

THE RELEVANCE OF TELEPHONE DIRECTORIES TO A LINEAGE-BASED SOCIETY : A CONSIDERATION OF SOME MESSIANIC MYTHS AMONG THE HMONG¹

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'Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves' De Freire 1970

ABSTRACT : The following paper sets out to demonstrate that, as Lévi-Strauss (1963) has put it, 'the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real.²)' The contradiction is, in this instance, a real one, and by examining variant versions of a single Hmong myth which accounts for the lack of literacy and political autonomy among the Hmong, we find that, reduced to its simplest elements, the myth is concerned to overcome the felt contradiction between state and stateless society. We are then led to examine Christian missionary influence as a catalytic influence on the emergence of this myth, and to consider its historical antecedents. According to Lévi-Strauss (1969), 'history... can never completely divest itself of myth'. Equally it is true, as we see, that myth never quite succeeds in ridding itself of history. Finally I am led to query some of the assumptions which have been traditionally made concerning Hmong autonomy and ethnic exclusiveness, and to suggest that the same sort of analysis which has been applied to the study of 'sub-nuclear social systems' in Burma (cf. Lehman 1963) may be usefully applied to such groups as the Hmong.

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1. In what follows, I have used the term 'Hmong' to refer to the people of that name in Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, while I have used other terms such as "Miao" when referring to the work of other writers who have used such terms themselves. It should be clearly understood, however, that the term 'Hmong' or 'Mong' refers to the Western branch of a language family which also includes the Hmu and Xioob, which terms are cognate. The latter were referred to by the Chinese as respectively Hei Miao or Black Miao, and Hung Miao or Red Miao, while members of the former included the White, Green, and Flowery (Hua) Miao.
 2. According to Lévi-Strauss (1969), 'we define the myth as consisting of all its versions' which, as he points out, has the merit of excluding the quest for the 'true' or 'earliest' version of the myth, much as occurred in early comparative linguistics. Consequently I have made no attempt at selection of an authentic version, but have rather concentrated on all the versions available in the published accounts, with no attempt to differentiate between them. I hope to prepare an exhaustive account of these in due course.

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I

Writing in 1947, Bernatzik claimed that 'The memory of times when there was a much larger political unit has been kept alive to this day among the Meau. Thus, tradition tells of a powerful kingdom of the Meau, an hereditary kingship, in which the king was at the same time the supreme war lord'. Bernatzik goes on to say that the last king (*van tso*) was defeated in battle against Chinese forces who were menacing their settlements, and then led his people southward in flight before the pursuing enemy. He concludes by declaring that 'Even today they believe that sometime and somewhere a Meau king will rise again, who will unite his people, gather them together, and lead them victoriously against the hated oppressors' (Bernatzik 1970), and quotes Savina to the following effect: 'The Meau are waiting for a liberator, a king, a *phoa thay*. As soon as the report of a *phoa thay* comes from somewhere, they immediately take up their weapons and set out to put themselves at his disposal. What we call a 'rebellion' they call *oa phoa thay*, 'to make a king'. The phrase Bernatzik's translation omits without apology, which follows Savina's first sentence above, is 'tout comme les Juifs, attendant un Messie' (Savina 1930).

Geddes also has drawn parallels with Judaism when, speaking of the presence of people whom he considers 'culturally identifiable' with the Miao in Kweichow and neighbouring provinces some 1,000 years ago and 'possibly twice as long', he remarked that 'The preservation by the Miao of their ethnic identity for such a long time despite their being split into many small groups surrounded by different alien peoples and scattered over a vast geographical area is an outstanding record paralleling in some ways that of the Jews but more remarkable because they lacked the unifying forces of literacy and doctrinal religion and because the cultural features they preserved seem to be more numerous' (Geddes 1976).

But indeed, the felt lack of literacy seems to have been a crucial element in the Hmong messianic movements which played such an important part in fashioning political decisions and forging cultural identity. Hence Lemoine: 'Frappés sans doute de l'importance accordée au document écrit par l'administration chinoise, les Hmong rêvaient d'une écriture tombée du ciel et qui leur serait propre. Ce thème revint constamment au cours des divers mouvements messianiques qui pendant des siècles ont tenté à intervalles plus ou moins longs de secouer le joug chinois et surtout d'établir un 'royaume hmong'..... Selon le mythe messianique un roi allait naître ou était né pour rassembler les Hmong et les délivrer de la tutelle des autres peuples. Le roi ou son prophète ne manquait pas d'annoncer qu'il avait eu la révélation d'une écriture. C'était la marque même de l'investiture par le Ciel'. The name of this mythical king is '*Foua Tai*' (from the Chinese *Houang Ti* or Emperor) (Lemoine 1972a).

