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The Emergence of an Environmentally Conscious and Buddhism-Friendly Marginalized Hmong Religious Sect along the Laos-Thailand Border

The ethnic Hmong people in Laos and Thailand are frequently—and often unfairly—stereotyped as destructive hunters of wildlife, and as the destroyers of forests through "pioneer" forms of swidden cultivation. They are also commonly labeled as users and traders of illegal drugs, and as not being respectful of state power. This article looks at how a marginalized group of Hmong living along the Laos-Thailand border have established a particular millenarian religious sect to promote a form of frontier modernism designed to address these criticisms. Although the Ee Bi Mi Nu religious sect does not identify itself as having been established as a response to lowlander critiques, the sect nevertheless acts as such. The Ee Bi Hmong have adopted religious practices that they claim are much closer to the real and original essence of being "Hmong," even if their origins appear to be much more contemporary.

Keywords: Hmong—Thailand—Laos—borderlands—millenarian—religion

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Of all the ethnic groups in Thailand and Laos, the Hmong are arguably the most stigmatized and stereotyped, including frequently being criticized for conducting swidden cultivation, particularly "pioneer" swidden cultivation in old growth forests (Forsyth and Walker 2008; Delang 2002), even though it has been well documented that swidden cultivation is frequently misunderstood and unfairly vilified (Conklin 1957; Dove 1983; Delang 2002; Cramb et al. 2009; Forsyth and Walker 2008). Moreover, this sort of swidden agriculture, which involves cutting down large trees, has not been common in Thailand for decades due to land pressures (Forsyth and Walker 2008; Delang 2002), and Lao government restrictions on swidden cultivation have made it rare in Laos as well (Baird and Shoemaker 2007). The Hmong are also often assumed to be involved in illegal drug use and trade, initially opium, later heroin, and more recently methamphetamines (Delang 2002; Forsyth and Walker 2008; Tapp 2005). In addition, the Hmong are frequently blamed for engaging in destructive or unsustainable hunting activities (Forsyth and Walker 2008; Dearden et al. 1996; Tungittiplakorn 1995; Tungittiplakorn and Dearden 2002). Finally, the Hmong are often mistrusted or even feared by their lowland compatriots due to the belief that their loyalty to the government is suspect (see Baird 2010; Marks 1973). This includes believing that the Hmong do not respect state boundaries, including international borders. In Thailand, the Hmong are also often associated with disloyalty because many joined and fought for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in northern Thailand between the late 1960s and early 1980s (Race 1974 Marks 1973; Saiyud 1986), while in Laos the Hmong are frequently assumed to be a threat to the state, due to being associated with right-wing anti-Lao government insurgents (Baird 2010; Baird and Shoemaker 2008).

Crucially, the general public, and even researchers, frequently assume that all the people from the Hmong ethnic group have the same or similar ideas and motivations (see, for example, Dearden et al. 1996), even if the reality is undoubtedly much more diverse and nuanced. Ultimately, all of this stigmatization has led to considerable negative "racialization" of the Hmong and related marginalization, whether in Laos or Thailand (Baird 2010; Vandergeest 2003).

The Hmong are well known for participating in messianic and millenarian religious movements. Messianic means "follower of the Messiah," or religious savior. Millenarian has a similar meaning, as it relates to the coming of a major societal

