



Hmong boys training with the qeej



Shaman Txiaj Lis Yaj ties a sacred thread to unite the patient's recovered soul



Vam Kaim Lis, a high third-level shaman from Chiang Rai Province, Thailand

HMONG RITUALS AND MUSIC

by Graeme Vanderstoel

Everything is interwoven in the large context of the Hmong ethos – myths, lyrics, motifs, embroidery stitches, rites, and, of course, music. In an email Victoria Vorreiter stresses what to expect in her *Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music* book and accompanying DVD. They are so much more than just a study of the music.

The book and DVD were launched in Vorreiter's adopted hometown Chiang Mai, Thailand at the same time as her multi-media exhibition of the same name, including objects from her archive, at Tamarind Village. Splendid photographs, many instruments, ritual and musical, were displayed along with fine costumes and textiles. A shaman shrine with all the trappings emphasised its important spiritual role in the Hmong tradition.

Vorreiter's first book and CD *Songs of Memory* published in 2009 introduced the music of six tribes, including the Hmong, in the Golden Triangle area of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and China. Her new book concentrates on the Hmong of Laos and Thailand: the White, the Striped, the Black, and the Blue Hmong.

The Hmong are presumed to have migrated from Siberia and Mongolia about 2000 BC to what we now know as central China. Over the centuries the Hmong were pushed south and about 300 years ago started crossing into the upper reaches of Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar. The most tragic episode in recent memory was their assisting the US in their Secret War during the Vietnam War resulting in many escaping to Thailand and then in large numbers moving to the US.

Vorreiter started researching for this new book in 2005 by visiting a remote White Hmong village in northern Laos. The very first day she witnessed a healing ceremony for the

infant Cas Khoos by his grandmother, Rhiav Lis, a respected White Hmong shaman. This soul-calling ritual is documented in her latest work – the 591 verses of the soul-calling ceremony, transcribed and translated, are indexed in both English and Hmong and included on the DVD.

Less than a quarter of the book covers secular music while the bulk of it is on sacred music includes chapters on Hmong shamanism, Pantheon of Spirits, Souls and Shadows, Hmong Cosmology, The Sacred in the Human World, and the aforementioned Healing Ceremonies

of an infant. For the Hmong, even in the US communities, the shamans are crucial in maintaining the balance between their supernatural and natural worlds. It is admirable how the Hmong life styles and culture have survived.

Hmong shaman enter trance not to become possessed but to pass into the spirit world 'with full mental and physical authority' so as to find 'where an individual's souls have strayed or taken hostage'. Shaman training is long and detailed as they attain the three different levels of expertise, and is evident by how they construct their

altars. Vorreiter details all these including the deities of each cycle of life, the various ritual instruments, and transcribes and translates two important rituals: one soul-retrieving and the previously mentioned soul-calling.

Like many ancients, the Hmong had no written language until their full contact with the modern world in the early 1950s. Oral traditions and remarkable memories preserved their traditions. One song even recalls the 'icy terrains and harsh winters' of their earlier residence millennia ago. The Hmong language like many of this region is tonal, and their poetry is based on ancestral dialects. This is even preserved in instrumental music where it can emulate most aspects of the language so that full lyrics are usually recognisable to listeners. Ballads and rituals are transcribed in Hmong and translated into English. In all, a true tour de force, as Vorreiter acknowledges the large number, mostly Hmong, who assisted.

And yes, the music: the DVD has many examples although as often one wishes they could be longer. It starts with a quotation: Hmong legends imply that music is a miracle, capable

of making a waterfall dry, birds numb, and quenching a deer's thirst – *Hooj Tboj*.

The variety of instruments includes a leaf capable of playing a rich repertoire, a mouth harp, various flutes, the qeej (a multiple free-reed pipe), a spiked fiddle, and percussion used in rituals. The DVD highlights all these and includes a special sequence with the qeej played in a martial arts dance, the result of weapons being outlawed by the Han Chinese, and so the qeej was substituted. The same dance is shown in a story cloth. These modern textiles form was started after the communists took control of Laos in 1975. The Hmong, who fled to Thailand, used these stitched cloths by women to illustrate their heritage and current life activities.

This is a keywork for anthropologists, musicologists, and all interested in the legacy of the Hmong. It includes a detailed archive of instruments, a list of tonal preludes, 19 pages of music glossary but no index, although that would have been very complicated. Alas there is no discography of other recordings. The book is beautifully designed, printed, and bound, doing full justice to the over 300 photographs. The DVD, finely filmed, directed, and edited by Vorreiter, captures the rituals and music in village life. I hope her exhibition travels to show this exceptional heritage that like so much nowadays, unless treasured, could vanish.

• *Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music* by Victoria Vorreiter with essays, images, and film, including an ethnographic film DVD, Resonance Press, Thailand 2016, ISBN 9780998123905, film 9780998123912. Softbound, US\$65. More information and how to order the book and DVD can be found on TribalMusicAsia.com



Shaman Rhiav Lis crossing the Nam La River to her village in northwest Laos. All Photos: Victoria Vorreiter

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