Although accounts of the lost form of Miao writing differ, the essential elements remain the same. Geddes, for example, recounts that 'At Pasamlien I was told by some of the people that long ago, when they were still in China, they had a book like the Chinese. But one day it got cooked up and was eaten by them with their rice' (Geddes 1976). Other accounts attribute its loss to the flight of the Hmong from invading Chinese, when it was dropped while crossing a river (cf. Hudspeth below) or, as in the following fictionalized version of the tale by a recent missionary in northern Thailand; to other causes :

'Why ever did those horses have to eat the books of our forefathers, many, many years ago? Those Meo kings were the first there were in the whole great northern kingdom. Indeed in those days we had a land of our own. A Meo king ruled over us. We were the most powerful nation on earth. But the wicked Chinese were more cunning than we. They fell upon us in great hordes. They had better weapons than we had. We fought bitterly and courageously, but it was in vain. The Chinese knew no mercy. They murdered, enslaved and pillaged. We had to surrender. But not quite everyone gave in; whoever could escape did so. When the exhausted fugitives came to a wide river they rested, leaving their packs among the bushes. They were all overcome with sleep. When at last they woke up—O horror—the horses had eaten up the Meo books ! Not a single one remained. Since then we have possessed neither books nor script...'

After describing the passage of the Meo through a 'Lake' which closely parallels the Biblical account of the passage of the Jews through the Red Sea, the raconteur concluded,

'Ever since that day we Meo have been sacrificing to the spirits and are pledged to them until our Fuatai comes again and destroys the spirits and all our enemies'..... 'Until our Fuatai rises again and comes to help us' they all cried', adds the author (Scheuzger 1966).

In this highly coloured and somewhat Kiplingesque version, we nevertheless see the clear connection between messianic beliefs and a myth about the lack of literacy which is linked to the ideal of a fallen kingdom.

These motifs remain politically most important. Garrett reported that in the late 1950's, the Hmong of Laos, divided by the conflict between Pathet Lao and Lao Government forces, 'naturally looked to the spirit world for help. Messianic myths spread through the hills. One prophesied that Christ would come to the Hmong in a jeep, wearing American clothes and handing out weapons' (Garrett 1974). Lemoine

noted that the invention of a new script believed to be the lost Hmong writing formed the attraction of the messianic movement which began in Long Tien (Laos) in 1967 (Lemoine 1972a). In the early 1960's reports of the birth of a new Hmong king drew large crowds of Hmong villagers to a remote valley in the north of Thailand (cf. Bertrais 1978)³, while recently the Vietnamese Government accused the Chinese of spreading similar rumours of the birth of a Hmong king in southern China in order to alienate the Vietnamese Hmong (The Guardian, London, 9 Jan 1981).

Two points should perhaps be made here. Firstly, in the opinion of the present writer, it is useless to attempt historical reconstructions on the basis of such myths⁴. We should, rather, be looking at what such a myth may be able to tell us about the society which possesses it. Richard Davis (1979) has drawn attention to the surprising functionalism of Levi-Strauss's thesis that 'a myth can validate actual social practice by offering imaginary alternatives', and this is the line which shall be followed here⁵. Thus a myth of the type 'Once we had a kingdom and a writing of our own, but owing to the Chinese we lost it' should be read as a conditional statement of the type 'If it hadn't been for the Chinese, we *would have had* a kingdom and a writing of our own'. The implied negative (*absence* of a state, *absence* of literacy) has disappeared from the mythological statement just as it does from the subordinate clause of the English conditional. We are dealing with a society *deprived* of a state formation and of literacy, and *consciously aware* of its deprivation. Secondly, in the absence of the possibility of a valid historical reconstruction, we may nevertheless inquire into the historical circumstances in which such a myth may have been expressed, and which may have provoked its emergence in such a powerful form. These, I believe lie largely in the influence of missionary Christianity upon the Hmong.