transformation. Many Hmong religious movements are both messianic and millenarian, with a "Hmong King" or other religious leader serving as a sort of Messiah, one who is expected to liberate the Hmong and drastically change society. These movements, which have often had important security implications, have attracted considerable scholarly attention, including by Geoffrey Gunn (1986), Robert Jenks (1994), James Lewis (2002), Christian Culas (2005), Sebastian Rumsby (2014), Tam Ngo (2015), Mai Na Lee (2015), Jacob Hickman (2015), and the late Nicholas Tapp (1982; 2015). Lee, in her book, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom*, uses both oral and archival sources to better understand two important Hmong messianic rebellions that emerged in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The first was led by Chang Mi, a Hmong from Vietnam, and persisted from 1910 to 1912. The second—which was an ever-greater threat to the French colonial government and was led by Pa Chay Vue—occurred from 1918 to 1921 and spread from Vietnam to Laos. Tapp (1982) examined the millenarian movements of the Hmong in China in the first part of the twentieth century, including associated writing systems. Jenks (1994) also looked at "Miao" or Hmong millenarian movements in China. William Smalley and colleagues (1990) studied the Shong Lue Yang (*Soob Lwj Yaj*) "Mother of Writing" (*Niam Ntawv*) movement in Laos and Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s, giving special attention to Shong Lue's invention of the *Pahawb* Hmong script. Shong Lue Yang apparently dreamed a letter in the alphabet each night, and the script was said to have been handed down from heaven. He intended to reorganize Hmong society so as to reduce conflict between different Hmong people.

More recently, Baird (2004) has written about a millenarian Hmong movement that erupted in 2003 in Houaphanh Province of northern Laos, and in 2011 yet another millenarian Hmong movement was reported to have emerged in Dien Bien Province in northern Vietnam (Bloomberg News 2011; Ngo 2015), before it was put down by the Vietnamese police. However, Hmong millenarian movements are not necessarily violent. Some messianic leaders have emphasized spiritual or religious aspects. This includes the movement that is the focus of this article, the Ee Bi Hmong movement (*Is Npis Mis Nus* or *Isnpis Hmoob* in Hmong, and *Pha Mi Nu* in Thai), with Ee Bi Mi Nu being strongly respected by the group's followers (Anonymous n. d.). The Ee Bi Hmong have not advocated violence, an important point that distinguishes them from some other millenarian Hmong groups, although members have occasionally inflicted violence and were subjected to particularly brutal violence when Lao communist soldiers shot and killed many Ee Bi Hmong followers in 1982 (see following paragraphs).

The argument presented here is that the Ee Bi Hmong presently have—through adopting particular religious beliefs and frontier modernism—responded to many marginalizing criticisms of Hmong by non-Hmong lowlanders, both in relation to Buddhist society and lowlander environmental narratives, but also in support of certain changes designed to modernize Hmong society in a particular borderlands area. However, the Ee Bi Hmong response has not been explicitly framed or understood by most or all of the adherents as such but rather as a reemergence of very old or even original and primordial Hmong ideas, from a distant past when

the Hmong were still pure and united as a single group, rather than being divided by different ritual practices associated with clans and clan lineages. This has allowed for changes to occur that respond to mainstream critiques of the Hmong but also for the Hmong to claim agency associated with changes that they advocate.

In making this argument, I rely on the cited literature about the Hmong in Thailand and Laos, and also interviews with people variously linked to the Ee Bi Hmong group. In addition, I use an unpublished paper about the group written by William A. Smalley, a linguist, and Nina Wimuttikosol. I also rely considerably on information provided by Nina Wimuttikosol, an American who came to know the Ee Bi Hmong group when she was a field officer in northern Thailand for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) between September 1980 and December 1983.[1] Her role in the development of the Ee Bi Hmong group has been important, as she both represented the United Nations, a global governing body to the Ee Bi Hmong, and also played an important role in securing the welfare of the Ee Bi Hmong at crucial times of crisis. She was also chosen to safeguard the movement's sacred texts in a time of political turmoil. The Ee Bi Hmong stayed at the Sob Tuang and Chiang Kham refugee camps in Nan and Phayao Provinces respectively, both near the Thailand-Laos border (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996). I especially benefited from a couple of interviews I conducted with Nina Wimuttikosol in Thailand in July 2015, additional information she provided in November 2016, and a long interview with Ka Va Her, the present leader of the Ee Bi Hmong movement, in July 2012. I also conducted other interviews with key ethnic Hmong and Lao people who stayed at or near either Sob Tuang or Chiang Kham refugee camps during the early 1980s, including Khammy Vang, Nhia Ja Sae Xiong, Lee Long Fu, Thongrean Douangkham, and Lloyd Daykin, an American who worked at the camp.

