



Listening to Immigrant Voices

The Story of the Hmong

Nouk Vagh

Lay Pastor, Hmong Central Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minn.

With

Gregg Helland, *Retired ELCA Pastor, Lakewille, Minn.*

Jua J. Her, *Hmong Central Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minn.*

The author, Nouk Vagh, is a Hmong, who considers it an honor to contribute this article to the “Listening to Immigrant Voices” feature in Currents in Theology and Mission. This article is about a group of refugees who started coming to this country in 1976. The last wave of those coming from Southeast Asia, called “Hmong,” ended in 2005.

Who are the Hmong?

The Hmong are members of an ethnic group that had been living in China for thousands of years before they fled to Southeast Asia beginning in the eighteenth century. Although they do not have a country of their own, they have developed their own tradition and culture within their small mountainous farming communities.

Hmong people today are scattered to many parts of the world. According to the 2010 census in the New World Encyclopedia, there are over 3 million in China, 800,000 in Vietnam, 550,000 in Laos, 260,000 in the U.S., 150,000 in Thailand, 15,000 in France, 12,000 in Myanmar (Burma), 2,000 in French Guiana, 2,000 in Australia, 850 in Canada, 600 in Argentina, and several families in both Germany and Japan.

Hmong history

It is difficult to trace the early history of the Hmong people because there were no written records. The Hmong history, verbally passed down from generation to generation, said that the Hmong originated from around the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers in China thousands of years ago. However, in the eighteenth century, tensions arose between Imperial China and the Hmong because of Imperial China's quest to unite smaller kingdoms and ethnic minorities as one nation. Since then our ancestors have never gotten along with the Imperial Chinese, because they invaded our lands and killed our people. This suppression went on for decades. The majority of Hmong chose to remain in China, but several hundred of them, along with their leaders, decided to move south to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar in the 1700s to escape the persecution.

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Before the war

Before the secret war in Laos, the Hmong lived in harmony. The responsibilities of the men were farming and making sure families were well fed throughout the year. The Hmong lived in peace. They were born, raised, advanced in age, and passed away in the same villages, because there was no war and therefore no need to flee from place to place.

The Hmong's roles in the secret war

After 1960, the lives of the Hmong changed because the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sought out and recruited Hmong people to fight the so called “secret war” against the North Vietnamese and the Communist Pathet Lao. The Hmong were known to be skillful and loyal fighters alongside the French against the Japanese prior to the secret war. The Hmong played many critical roles under the direction of General Vangpao and the U.S. CIA, first by disrupting the North Vietnamese from sending troops and supplies into South Vietnam using the Ho Chi Minh Trail; second, by rescuing downed American pilots; and, third, by defending and protecting the important radar site, known to the CIA as “Lima Site 85” at Phu Pha Thi, which directed American pilots from South Vietnam to bomb North Vietnamese military installations.

Our men began to disappear: young males were recruited to fight the war, and most of them returned to their families from the frontlines in body bags. More and more, boys became involved; the

average age of Hmong recruits was fourteen. Even more Hmong males were killed protecting freedom, including my three uncles. Many families were left without any male over the age of fourteen in the household.

After the war

In 1975, after the U.S. pulled out of South Vietnam and the Communist Pathet Lao overthrew the Laotian Monarchy, General Vangpao, his family, hundreds of Hmong military leaders, and their families had to be evacuated by plane immediately to Thailand for fear of reprisal. Thousands of Hmong who were left behind followed suit and decided to risk their lives by walking days and nights through thick jungle before reaching the Thai border.

However, many Hmong were unable to reach the Thai border because they drowned while crossing the Mekong River. The Communist Laos stopped many groups from fleeing the country by ambush and mining their paths, and then taking the captives back for more punishment. There were several refugee camps set up in North Eastern Thailand to temporarily settle the Hmong before they sought asylum in many European and Western countries, including Australia, French Guiana, Canada, Germany, and the United States.

As a result of siding with the U.S., the Hmong who were left behind became singled out by the victorious Communist government of Laos and Vietnam. Thus many Hmong leaders began to disappear mysteriously without any trace, and many were shot dead during the night without any reason. People began to panic and be frightened because no one knew who was going to be next. Therefore, thousands of Hmong fled deep into the mountainous jungle of Laos to fend for themselves.

My family and I were among the many thousands of Hmong people who spent several years hiding in the jungle and continuing to fight against the oppressors for survival. We tried to survive against all odds because we were being hunted like animals. We kept ourselves alive by eating roots, leaves, bamboo shoots, wild potatoes, and all kinds of wild animals. We lived in makeshift tents under thick tree canopies and were always on the run. Many people were either killed by the enemies or died from starvation, diseases, and chemical warfare, especially the small children and weak elders. We were unable to set up fire or cook during the day, because the smoke would give away our hiding place to the enemies for shelling and bombing. For this reason, all cooking was done at night to make sure we had enough food to last for the whole day.

In the latter part of 1978, my dad decided that enough was enough; he took our family along with about 300 others and we walked through thick jungle for three days before reaching the Mekong River. We cut lots of bamboo in about two foot lengths and tied two pieces together as a floating device for adults. We made bamboo rafts, so children and older people could ride them across. The Mekong River is extremely difficult to cross by swimming without the floating supports.

My family and I settled in Ban Vinai Camps in the Province of Leoi, Thailand, for about three years prior to coming to the

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U.S. On July 21, 1981, my family and I landed in San Francisco International Airport and were headed the next day to our final destination in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In June 1985, we moved from Pittsburgh to St. Paul, Minnesota, and have been living here ever since.

In 1976, many Hmong people began arriving in the U.S. after being sponsored as refugees, and many were sponsored by the Lutheran denomination. The majority of Hmong people in this country are in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, with many others scattered across the states. According to the 2010 census, there were more than 260,000 Hmong in the United States. More than 66,000 have made Minnesota their home, most of whom live in or near the Twin Cities, which has the largest urban Hmong population in America. Approximately 50 percent of us identify ourselves as Christians (according to the Historical Society of Minnesota). Moreover, I have noticed that English has become the first spoken language, and Hmong has become the second spoken language for most Hmong under the age of thirty-five.

Many Hmong today in the U.S. still embrace our culture. Our society is divided into eighteen main clans; each main clan consists of many sub-clans. Traditionally, our daily life or social activities are centered on these clans. The clan leaders make decisions for their clans and keep peace among the members. Each family belongs to a sub-clan and a sub-clan belongs to the main clan. For example, I am a Vagh (Vang), so I belong to a sub-clan of the main Vang clan, which consists of twenty-four other sub-clans. Accordingly, an elected leader, in order to oversee the main clan, has to be elected depending on the established policy and similarly for any other clan. When a woman marries, she joins her husband's clan. Clan members' responsibilities include support of each other, and thus we are drawn nearer to each other in the same clan.

Today only a few Hmong Christian families still believe in the old clan. This belief is no longer true for most of us who have become Christians because Christ enables us to break this barrier. We are no longer encouraged to live closer to our blood relatives, rather closer instead to our new brothers and sisters in Christ. Christ sets us free and we are freed to live wherever we wish as long as there is a church for us to worship our Lord, Jesus Christ, regardless of clan, race, and ethnicity.