

## Hmong Ancestor Wisdom: Surviving Covid-19

For most of year 2020, the coronavirus has swept our planet unchecked without a clear understanding of what it is or how it spreads, infecting and affecting our entire human species at precisely the same time—all this in spite of mankind's advanced medical knowledge, state-of-the-art technology, and global coalition of specialists. It is astounding to consider that all people throughout the world—think of it, every continent, country, county, and remote corner—are experiencing this virulent contagion as an invisible, unpredictable common enemy, one that takes on mythic proportions in the way it provokes universal feelings of loss of control, dread of the unknown, and fear of suffering and death.

Such primal impressions in the face of nature's volatility tie us emotionally to our first ancestors, who, before the advent of science, turned without recourse to their age-old spiritual beliefs, superstitions, lore, and ritual enactments in order to understand the universe, to address their anxieties, and to survive decimating hardships. Suffice it to say, Covid-19, with a remedy only now on the horizon, has rendered us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as vulnerable as our animist forefathers of yore. This realization confirms a fundamental truth: we are connected to all peoples throughout time and place in our primordial drives, in our collective unconscious.



The highlands of the Golden Triangle, where Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar once knew no boundaries, harbor a staggering number and variety of peoples of over one hundred and thirty groups and subgroups who, by living in isolated, often inaccessible villages, have effectively maintained their ancestral heritage and individuality. Settling in mountains marked by deep valleys, a good source of water, and dense forests, these are agrarian peoples, working the land with traditional swidden techniques along precipitous slopes, while supplementing their diet with the domestic animals they raise and wild animals they track. In such rugged terrain, these indigenous peoples have necessarily developed a strong sense of self-sufficiency, resourcefulness, and perseverance in order to survive.



**Tswb Vaj, a Hmoob Dawb Matriarch  
Feeds her Animals  
Ban Sayua, Luang Nam Tha, Laos**



**Txawj Thoj, a Hmoob Dawb Hunter  
Shoots Game with his Crossbow  
Ban Nam La, Luang Nam Tha, Laos**

The Hmong represent one of the major indigenous groups among these. From their source in the mountains of northeastern China, the Hmong migrated in a southerly trajectory over centuries along the great rivers of China, traveling all the way to the Himalayan foothills that span Southeast Asia. In recent times, through circumstances of time, place, and cataclysmic local and global events, the Hmong diaspora has now stretched throughout the world, as far as Europe, Australia, and prominently the United States, where large Hmong communities can be found in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California.

Composed of numerous groups and subgroups who speak a range of regional dialects, the Hmong have created a cohesive understanding of the universe that reflects their individual heritage, character, thoughts, and dreams. They share the universe and interact daily with a pantheon of innumerable deities—creators, ancestors, guardians, benevolent spirits, malevolent fiends, and souls—who inhabit the invisible realm as they orchestrate, ‘animate,’ all that plays out in the visible plane of mortals. The Hmong believe that every entity in nature—the mountains, rivers, forests, fields, and sky, and all living creatures—and in areas important to social life—the village, home, altar, hearth, central post, and animal compound—possesses a spirit. Spirits also reside in objects, ritual tools, and musical instruments. The spirits of ancestors are dynamic, ever-present, and all-important beings, guiding and guarding every member of the household. Each person has multiple souls that dwell within the body to maintain safety and well-being. Living in accordance to changing earthly patterns and celestial cycles, the Hmong are at the mercy of this intricate web of capricious nature spirits that alternately protect or wreak havoc, depending on the placations they receive from humans.

As animists, the Hmong, like all first peoples (including our own founding fathers and mothers), have created over millennia a continuum of rites, ceremonies, and festivals that are requisite throughout the year to accompany their complex, all-encompassing belief system. Hmong spiritual doctrine, along with its devotional practices, is sophisticated and vast and contains multitudes.

So whether enduring life’s hardships at the communal level—plagues, famine, infestations, floods and drought, severe weather, extreme temperatures, and conflicts—or at the personal level—illness, accidents, misfortune, sorrow, loss, and death—it becomes the responsibility of every Hmong village, family, and individual to appease spirits regularly and frequently in order to achieve the harmony that manifests in healthy families, bountiful crops, good hunting, and long, peaceful lives. In animist belief, the human world and the supernatural realm are mirror images. What happens in one reverberates in the other.