The next section provides basic information about traditional Hmong religion. I then outline important aspects of the Ee Bi Hmong religious movement. However, I do this without providing all the specific details about the places where people discussed are located, in order to protect them from possible danger. I then outline the rules prescribed for the movement, and how some of those provisions appear to act as responses to past critiques of the Hmong in both Thailand and Laos. I analyze the rules through considering lowland Buddhist and environmental narratives that have been used to criticize the Hmong. Finally, I present some concluding ideas.

Hmong society and religion

Generally speaking, the Hmong have long socially organized around a clan system with different lineages within individual clans. It is taboo for two members of the same clan to marry, and once two people enter into wedlock, the bride leaves her clan of birth and joins her husband's clan. Although Hmong people now belong to various religions, including different denominations of Christianity, the Hmong traditionally held spiritual beliefs that were closely associated with their beliefs about health and illness. Indeed, Hmong often closely associate physical well-be-

ing with spiritual wellness. Living and non-living things are believed to have spirits. To achieve an appropriate balance in life, it is generally considered important to honor one's ancestors, in order to seek guidance and protection from them. Rituals to appease spirits often involve offerings of food and "spirit money" (*Niaj ntawv*). Although men tend to take the lead in conducting these rituals, women also engage in these practices (Lee and Tapp 2010).

The Hmong often believe that humans have twelve main souls, and that maintaining a harmonious relationship between these souls is crucial for achieving overall good health and wellness. If there is disharmony between one's souls, one or more may leave the body, potentially leading to serious illness or even death. The more souls leave the body, the more serious the illness becomes. When a soul has left a body, Hmong may call on a shaman to conduct a soul calling or *hu plig* ritual, in order to attempt to bring the soul back and return one to good health. For those who continue to follow traditional beliefs, shamans are the main communicators between the spiritual and material worlds (Lee and Tapp 2010, 37–38).

The Ee Bi Hmong religious group

The Ee Bi Hmong religious group is rooted in what many would consider to be "traditional" Hmong beliefs and practices. However, the Hmong who follow this religion have deviated from the general norm in some important ways, thus distinguishing themselves from other "mainstream" Hmong. The Ee Bi Hmong see themselves as both reformist—including supporting a modernizing agenda and an ethno-nationalist premise that endorses simplifying rituals and uniting all factions of Hmong people—and also as promoting ancient and ageless "true Hmong culture." In other words, they see themselves as moving the Hmong forward back to a time of Hmong greatness.

While it is not possible, or even appropriate, to present all the details regarding the Ee Bi Hmong group here, even if I knew them, it is worth mentioning that the group identifies itself as advocating for a reformist version of traditional Hmong religion, one that is easier and cheaper to practice, including not requiring the sacrificing of domestic animals, as is typical for mainstream Hmong shamanism.[2] There is also a desire to unite all Hmong together by making Hmong religious practices the same across clans and lineages (Anonymous n. d., 2). Still, I am certainly not familiar with all the spiritual beliefs associated with this group, or the Hmong more generally. Therefore, I have partially chosen to reference Smalley and Wimuttikosol (1996), since some potentially sensitive information has already been revealed in their paper. Culas (2005) also wrote about Ka Va Her and Ee Bi Hmong millenarianism. Still, my focus is different than both, and I rely on interviews to fill in the gaps, considering not only religion and culture but also politics. The document cited as "Anonymous (n. d.)" was prepared by the group itself, and its content is quite sophisticated.

