

Contrasting Hmong and Lao on Social Organizational Patterns

Laos, the only land-locked southeast Asian country, is marked by its diverse ethnic groups. The ethnic settlement could be stratified into three levels by elevation: Hmong reaches the highland areas while Lao occupies the lowland regions. To ca. 1965, Hmong accounts for approximately 15% of the population of Laos, while Lao, the major ethnic group of Laos, accounts for about 50% (Lecture 3). As a result of the difference in terrains, Hmong living is more isolated and scattered in a self-sufficient way on mountains, compared with Lao. Unlike Lao, who could settle in fertile plains along the Mekong River and its tributaries to practice paddy agriculture, Hmong performs migratory cultivation of rice, corn, and poppies (for opium) by swidden agriculture (*Miao Year*).

The difference of Hmong and Laos not only represents in demographic and geographic situations, but also largely reflects on social organizational patterns. Hmong follows patrilineal pattern, but Lao follows bilateral pattern. Such fundamental deviation results in Hmong's clear clan boundaries but no family names used in Lao, strictly enforced exogamy for Hmong's marriage but Lao's less restricted marriage arrangement, common extended family in Hmong but more regular nuclear family in Lao, and Hmong female subordination on male but females with more autonomy in Lao.

Hmong and Lao display different social structures, largely because Hmong and Lao observe different descent patterns, being patrilineal and bilateral, respectively. At the end, two ethnic groups construct contrasting kinship systems. For Hmong, the culture emphasizes on "endogamy" and "lineage" (Hein, 60). So, they practice the inheritance and descent by strict male lineage, meaning that the father exclusively occupies the title to the property of household and would pass the most of property to the eldest son (LeBar, 75). As a result, there are usually

clear boundaries among different clans in Hmong. Generation by generation, 18 clans are fixed and established, named after a feature from agriculture within the rural village and with their own origin myth (Lecture 3, & LeBar, 75). Each clan can be traced to the common ancestor, so that these names, like Xiong or Moua, have become the family name to mark which clan his or her ancestry belongs to. Conversely, Lao runs an opposite bilateral kinship system, which does not emphasize on male lineage, meaning that the ties of descents with both sides of mother and father are relatively equal. Even in reality, the inheritance usually passes to the last daughter to marry. The relatively relaxing descent structure brings about no concept of clan, then no family name traditionally. They usually directly use given name as the identification (although today Lao also uses a sur name, this is innovated after entering the modern time) (LeBar, 217).

The different descent patterns between Hmong and Lao require different marriage regulations to maintain the patrilineal or bilateral structure. For Hmong, the strict exogamy is enforced to marry daughters outside the clan and leave sons within the clan (LeBar, 75). To fulfill the requirement of exogamy, marriage selection is usually held and arranged by elder family members. Also, exogamy means that men would remain in the clan as the members at birth for the whole life but women would join husband's clan after marriage. Thus, a kind of bride price is prevalent throughout Hmong as the compensations to bride's family for loss of the labor. In this way, one household unit generally includes at least parents and a family of their son (LeBar, 76). Even in some cases, a household could contain several generations up to dozens of family members. Thus, the form of extended family is very common among Hmong. On the contrary, the kind of nuclear family is more regular in Lao. Without the concept of clan, the Lao household unit is very simple, usually only consisting of parents and their children (Whitaker, 6). After the marriage, the new couple are expected to establish their household instead of living

under roofs with parents. Generally, the couple would live with wife's family at first and then seek for independence until the first child is born (Whitaker, 48). Also, without the apparent preference for exogamy or endogamy, there exists some freedom of sexual love and marriage selection for newlyweds.

From above, the main feature of Hmong and Lao on social structures gradually become clear: the society of Hmong is defined by male dominance while Lao maintains relatively equal relationship between males and females. Therefore, Hmong women tend to bear much stress from the society while Lao women usually enjoy some autonomies in their households. After marriage to a new clan, Hmong women usually need to be examined by husband's clan members. Even sometimes women work very hard, but rumors from others still slander them (Hein, 69). Also, the inequality between males and females allows polygyny so long as the male could support several wives, which takes account for 20%-30% marriages in ca. 1970s (lecture 3). In the unequal marriage, divorce is usually uncommon and bad for women, while for Lao, divorce is acceptable and does not harsh any side of the marriage.

However, there are still some similarities between Hmong and Lao inside the household unit: the labor division. Males usually take charge of heavy physical work, including preparation of planting, harvesting of fields, repairing houses, etc., while females take the responsibility of domestic tasks, including cooking, weaving clothes, raising livestock, etc. (Whitaker, 48, & *Miao Year*). In addition, like Hmong, males take the title to household unit, giving an appearance of being patriarchal, but this is mostly for convenient census and taxing (Whitaker, 48). In essence, Lao still follows the bilateral pattern in terms of the practice of inheritance.

In conclusion, considering the social organizational systems, Hmong and Lao exhibit very different patterns, despite some similarities, like the labor division between males and

females. This is because Hmong observes patrilineal pattern while Lao observes bilateral pattern, resulting in Hmong's strict exogamy, extended family, and inequality between males and females but Lao's relatively relaxing marriage selection, nuclear family, and more autonomy for females.