In times of illness, it falls upon either a medicinal practitioner or a spirit intermediary to use the traditional Hmong healing arts to treat a patient. Specialists in herbal medicine, *kws tshuaj ntsuab*, choose domestic plants and wild herbs to prepare special infusions, poultices, tinctures, or amulets to alleviate a

variety of conditions. A master shaman, *txiv neeb*, donning a cloth veil as he or she rides a winged horse into the supernatural world, attempts to redress problems at the spiritual level, negotiating or even battling evil spirits to retrieve a patient's souls that have wandered from his body or have been captured. By returning the souls to the host, there is a sense of reestablishing balance in human and spirit relations, of restoring an invalid's health, and of reassuring him that pages still remain in his Book of Life.



**Txooj Ntxwg Xyooj, a Hmoob Dawb Shaman  
Enters the Spirit World accompanied by Ritual Instruments  
Ban Ka La, Chiang Rai, Thailand**

However, when ‘bedeviled’ with a contagion so virulent it overwhelms the powers of a medicinal healer or shaman, a Hmong community must conduct special, rarely used acts, supplications, and ceremonies to protect its village. For if a pandemic should enter a remote community, it can spread like wildfire from family to family, decimating an entire populace in a matter of days—breaking the precious link in a long chain of descendants and silencing the wisdom they have accumulated through untold generations of oral tradition. Thus, in early 2020 the Hmong of Southeast Asia summoned their ancestral wisdom to reenact elaborate ritual acts that, taken together, provided maximum protection against Covid-19.

With news of a devastating, unknown pandemic, the numerous Hmong communities of Thailand and Laos acted with utmost haste to barricade their villages. Men constructed makeshift spirit gates, *rooj vaag*, that closed off their lands to evil spirits, *dab phem*; wild spirits, *dab qus*; disease, *kab mob*, and death *kev tuag*, as well as to any visitors who might carry the coronavirus into their safe haven. Though there may be variations in practices among the different subgroups, each Hmong village carried out the rite on an auspicious day chosen by the principal shaman and elder male leaders, so that within hours each community was physically sealed and spiritually protected.

The Hmong spirit gate is fashioned from supple lengths of cut bamboo into a soaring arch that spans the paths and roads leading to the village. This structure may continue on either side of the road with two additional arches so the gate blocks unwelcome disease, spirits, and travelers on three fronts—the center and its two flanks. All bamboo arches are wrapped in black cloth around which red and white cloth strips are wound, a beacon clearly visible for all to see.



**Spirit Gate, *Rooj Vaag* – Hmoob Ntsuab (Blue Hmong)  
 Built during the Protective Ceremony, *Rooj Vaag Qua Dab*  
 Ban Doi Pui, Chiang Mai District, Chiang Mai Province  
 An Auspicious Day, March 2020**

A fusion of threatening symbols that harken back to ancestral beliefs, stories, and spiritual canon are attached to the gate as a strong signal to intruders that they are approaching a mighty fortification: garlands of thickly braided rope of thatch grass, *hlua nqeeb*, representing manacles that bind evil spirits’ hands behind their backs, drape along the gateposts and arch; *riam dab*, frightening wooden knives hewn from the *ntoo huab txhib*, a wild jungle tree that spirits fear, and marked with black X motifs, hang from these ropes to menace, maim, or murder malevolent spirits; large star-like hexagonal totems, *ntxaij*, designed with latticed strips of bamboo, confuse evil spirits with their complex form and serve as a bold threat, “Do Not Trespass;” on each post is tied a sturdy acacia branch studded with razor-sharp thorns; a rattan winnowing tray, *vab*, hangs directly in the center of the arch, acting as a net to catch misfortune, disease, and death; and attached to the pinnacle of the gate sways a small black pouch, *hnab tshuaj*, filled with medicinal herbs prepared by a healer as a protective talisman against infection and malicious spirits that try to steal people’s souls.



**Archway of Protective Spirit Gate  
 With Menacing Totems  
 Rope, Knives, Tray, Star, Herbal Pouch**



**Arched Spirit Gate Protects a Shaman’s Home  
 With Menacing Totems – Interior Shaman Altar  
 Rope, Knives, Spirit Money, Corn, Paper, String**

Rattan effigies of the first Hmong “mother and father ancestor spirits,” *dab niam dab txiv*, prominently stand sentinel at the base of the gateposts. They are robed, as are their descendants, in hand-woven hemp clothing of red, indigo, black, and white, the four major colors of the Hmong palette. As the father dons a traditional black headdress and the mother displays a voluminous bun of coiled thatch grass hair, *dab niam dab txiv* are conspicuously poised for combat, for each is armed with a large wooden crossbow, *hneev*; rifle, *rab phom*; and knife, *riam dab*.