In December 1983, Nina Wimuttikosol was given eight books by Ka Va Her during a special ceremony, along with a ninth large book made of poster paper that included many illustrations (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996). She kept the

set for many years until returning the books to a member of the group a few years ago. She also made a separate set of copies and sent them to Smalley. Initially, Nina contacted Smalley because of his knowledge of *Pahawb* script,[3] even though the books she acquired turned out to not be in *Pahawb*. Written in Hmong *Ntawv Puaj Txwm*'s script, Smalley and Wimuttikosol (1996) described the books as constituting "something between a bible, a history, and a set of rules for future administration." They also reported that the books "deal with the importance of religion training emphasizing values such as honesty and unity among the Hmong, the need for fair and just laws to ensure security for the people, and the qualities of a good leader" (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996, 4–5).

The Ee Bi Hmong seek international recognition. For example, they wanted their sacred books deposited at the Library of Congress in the United States (see Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996),[4] but at the same time they are quite secretive about giving out details regarding their beliefs and history. Illustrative of this, I was told that the group had given copies of their important religious books to the government in Thailand, in order to demonstrate that there are no problems between the two. However, my interactions with the group indicate a considerable level of secrecy surrounding the movement. This is not surprising, as the group is based in northern Thailand near the border with Laos, and thus remains under potential threat from both Thai and Lao security apparatuses. Therefore, their narrative is heavily embedded within present political circumstances, which are somewhat precarious.

The belief system of the group is centered on Ee Bi Mi Nu. There are some similarities between this movement and the one founded by Shong Lue Yang, according to Ka Va Her, but Ee Bi Mi Nu's writing system is quite different from *Pahawb*,[5] with the differences having been reported on by Smalley and Winuttikosol (1996). Ka Va told me that Ee Bi Mi Nu was sent down to earth to give the chance for the Hmong to learn from him. Ka Va also informed me that Ee Bi Mi Nu "returned to heaven" (or died) in around 1995.[6] Another Hmong informant told me that Ee Bi Mi Nu's Hmong name was Chue Doua Her,[7] and Anonymous (n. d.) refers to him as "See Her."

According to Smalley and Wimuttikosol (1996), Ka Va Her was first shown the sacred books by his father, Chue Yer Her, in a ceremony that occurred in Laos on February 19, 1965, when Ka Va was just eight years old. At the time, Chue Yer apparently made a small statue of Ee Bi Mi Nu and put it on a table. He also lit a candle and prayed to Ee Bi Mi Nu or to God, and asked God to allow his son to fulfil his responsibility. He then gave Ka Va the nine sacred books and told him to remember the creator Ee Bi Mi Nu, since he brought writing to the Hmong. The script name, *Ntawv Puaj Txwm*, refers to original, primeval writing in Hmong (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996),[8] and could be translated as "book/guidance to pay one's debt (in equal value)." Based on the lunar calendar, the books were then used in sacred and secret ceremonies held three times a year. Ka Va was one of the only people allowed to see the books, and his father taught him to read them. He was told that the books were 726 years old when he first saw them. Chue Yer claimed to have received them from Tong Lu Her (*Tooj Lwm Hawj*), who had

written them out and drawn the illustrations on the instructions of the God, Ee Bi Mi Nu. Ka Va was told that he should keep the books for seven hundred years or twelve human lifetimes, and that he should guard them with his life until they could be revealed to the broader public. He was also told that the books would be of fundamental importance once the Hmong have "their own land to govern, and when a complete and clear understanding of their meaning will become evident" (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996, 6).

Ee Bi Mi Nu—in the books—is described as a god born on the twelve levels of the heavens. There is no mention of Ee Bi Mi Nu's father, but his mother sent him to study on different levels of heavens for 2,800 years, so the books are sometimes considered to be 3,526 years old, which includes the time that Ee Bi Mu Nu was learning them. He apparently asked permission of the supreme god to allow him to take his knowledge down to the human plain, and his request was granted (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996). Probably because the Hmong have an oral tradition but have often seen themselves as marginalized due to not having had their own written script, like the Chinese, Lao, or Thais, Hmong messianic and millenarian movements often consider written scripts to be crucial. While James Scott (2009) imagined that the Hmong might have willfully chosen not to have taken on a script, in order to remain aloof from the state, it seems more likely to me that Hmong messianic leaders—including Pa Chay Vue, Shong Lue Yang, Ka Va Her, and others—have often developed "Hmong scripts" to at least partially legitimate themselves. These movements have all sought some form of independence for the Hmong and have developed scripts to legitimate their goals, as if having one is a fundamental criterion for creating one's own state or being recognized within states dominated by others. This observation generally supports the views of others who have critiqued Scott's "upland anarchist" framework, including Baird (2013b) for Mon-Khmer groups in southern Laos, Hjorleifur Jonsson (2012) for Iu-Mien people in northern Thailand, and Lee (2015) for Hmong people in Laos and Vietnam.

