiar stitches to depict scenes, in this case the escape from Laos as refugees.

Orality vs. Literacy
Implications for Educators

Western society has not always been associated with literacy. Widespread literacy first occurred during Plato's time in ancient Greece, and produced an alternative to the oral transmission of knowledge and culture prevalent until that time. Epic poems and scholarly dialogues of Plato's time were analyzed and compared, and the differences between oral and written texts became evident. The styles, syntax, and lexicons were quite different, with the epic poems featuring memory-enhancing devices such as rhythm, narration, emotional imagery, and repetition. The dialogues, on the other hand, featured abstract concepts and an orderly sequence of premises leading to a logical conclusion. Literacy makes language permanent, which enables discourse over time, and the building of one idea upon another. Written language promoted abstract concepts, new ways of categorizing knowledge, and different styles of learning.

Researchers and casual acquaintances alike remark on the superlative memory skills of non-literate people, when they witness hours-long ritual songs and the naming of generations of ancestors. It may be that the kinds of things memorized are surprising, because they don't expect non-literate people to remembers long oral histories or herbal remedies. The relevance of the concepts to be memorized is important. Likewise, memory-enhancing practices increase the likelihood that information will be passed on word-of-mouth from one generation to another. Oral texts often have a predictable structure that contains semantic pairs, rhymes, distinctive rhythm, and repetition. In fact the repetition is helpful to remembering stories; think of the "Three Little Pigs" or "Little Red Riding Hood." Children's stories contain ample repetition of language, events, and characters. The predictability also reduces the ambiguity that accompanies oral texts; the receiver can't go back and re-read a passage. The predictability is important to understanding.

In general, studies have shown that schooled children and adults use different strategies for memorizing. Most regroup objects into categories, then remember one category at a time. Those villagers who have never been to school tend to name the items, rehearse the names, and sometimes pair the objects with physical actions. When the objects were presented in the form of a narrative story, the memory of schooled and unschooled children did not differ. Material that was unfamiliar or irrelevant to the unschooled individuals was not remembered, and grammatically unrelated objects were not well-remembered.

The social world of the non-literate villager integrates all aspects of life into ongoing activity. Teaching and learning are part of every-day events and interaction. Learning is largely by observation and trial-and-error. Adults seldom verbalize a concept; they demonstrate the concept. Children in these societies seldom ask "why?" questions. This may be because so much learning is done in real-life situations, in which the context makes meaning clear.

Styles of communication affect learning. When asked to describe an object that the other person cannot see, villagers left out important parts of the description. Their descriptions were based on an assumption that the listener knew what they meant without precise verbalization. This lack of precision is similar to the descriptions of young children, who relate objects in personal terms, for example, "pick the one that looks like my mother's hat").

Teachers often have children in class who come from social groups that use oral means to transmit knowledge. Understanding differences between oral and literate styles of learning can help remove barriers to equal access in the classroom. For example:

- use pattern and repetition;
- tell stories;
- tie abstract concepts to familiar experiences;
- demonstrate;
- provide corrective feedback ("trial-and-error");
- explicitly teach and practice reorganizing strategies for memorizing unrelated or irrelevant concepts, well beyond the early years.

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