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3. In the *Meo Handbook* prepared by the Joint US-Thai Military Research and Development Center in 1969, it is declared that 'Present day insurgent recruiters have induced some Meo to go to Laos for training by promising to take them to see the 'King of the Meo'.'
 4. Nevertheless, the history of such movements is being reconstructed by people better qualified than myself to deal with the historical evidence, such as Father Y. Bertrais and the Miao-Yao Project team members of CEDRASEME in Paris. When this is assembled, it should be useful for our understanding of the persistence of such beliefs today in the analytical framework I have suggested.
 5. Similarly, Leach refers to 'Lévi-Strauss's version of the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic in which the sacred elements of myth are shown to be factors which mediate contradictories'. As Lévi-Strauss himself put it, mythology, seen as an 'instrument for the suppression of time.... overcomes the contradiction between historical, enacted time, and a permanent constant' (Levi-Strauss 1969).

II

It must be noted, however, that rebellions among the Hmong in China predated the influence of what Lemoine (1972b) has (in a literary context) termed 'une contamination biblique' by many centuries. The earliest references to the 'San-Miao' in Chinese records categorize them as a rebellious people banished from the central plains of China before the second millennium B.C. ⁶ In A.D. 47 a suppression campaign mounted against the Miao of West Hunan was followed by other suppression campaigns which hastened their migration southwards, according to Wiens (1954). The Miao mounted a northwards invasion during the 5th and 6th centuries, and again during the 3 Kingdoms period following the Han period. In Wiens' words, 'Between A.D. 403 and 561 there were more than 40 instances of Miao uprisings between the Yang-tzu and Yellow Rivers'. During the 5 Dynasties period (A.D. 907-960) Ma Yin, the self-proclaimed ruler of the new state of Ch'u, subjugated the Miao, who had declared their independence. According to Wiens, 'There was hardly any time during the Ming and Ch'ing periods when suppression or pacification campaigns were not being undertaken against the Miao and the Yao. In the major suppression campaigns in the uprisings of 1698, 1732, 1794, and 1855, the Miao scattered in all directions, initiating the migratory movements of the modern period' (Wiens 1954). As McCoy (1973) put it, 'trouble descended on the Meo tribes after the Manchu dynasty was established in 1644'. After the failure of attempts to integrate the Miao into the regular bureaucracy, 'the Manchus began to exterminate these troublesome tribes and to repopulate their lands with the more pliable ethnic Chinese. After a two hundred year extermination campaign culminated in a series of bloody massacres in the mid-nineteenth century, thousands of Meo tribesmen fled southwards towards Indochina' (McCoy 1973).

Dealing with the great Miao uprisings in 1734-1737 and 1795-1806 in the province of Gui Zhou, Claudine Lombard-Salmon (1972) quotes the *Sheng Wu ji*: 'Nombreux les Miao qui tuèrent eux-mêmes leurs femmes et leurs enfants, pour ensuite affronter les armées impériales et opposer une résistance acharnée' (*Sheng Wu ji* 7 in Lombard-Salmon 1972 p. 237). The repression of this first uprising of the Gui Zhou

6. I here follow Lehman's (1979) important distinction of the usage of an ethnic category from the 'genetic-linguistic' groupings to which it may at different times refer. The real issue is the persistence of an ethnic category such as 'Miao' in a given ecological niche to refer to a particular kind of people, and its continuing application to a people who today resent its derogatory implications. The way in which the term was used indiscriminately in the past by Han Chinese is identical to the way in which the term 'Meo' is used to refer to such other groups as the Karen (cf. Kunstadter 1979).

Miao and the savage reprisals following the second, did not however prevent further rebellions : in 1801 40 villages rose up, and in 1802 a Miao chief proclaimed himself 'Roi du ciel' (*tien wang* 天王), and led a further rebellion. 18,000 Miao warriors were massacred after the 1735 revolt, while the 1795 uprising against the introduction of Han Chinese tenant farmers by Han overlords resulted in the destruction and burning of thousands of Chinese homes. Père Amyot, a Jesuit missionary resident at Beijing during the 18th. century, has left us an account of the 1763 campaign against two small Miao principalities in Sichuan which ended in the slaughter of the ruler and his whole family after they were invited to the capital (Savina 1930). 20,000 Imperial troops were required to quell the last great rebellion of the Miao in Gui Zhou of 1856, which took place during the Panthay Rebellion of the Chinese Moslems in Yunan.