In 1972 the books were apparently handed over to Ka Va Her, just a month before Chue Yer Her's death on June 30, 1972. From 1962 to 1969, Chue Yer had been deputy headman of Phou Longwa Village, before being resettled due to the war (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996). In 1970, they were moved into the resettlement village of Nam Phoui, a large community with inhabitants from many ethnic groups. Chue Yer became village headman of Phou Khong Village, Nakham Subdistrict, Phiang District, Xayaboury Province, northwestern Laos. He was also apparently the *Tasseng* or subdistrict chief of Nakham, and somewhat ironically, he was able to use his government authority to promote the Ee Bi Hmong movement.[9] Ka Va told me that Nam Phoui Village was known as "Nam Lok" or "Mou Zen" in Hmong.[10] Chue Yer began to gain adherents. One Hmong person reported that many people began following Chue Yer because he conducted a ritual and then put an egg in a mortar and pestle. Even after pounding it, the egg did not break, causing some to believe in his power.[11] Indeed, these sorts of supernatural feats are frequently associated with millenarian and messianic movements in mainland Southeast Asia (Lee 2015; Baird 2013b).

After May 1975, when the communists began taking control of Laos, a large number of Hmong fled to the forests. Over the next few years many would cross into Thailand, where they became political refugees (Thompson 2010). Ka Va Her and other followers of Ee Bi Mi Nu crossed into Thailand and initially stayed near Nam Phun Village in Mae Charim District, Nan Province. They then moved to Sob Tuang refugee camp, also in Mae Charim District, in 1976 after it was set up by the Thai government in cooperation with the UNHCR.[12] Shoua Vang Her, who was older than Ka Va, and was later thought to be the leader of the group by Nina Schaefer/Wimuttikosol,[13] began to learn the script from Ka Va when at Sob Tuang camp.[14] Lee Cheng Thao was another elderly Hmong leader in the group. One key figure at the camp, but not an Ee Bi Hmong, was Major Pao Lee Moua. He apparently controlled half of Sop Tuang camp but did not get along with Khammy Vang, who controlled the other half, where the Ee Bi Hmong stayed.[15] Like Khammy Vang, Pao Lee was aligned with General Vang Pao, but he commanded a separate group of resistance soldiers to Khammy when he was based at Sob Tuang.[16] Pao Lee reportedly moved with some other Hmong from Xai District to Houay Yo Village in Luang Phrabang Province, due to communist attacks, before resettling in Nam Phoui Village in April 1970 (Hatsady 1970). Later, however, after coming to Thailand as a refugee, he emigrated to Canada.[17] However, after settling in Canada, he frequently returned to Thailand to support resistance activities against the Lao PDR government.[18] Indeed, Khammy and Pao Lee both led insurgent groups out of Sob Tuang.[19] Pao Lee passed away in Canada a number of years ago,[20] and Khammy passed away in Thailand in 2017.