**Mother and Father Ancestor Spirits, *Dab Niam Dab Txiv*  
Armed with Crossbow, Rifle, and Knife to Protect the Village  
Ban Doi Pui, Chiang Mai District, Chiang Mai Province**

Once the spirit gate has been completed, a village shaman conducts the *rooj vaag qua dab* ritual to sanctify the gate and safeguard the community. Intoning verse after ritual verse while brandishing clanging shamanic instruments—*txiab neeb*, iron spirit scissors with rattling discs, and *tswb neeb*, bronze rings with metal pellet rattles—the shaman implores Hmong ancestor and guardian spirits to keep every villager safe from harm. As the shaman then tosses to the ground his *kuam*, buffalo horns that serve as divination tools, he poses yes/no questions to benevolent spirits to determine if his supplications have been properly fulfilled and accepted. This is repeated until the guardian spirits are in accord, as determined when the horns finally land in a favorable position. Only then does the shaman burn *xov txheej*, rectangular paper notes symbolizing “spirit money,” as payment to the spirits. The spirit gate has now been consecrated and the ceremony draws to a close.

Just as the Hmong close off their village with a defensive gate, so also do they take every precaution to barricade their homes with warning symbols. Stakes, *ncej*, on which rope garlands and spirit knives are strung, are planted at the compound entrance in a labyrinthine zigzag layout to prevent access; *nkawj zes*, wasp nests, and *ntxaij*, latticed-woven bamboo totems adorned with black, white, and red cloth strips and plant leaves, are affixed at the central and cooking room doors to thwart; these entryways are further fortified with rope garlands strung with spirit knives and, on occasion, dog’s paws with fearsome claws; at certain homes, the head of a guard dog, baring his teeth, is trained skywards and mounted on a towering pole to terrorize evil spirits from above.



**Stakes, Garlands, Spirit Knives**



**Hexagonal Totem**



**Wasp Nest**

When Hmong family members leave their ‘safe house,’ personal amulets shield them from disease and harm. Their necks and wrists are encircled with multiple red or white ritual strings; silver neck rings, *xauv ncais*, may be strung with soul locks, *phiaj xauv*, to keep their souls safe inside the body, or with medicinal pouches, *hnab tshuaj*, filled with protective herbs; the simple cutout of a human figure, *moj zeej*, which represents a person’s soul, may be hung at the bedroom door or worn on the back of his jacket, literally to “watch his back;” and in certain cases, *xauv ntswj*, “twisting rings,” bracelets and anklets fashioned with entwined strands of silver, brass, and copper, and capped with dragon heads, safeguard patients, the elderly, and mothers and their newborns. The Hmong have considered every possible measure, great and small, to foil the virus—from cocooning the entire village with human gates and divine protection, to encircling the wrist of the tiniest baby with silver, a magical metal able to deflect disease.



**Rhiav Lis, Hmoob Dawb Healer**  
**Grows Medicinal Herbs**  
**Ban Nam La**  
**Luang Nam Tha, Laos**



**Txaj Lis Yaj, Hmoob Dawb Shaman**  
**Ties Ritual String on Qhua Neeb Yaj**  
**Ban Khun Chang Khian**  
**Chiang Mai Province, Thailand**



**Hmoob Dawb Boy**  
**Shielded by Silver, String, Herbs**  
**Ban Kok Ek**  
**Had Nang Singh, Laos**



**Silver Neck, *Xauv Ncais***  
**Soul Locks, *Phiaj Xauv***



**Soul Effigy, *Moj Zeej***



**Twisted Silver Bracelets with Dragons**

At this unprecedented time, when our human race collectively is confronted with the ravaging coronavirus pandemic, we all resort unconsciously to our primal, reptilian brain where reside innate emotions of uncertainty and fear, and instinctual behaviors of retreat and defense that ensures survival—for self, family, and species. With a cure in sight yet not in arm, we are left only with the ability to lock ourselves in and to block disease out.

And yet the ancestors of all first peoples were resourceful enough to establish meaningful precautions to bolster their chances to stay alive. To counter the threat of Covid-19, the Hmong of the Golden Triangle followed the guidelines of their local governments, all the while knowing that for true physical and spiritual protection they must tap into their ancestral cache of traditional practices, unique to plagues and rarely performed, to preserve their very existence. For the Hmong, every divine numen, sanctuary, spirit gate, verse, ceremony, offering, totem, and charm embodies the wisdom and power accumulated and transmitted by countless generations to overcome this menace and those that will surely follow.

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