Miao insurrections during the Qing (Manchu) period, were in large part the result of the forcible imposition of Han Chinese military officials on the *tu-si* or local official system of indirect rule practised by the Chinese authorities in the southern provinces (viz Hill 1980). Under this system, first formalised during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), local chiefs had been enfeoffed to rule their peoples from the Chinese court. Office was hereditary, and usually patrilineally inherited. The *tu-si* system had emerged from the more informal system of local enfeoffment established by military garrisons set up after the Mongol conquest of Yunnan in 1253 during the Yuan dynasty (1280-1367). The *tu-si* system left indelible impressions of Chinese social organization on the customs of many of the local people, and may have been partly responsible for the superimposition of Han patrilineal characteristics on the original kinship structure of the Miao (Ruey Yih-Fu 1960). It may also have been responsible for the emergence of quasi-independent Miao chiefdoms, the memory of which survives in mythological form today (cf. Shryock 1934 for an account of these rich Miao clans) and, in its later form, for the upsurge of rebellions documented from the 18 century onwards.

To take this general consideration of their rebellions into the present century, in 1919 the Pachai Revolt of the Hmong against the French in Laos, dubbed the *Guerre du Fou* and closely connected to messianic beliefs and promises of an end to economic exploitation, took the authorities two full years to suppress, while their most recent insurrection in Thailand from 1967 to 1971 necessitated the joint operations of the Thai and Laotian Armies and the establishment of five major refugee centres in the northern provinces. Meanwhile the resistance of the Hmong in Laos to the Pathet Lao continues. From this and other evidence we may conclude that real social pressures, arising from the contradiction between a state and a tribal form of social organization, were responsible for the rebellious propensities to which the ethnic category 'Miao' was,

and still is, considered appropriate. The Miao, in common with many other peoples of the area, were classified according to relative acculturation by the Chinese as *sheng* raw, wild, uncivilized or unsinicised, or *shu* (cooked, tax-paying, Chinese-speaking, 'civilized'), which suggests that the opposition became internalized in their own form of social organization as tendencies towards autocratic rule emerged. It was in this form that Christianity found it.

III

Although Jesuit missionaries were reportedly in contact with the Hmong as early as 1736 in Gui Zhou, the first Protestant encounter only began with the work of the China Inland Mission in 1896. Samuel Pollard, who introduced the first romanized script for the Miao language, described the surprising impact of the Christian Gospel on the Miao at that time in the following words: 'Some days they came in tens and twenties! Some days in sixties and seventies! Then came a hundred! Then came two hundred! Three hundred! Four hundred! At last, on one special occasion, a thousand of these mountain men came in one day! When they came, the snow was on the ground, and terrible had been the snow on the hills they crossed over. What a great crowd it was!' (Pollard 1919).

'Picture these early scouts as they journey' adds Hudspeth (1937), Pollard's colleague and pupil. 'Each carries a felt cape which in the daytime serves as an overcoat and at night as a blanket, and every one has a bag of oatmeal, a basin and chopsticks or a wooden spoon; the oatmeal mixed with water serves as breakfast, lunch and evening meal'. Pollard describes the degraded and impoverished position of the Miao at the hands of unscrupulous Chinese and Norsu landlords, and how 'The great demand these crowds made *was for books*' (my emphasis). He describes how it was whispered that the Miao meditated rebellion and massacre, how rumours arose that the foreigners were supplying the Miao with bags of poison with which the waters of the Chinese and Norsu were being contaminated: 'Before the Miao had been coming many months, a most dangerous situation was created, which might at any time have ended in a great massacre. As it was', he adds glibly, 'a number of people lost their lives'. 'Nearly every day came stories of Miao being driven away from the markets, of men and even women being beaten, of murderous attacks, and chained prisoners' (Pollard 1919). In effect, the introduction of missionary teachings to a people already marginal in relation to their lowland neighbours increased their marginalised position and widened the gap between Miao and Chinese.