When I met Ka Va Her in 2012, he assured me that his group was not involved with any of the anti-Lao government insurgency groups that emerged after 1975. According to him, Ee Bi Mi Nu only desired peace and would not allow his followers to participate in any violent acts, such as those committed by followers of Shong Lue Yang, including insurgent leader Pa Kao Her.[21] In the early 1980s, Pa Kao's group was officially named the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (ELOL), but they were best known as the Chao Fa, or the "Gods of the Sky" (see Baird 2013a; 2014). Ka Va's claims of wanting peace appear to be generally accurate, but at least partially because Sob Tuang was located in a mountainous and relatively remote area, and was not fenced in like Nam Yao camp, it was generally a hotbed for insurgent activities against the Lao communist government, with Hmong insurgents frequently crossing the border between Laos and Thailand and taking refuge at Sob Tuang camp when in Thailand.[22]

The books of the Ee Bi Hmong apparently encourage Hmong followers to wear particular elaborate uniforms and for the male followers to wear their hair long, so that is what Ee Bi Hmong did in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see Figure 1). However, Ka Va Her and Shoua Vang Her, another leader of the group, came into conflict with other Hmong, led by Khammy Vang, at Sob Tuang camp.[23] Khammy's group supported armed resistance against the Lao PDR government at the time and were loyal to General Vang Pao and his followers rather than Pa Kao Her's ELOL.[24] Ka Va and Shoua's group did not want to support Vang Pao's United Front for the Liberation of Laos (UFLL) (*Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat* in Lao),

or the pro–Vang Pao armed insurgents who predated the UFLL, or engage in guerilla insurgent activities against the Lao communist government. This pitted them against other Hmong who supported violent conflict as a means for retaking Laos from the communists. As Ka Va told me in 2012, "I never attempted to make war with anyone; I never thought to do that in Laos, either before or now." However, Ka Va's group also did not want to immigrate to Western countries as refugees, as they were hoping to find a peaceful place of their own where they could live following their religious beliefs. This is why the border politics became more complicated and ultimately tragic, as will be explained.

In 1981, due to internal conflicts related to participation, or lack of it, in the insurgency, the Ee Bi Hmong's millenarian vision, and knowledge that Sob Tuang camp would be closing,[25] a few hundred Ee Bi Hmong followers decided to leave the camp and cross the border into Laos in order to establish what Smalley and Wimuttikosol (1996) called "Nam Loy Village." The village was located in Xayaboury Province about three miles inside Laos and across from Mae Charim District, Thailand. They hoped that if they avoided resistance activities, they could live there and not be bothered by the Lao government. Several hundred more Hmong from Sob Tuang joined them as the camp neared closure in August 1982. Neither Nina nor the UNHCR sanctioned the group's return to Laos, but when a few Ee Bi Hmong representatives came to visit her in Thailand after the group had gone to Laos, she decided to provide them with some salt, medicine, and a limited amount of rice. She informed the UNHCR of her decision, and it was hoped that the group would register with the Lao authorities so that the UNHCR could provide official support to them in Laos.[26] However, that never happened, and in October 1982 the group came into conflict with Lao communist soldiers. According to Smalley and Wimuttikosol (1996), the Lao authorities visited Nam Loy Village a number of times after it was established. The Hmong were initially told that



Figure 1. Ee Bi Hmong in Sob Tuang refugee camp in 1981. Photo compliments of Nina Wimuttikosol.



Figure 2. Ee Bi Hmong "security guards" with their special uniforms and swords in Laos near the border. Photo from prior to the 1982 massacre, at which time these security guards were killed. Photo compliments of Nina Wimuttikosol.

they would be left alone if they agreed to register with the Lao government. Lao authorities also offered them assistance. However, the group refused to register, wanting instead to remain neutral.[27] They were apparently afraid that if they registered they might end up in a conflict with Hmong insurgents operating in the area, since they would be considered to have joined the communists. They also probably did not fully trust the Lao officials. The refusal, however, of the group to officially acknowledge the sovereignty of the Lao government over the territory where they were living undoubtedly increased tensions.

