

Narrator: Tong Thai Xiong
Interviewer: Sallie Anna Steiner
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XIONG: ...because when he uses a horn, and he already protected the soul across the way to a connection in another realm, so that's why he cut the paper to separate the soul, so he or she would not go reconnect to another dimension.

STEINER: Is he in the spirit world right now?

XIONG: Ah, no. Right now he is in reality. He's cutting the paper money to represent the soul, to burden the soul to other dimensions, to say that we give this to you and you free our soul back to present life. And the chicken inside a bag is for guiding the shaman. Sometimes they cross between the two worlds and that's why the chicken spirit will have to guide the shaman. And also they are used for calling souls, too.

STEINER: Is it alright to talk to him while he does this, or does he do it in silence? You don't really talk to him while he's doing this?

XIONG: Not really.

And the water on that table, you know when you go to church and there's holy water--it's pretty much like that, water to wash the soul, to wash the people.

[Pause in recording]

XIONG: It's changing a lot in the new generation.

STEINER: How so?

XIONG: This is a really old tradition, shamanism, and he's a really old traditional Hmong.

STEINER: Was his altar stuff from his master?

XIONG: Yes.

STEINER: So back in Laos?

XIONG: Yes. And the two colored bowls in the front, it's rice...well, back in ancient time they didn't have flour, it's really hard to get flour, so they use rice and they put a mixture, and that represents Hmong flour.

There's a book written back in 1975, and it's by one of the French scholars, and they pretty much have all the details of Hmong shaman culture from A to Z. It's written in French, but some in English, so you

might look into that. They have everything, from how shamanism began. And that philosopher actually took the time to go live with a Hmong shaman, and he wrote a book about it. It was written in '75. Even the young generations like us, we still refer to that book because you have to generally study the basic skills and know the knowledge, too. Because once you become a shaman, you have to actually learn, too. They will get you the spiritual, or get you the idea, but you have to actually learn from a master, from somebody else, too.

STEINER: Can I ask what kind of cases you've dealt with in your shaman practice?

XIONG: Well, it kind of depends if the shaman has a specialty. For me, when I help people it's with calling soul, and sometimes when people get really old, and they try to pass between two worlds, and they kind of go because they had a past life, and they cannot cross into the other dimension due to debt. And also, people who have passed already and they cannot cross to heaven because they have debt in this life or the life before, and they will come back to their sons, daughters that are close to them and make them sick. Then they call shaman, they say oh, that's because your father or your mother have debt from the life before this life, that's what you need paper money to pay for. So that's pretty much my clientele. Each shaman has a specialty.

STEINER: So you do a lot of soul guiding?

XIONG: Yeah, and also people, they cannot find their way to heaven, and that's why people will come to me, to guide their soul to heaven.

STEINER: When you were back in Laos...are you from Laos?

XIONG: Yes, I was born in Laos, but I was raised in the hills. I was seven or eight years old when I came to this country, a first grader.

STEINER: So, did you have any experience with shamans back then?

XIONG: No, back then I was really young. I remember I was like five or six, and that's really young.

STEINER: But then here you had experience with shamans. Did your parents bring a shaman to the house when you were sick and stuff?

XIONG: Yeah.

STEINER: Did you always believe in it, or did you doubt?

XIONG: At first I doubted, because I'm the new generation, right? Like I told you, I was sick for four or five years, and they said "Yeah, you have to become a shaman," and I said no, I didn't want to. Because that's only for people in the traditional way. I denied it. But after the ritual, it worked. And sometimes when we go to people's houses to do shaman for them, do I believe it? Yes. And do I cure people? Yes. But sometimes we say go to the doctor first, and if they cannot find anything wrong with you, you can come to us and we will see the other world, the other dimensions, to balance the mind, and soul, and body. That's pretty much what shaman do. So we tell them to go to the doctor first. We cannot just say oh, this and that, no--we say you go to see a doctor.

Shaman wear different kinds of hats, too. Right now he wears the color of the old tradition, the ancestor's shaman way. And the red hat, they will call it the shaman king, the people with a red hat, and mostly they will come from the special holy dragon, like the god of plenty. That's why they wear the red hat. And the white hat is pretty much like the Buddhism way. So they come in three different hats, and some have no hat.

STEINER: How long have you known Chong?

XIONG: Well, I've known him for a while since he got to the States.

STEINER: Have you learned anything from him, like shaman rituals from him?

XIONG: This is the first time I've actually seen him do shaman.

STEINER: It seems like Hmong people like to drink Bud Light? [Laughter]

XIONG: Yeah, low alcohol.

STEINER: So you can keep drinking it during the ceremony?

XIONG: Yes, low alcohol. Because you need to talk more, so the less alcohol in your system.... That's why everywhere you go, we always drink Bud Light, so you can talk more than drink. The other brands, it's too strong. [Laughter]

STEINER: What do all of the different shapes mean when he cuts things into different shapes?

XIONG: Well, right now he's cutting paper money.

STEINER: He cut the female figures before...

XIONG: Yeah, the female figures to represent the soul you're going to divide between two dimensions. And right now that's to make the money for the other dimension.