Finally Pollard reported that 'We were troubled yet in another way. By some means or other the rumour went abroad that Jesus was coming again very soon. Instead

of the teachings of the Second Coming proving a blessing to these simple people, the way in which it was stated by some irresponsible and ignorant people led to disastrous results. Some of the old wizards, and some of the singing women tried the role of prophet, and several dates were announced for the appearance of Christ. So firmly did some of the people believe these prophecies, that they neglected their farm work and gave themselves up to singing and waiting for Jesus. One party betook themselves to a loft, and with lighted lamps or torches stayed up all night, expecting the King every moment. Poor, simple people, one cannot even smile at their misled enthusiasm. They had known the bitterness and degradation of heathenism so long, that one cannot wonder at their hoping for a short cut to the Millenium, when all wrongs would be righted and everybody have a chance'.⁷

Pollard notes that intense excitement was caused by the question of brideprice: 'With the coming of the New Testament many of the people wished to get rid of the old crushing burden'. Membership of the Church eventually gave the Miao a privileged status, and a Norsu landlord is quoted as saying that nobody now dared molest the Miao as they had formerly done. Pollard also mentions difficulties in translating the word 'kingdom' in the Lord's Prayer into Miao: 'None of the Miao ever remembered a time when they had a kingdom, and noone knew the Miao word for such an idea'. Hudspeth too described the mass conversion of the Miao by Pollard, who was said to be able to see three feet into the earth and drop magical water into Miao mouths which instantly converted them. Clearly the sudden adoption of a millenarian Christianity arose from the economically desperate position into which the Miao were forced following the failure of their various rebellions.

IV

Of course, this is only one example of missionary work among the Hmong, and many others could be cited for other Hmong divisions, which space precludes. But there is reason to believe that the influence of the China Inland Mission was not confined to the 'Hua' Miao of Gui Zhou, and that redemption work undertaken elsewhere, for example by Catholic missions in Laos, or by missionary work in Thailand, which still

7. Compare this to Smalley (1956) who observed that 'For years the Christian witness made no impression on the Meo. Then suddenly, in the space of a month in 1949 about a thousand converts were made. Today there are several thousand Meo Christians. Furthermore, occasionally, 'prophets' declare themselves to be Jesus. So far none of these splinter movements have become widespread, but they are symptomatic of the fact that the Meo are undergoing a period of cultural reformulation which was triggered and given its particular form by the Christian gospel'.

continues, has not essentially differed in the long-term reactions it has provoked.⁸ And in almost every case the result of such work has been to lend ideological support to an essentially sociopolitical form of alienation. Thus the economic marginalisation of an upland minority of shifting cultivators with a long history of persecution and extortion at the hands of local landlords from literate lowland state traditions, has been legitimated in terms of an ideology which has rationalised such a history of persecution in terms of, and by reference to, Judaeo-Christian motifs. This shows considerable similarities to trends reported from elsewhere, as I show below.

There can be no doubt that this process continues today. Cooper (1976) for example reports on the adoption of Christianity by emergent poor strata of Hmong society relieving them of the necessity to invest in ritual status (such as bridewealth) demanded by kinship obligations. These Christians of Khun Sa were, according to Cooper, 'attracted by the saviour aspects of their new religion and expect a supreme force to intervene in the believer's favour'. Rather than opening the way, therefore, for the greater integration into Thai society or economic innovations demanded by internationally funded development programmes, the adoption of a messianic form of Christianity seems to increase the belief in an ideal past and an ideal future which allows present structural contradictions to persist unchanged.

I now quote Hudspeth at some length to illustrate this process and the appeal which certain forms of Christianity makes to ethnic separatism: 'Before the Pollard script, books and a library were unknown. The great majority of these tribesmen had never handled even a sheet of writing paper or a pen. They had heard that once upon a time there were books; a tribal legend described how long, long ago the Miao lived on the north side of the Yangtze River, but the conquering Chinese came and drove them from their land and homes. Coming to the river and possessing no boats they debated what should be done with the books and in the end they strapped them to their shoulders and swam across, but the water ran so swiftly and the river was so wide, that the books were washed away and fishes swallowed them. This was the story. When the British and Foreign Bible Society sent the first Gospels and these were distributed