Ka Va Her added additional information. He claimed that one of the Hmong in the group, named Ka Po Thao, was unhappy that some of the Lao government soldiers had damaged part of his rice crop by walking through his swidden field one evening when they were sleeping at his field house. A meeting between the two sides took place in the forest. It was set up so that the Ee Bi Hmong could provide Lao authorities with information about the number of people in their group. That meeting apparently initially proceeded smoothly. Then, however, Ka Po brought up the incident of his rice being trampled. The discussion became heated, and allegedly led to one of the Lao communist soldiers accused of damaging the rice turning his AK-47 machine gun on his accuser and then Ka Po's colleagues, leading to a massacre.[28] Ka Va told me that thirty people had been killed, but Smalley and Wimuttikosol (1996) reported that eighteen died, along with some Lao soldiers accidentally shot by other soldiers. By another account, sixteen of the organization's "guards" (Figure 2) were killed.[29]

Nina Wimuttikosol believes that the shooting incident in Laos might have quickly escalated because the Lao soldiers did not believe that the group was not made up of Hmong "Chao Fa" insurgents. This is not surprising as the Chao Fa leader, Pa Kao Her, was operating nearby in Chiang Kham District during that period.[30] However, another Hmong observer put it somewhat differently: "Ka Va Her's group wanted to have their own territory and expand so the Lao government shot them."[31] This statement, if true, further complicates the border territoriality issue, as it would imply that the group was trying to establish a level of sovereignty that would have been seen as a threat to the Lao nation-state. According to Khammy Vang, Ka Va and Pa Kao's groups were aligned, but later they had a conflict due to religious differences.[32]

The Hmong guards who were killed had quite elaborate and flamboyant uniforms at the time, but they did not have guns. They only carried long swords, which Ka Va Her said were only used to enforce the rules associated with the new Hmong religious sect, although they were apparently never used to hurt anyone. According to Ka Va, after the initial massacre, the village was surrounded by three thousand Pathet Lao soldiers for seven days. He claims that chemical weapons were used on the village. Finally, Ka Va and others were able to escape. However, his wife and two children were killed during the fighting, along with many others.[33] So his group came to Thailand as refugees for a second time, arriving on October 20, 1982 (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996). Once the group crossed from Laos to Thailand, leaving their rice unharvested, they received support from Nina and the UNHCR. Since Sob Tuang camp was closing, Nina negotiated with Nan provincial officials, the Thai military, and Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) officials to allow the group to initially stay at the Mae Charim District Office. However, the pro-insurgent Hmong at the camp led by Khammy Vang initially tried to block them from using their previous refugee identification numbers to return to the camp or come down to the district office. Instead, they wanted them to only be allowed to return as new refugees, and with new identification numbers.[34] According to Khammy, the Ee Bi Hmong were initially under his authority, and he helped them obtain thirty swords, but later he was unhappy when they moved back to Laos, believing that they had betrayed him by interacting with the communists.[35] In any case, Nina was eventually able to negotiate for the group to come to the Mae Charim District Office. From there, she tried to get them transferred to Nam Yao refugee camp, which was still open at the time. However, she was unsuccessful and could only negotiate for them to go to Chiang Kham refugee camp in Phayao Province.[36]

According to Ka Va Her, God's word had required that the security people in the group wear their hair long and dress as they did. Later in 1982, after returning to Thailand again, Ka Va and others in the group cut their hair.[37] They probably did this because many Hmong insurgents who fought against the Lao communist government had long hair, and the Ee Bi Hmong group did not want to be associated with these militants.

The Ee Bi Hmong stayed at Chiang Kham refugee camp for many years, possibly until the camp was closed. The group was staying in Chiang Kham when they decided to give the books to Nina for safekeeping. She heard about the books in July 1983, and they handed them over to her during a ceremony in December 1983. This transfer was linked to a passage in the books that apparently states that a great power may offer to protect them if they are unable to establish their own nation, as they had apparently attempted to do in Laos. The books said that they should be revealed to that power, which they believed was Nina, since she was a UNHCR field officer (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996).