8. Father Bertrais, for instance, refers to the frequency with which individuals are invested with the mission of embodying the personality of an imminent *Huab Tais* to whom he speaks in trance, affirming that they generally appear 'at moments of crisis, when the general discontents or miseries create a psychosis of revolt or aspirations for a better life', often demanding the throwing away of money or cessation of planting 'because next year's grain of rice will turn itself into a granary of rice'. From 1957 onwards, Bertrais had 'heard talk about this constantly': in Sam Neua on the Pha Thong mountain near Luang Prabang: during the 1960's on the mountainous Thai-Lao border: and currently in the mountains near Phu Bia (Laos) and the refugee camps in Thailand (Bertrais 1978).

the legend grew—the once upon a time lost books had been found, found in the white man's country, and they told the incomparable story that Jesus loved the Miao. Only the imagination can conceive what this meant to those hillmen; some of them travelled for days to view the books' (Hudspeth 1937).

This account, the verisimilitude of which there is no more reason to doubt than there is to doubt Pollard's account of his difficulties in translating the word for 'kingdom' (although a Chinese word may have been used) clearly illustrates the various factors involved. Is it possible that Christian teachings of a kingdom and a chosen people of the Book should have so meshed with indigenous Hmong rationalisations of an illiterate, deprived and marginal state, as to have falsely inflated the latter by uniting the Judaic notion of a kingdom with the Hmong notion of writing in the form of the Messianic beliefs reported by Lemoine for the Hmong of Laos today? Given the similarity of this process with that reported for other minorities of the region, it seems quite likely.

Keyes's summarization for the Karen is a case in point. After describing the Karen myth of creation, Keyes describes how 'Y' wa is said to have given books to his various children, sometimes said to number seven, who are the ancestors of the major ethnic groups in the world known to the Karen. This gift of a book was, of course, the gift of literacy. The Karen, however, are negligent with the book given to them and it is eaten by animals or, in some versions, consumed in the fires built by the Karen in the course of tilling their fields. Y'wa offers the Karen the consolation that at some future date, 'foreign brothers' will bring the gift of literacy—in the form of a golden book—back to them. These two myths greatly impressed the American Baptist missionaries who began work among the Karens in the early part of the 19th. century. The first story so paralleled the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, including the fact that the name Y'wa was very similar to the Hebrew Yaweh, that the missionaries concluded that the Karen must be descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel. Moreover, they quickly presented themselves as the foreign brothers bringing the Karens the golden book. The fact that missionaries were the first to record these myths has led to their interpretations colouring the understanding of them ever since' (Keyes 1979).⁹ It seems that a similar process occurred with the Hmong, who show similarly ambivalent attitudes towards the acquisition of literacy skills as do the Karen (compare Geddes 1976 p. 20 with Marlowe, in Keyes 1979, p. 172). It has been missionaries who have been largely responsible for the various scripts invented for the Hmong languages (Pollard himself being the first), and there is no doubt that this has carried enormous appeal to a people possessed of an oral tradition.

9. See also Anthony Walker, for example, discussing the priest-led Lahu rebellions against Imperial Chinese rule in the 18th and 19th centuries, who points out how the white missionaries were originally welcomed as the fulfillment of a prophecy (Walker 1974).

Beliefs in a past state structure and a lost literacy, at first blush odd in a society of closely knit shifting cultivators, are clearly linked in other cases besides the Hmong.¹⁰ It seems clear that such beliefs express particular orientations towards majority or 'host' populations which, when combined with the appropriate legitimating supernatural symbols, can coalesce into millenarian and messianic movements in concrete political shape. Such movements, as Burrige has remarked, whether they are syncretic or nativistic, represent a transitional stage for subsistence economies adjusting to a cash economy, and his hypothesis that 'The redemptive process, and so redemption, bears significantly on the politico-economic process, particularly the prestige system' (Burrige 1971) is amply confirmed in the context of the data presented above.

V

If this is so, we may then be forced to reconsider some of the basic assumptions which have been made in the past about the distinctive and exclusive nature of Hmong ethnicity, which may prove more amenable to the sort of approach adumbrated by Lehman for the study of 'subnuclear social systems' (Lehman 1967) than has hitherto been thought, particularly since what isolation there was is now largely a matter of the past. On the basis of different migration patterns and the relative absence of trans-cultural movement among high-altitude swiddeners such as the Hmong, Yao, Akha, Lahu and Lisu, Hinton (1969) for example noted that 'Researchers in the latter societies tend to note the homogeneity and relative isolation of these peoples' by contrast with 'the concern of students of changing cultural identity with such peoples as the Thai, Karen, Lua', Thai-Lue and Shans'. However, recent research (e.g. Alting 1982) has shown that such homogeneity and relative isolation may be the result of quite recent historical conditions and that inter-ethnic relations in the past were far more extensive than has been supposed. It is at least probable for the Hmong that the strong sense of ethnic identity noted by many ethnographers has been at least in part a response to quite recent circumstances, including the influence of missionary Christianity in promoting traditional inter-ethnic hostilities and mistrust, and fostering a notion of sociocultural specificity essentially derived from Western models. The clear awareness of the lack of literacy and state formation, as evinced in legends which are part of an

10. 'The Akha mention two periods in their history in which they had warlords (generals) and, later, chiefs or kings....associated with walled cities...During the time of the third ruler, the power to rule, although thought of as reified for all time, was either lost or burned, the art of writing disappeared, books were eaten, and because of pressure from the Chinese and Shan, one after another of the clans had to seek refuge in the mountains' (Alting 1982). Graham (1954) mentions that the 'legend of a lost book' which in his account is linked with Buddhist scriptures and has nothing to do with a state or kingdom, was also found among the Ch'iang of West Sichuan and the tribes of Burma.

extremely ancient oral tradition, as with the Karen, Akha and even Kachin¹¹, would certainly seem to point towards long historical contacts with lowland state based civilizations. Not only the social scientist (cf. Lehman 1966) but also the missionary, then, has lent a spurious validity to local differentia by sanctioning what Leach (1961) defined as the third level of social reality—the folk model. As Lehman pointed out in 1966, such formal models of what seems an increasingly fluid and flexible ethnic situation must be employed with great caution to avoid fostering arbitrary and indiscriminating administrative approaches to the problems of ethnic minorities. The present day isolation of the Hmong, then, may be seen as a dynamic form of ‘retribalization’; a revitalism similar to that described by Cohen (1969), in the face of increasingly insurmountable political and economic uncertainty.

The term ‘Miao’, therefore, should be regarded as the blanket term for the minorities of southern China it so often was, much as the extension of the term ‘Meo’ has been loosely used to apply to the Karen today (Keyes 1979), and the ‘Hmong’ should be regarded as having evolved out of a complex polyethnic situation in southern China which also involved the Chung Chia, Lolo, Yunnanese, and many others (cf. Grandstaff 1979), accelerated, in the case of the Hmong, by the effects of missionary Christianity.¹² The logical outcome to this process of successive marginalisation and peripheralisation of the Hmong from the centres of power would seem to be the current diaspora of refugee Hmong from Laos to the four corners of the earth under the auspices of the UNHCR programmes, where, I am told, a people with still a predominantly oral tradition communicate with relatives in other parts of the globe by cassette recorder and urgently desire telephones, so that lineage names can be entered in telephone directories and traditional lineage hospitality practiced on a global scale. Here we see how a long process of historical marginalisation, when rationalised in terms of a myth which projects the possibilities of participation in a state formation into an idealised past and future, can serve to disguise real structural contradictions between democratic, autocratic, and stately forms of social organisation, and sustain a remarkably homogeneous and resilient ethnic community.¹³

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11. For example, Gilhodes (1908) on the Kachin : ‘*Ning kong wa* convoque tous les hommes en son palais du milieu de la terre. Aux Chinois, Shans, Birman, Kalas, il distribue la science dans des livres. Mais c’est sur des parchemins qu’il la donne au Katchins. Ceux-ci, pressés par la faim en rentrant chez eux, les rôtissent et les dévorent; depuis lors ils ont toutes leurs connaissances dans le ventre, tandis que les autres peuples les possèdent sur du papier’.
 12. See, for example, Shiratori’s (1966) claim that ‘the Miao are not a homogenous ethnic group’ and that ‘the recent Miao represent a widely distributed complex of originally different ethnic groups’.
 13. This study is the result of library research undertaken at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London from 1980-1981 for which assistance was received from the Social Science Research Council, and is not based on fieldwork undertaken among the White Hmong of Northern Thailand since then.

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