Because Nina was obliged to follow UNHCR policy, which was designed to keep refugees safe in camps, she did not approve of Hmong in the camps moving back and forth between Thailand and Laos. She also apparently stopped a number of buses brought in by the Thai military to pick up Hmong people to take them to

fight against Communist of Party of Thailand (CPT) insurgents (mainly Hmong themselves) in the Khao Khor area in Phetchabun Province.[38] Although she could not clearly remember that particular incident when I interviewed her over thirty years later,[39] another Lao informant I met in Canada clearly remembered it.[40] Still, Nina did remember generally not agreeing with refugees leaving the camps to fight against communists, whether in Laos or in Thailand, as it put them in danger, and fighting in Laos was the main obstacle to eventual refugee repatriation. But some in the security services of Thailand were unhappy with what they perceived as her obstructive behavior. At one point Prasong Soonsiri, the Secretary General of the National Security Council of Thailand, reportedly called her a member of the "KGB" (the Soviet Union's secret service) and threatened to have her expelled from the country.[41]

The circumstances of the Ee Bi Hmong are certainly complex. I was told by Yang Thao, the former military leader of the Chao Fa, that Ka Va Her and some of his followers returned to Laos in 1992 with him and others who belonged to Pa Kao Her's Chao Fa. According to Yang Thao, the group returned to Thailand once again in 1994–1995 in order to escape continued conflict.[42] However, according to Nhia Ja Sae Xiong, a Hmong former CPT leader in Mae Charim District, before Ka Va's group moved back to Laos, one Ee Bi Hmong planted a land mine on the path that the CPT in the area used, resulting in the death of one CPT soldier. Later, the member of Ka Va's group reportedly admitted to putting the mine on the trail, claiming that he did not know who was using the trail. In any case, the two sides negotiated to end such practices, and both sides drank sacred water and promised not to hurt each other. Later, after the massacre in Laos led Ka Va's group to flee back to Thailand in 1982, the Ee Bi Hmong negotiated again with the CPT, with both sides again drinking sacred water.[43]

According to Nhia Ja Sae Xiong, the Chao Fa forced the Ee Bi Hmong to join them in the early 1990s, even though Ka Va Her's group apparently did not like the Chao Fa.[44] Both groups were millenarian and desired a level of autonomy for the Hmong. The Chao Fa had ideas about making Laos into a Federal state, with a Hmong-administered part (Baird 2014), and later they wanted to create their own country along the Thailand-Laos border (see Baird 2019). However, in the early 1990s when the Chao Fa were attacked by the Pathet Lao military, Ka Va's group took advantage of the situation to separate from the Chao Fa and move to a different camp.[45] All these circumstances suggest that the Ee Bi Hmong frequently found themselves caught between armed groups operating in the borderlands, and that they were often marginalized and taken advantage of by others.

In the 1990s, followers of Ee Bi Mi Nu were able to integrate into Hmong villages in northern Thailand, where many continue to live today. According to Ka Va, Ee Bi Mi Nu, who came down from heaven, was about twenty years older than Ka Va, and "went to heaven" (died) in 1995, due to natural causes. Ka Va then took over the leadership of the group. In the early 1980s, when he was living in Sop Tuang and later Chiang Kham refugee camps, he kept his hair long and wore brown robes that resembled those of a Buddhist monk. However, when I met him

in 2012, his appearance was much lower key. His hair was short and he no longer wore the robes, instead dressing in typical casual store-bought Thai clothing.

Ee Bi Hmong religious restrictions

Having outlined the general belief system and traumatic and complex border-crossing history of the Ee Bi Hmong after 1975, I now turn to assessing the seven prohibitions that Ka Va Her told me his movement follows.

According to Ka Va Her,[46] these prohibitions are that:

1. People are supposed to stay with people, and animals with animals. There should be peace. Wild animals and forests are not supposed to be destroyed. However, one is allowed to eat wildlife if killed by others, unless one is a religious leader, in which case wild animals are not to be killed or eaten. Anonymous (n. d.) emphasizes that the religious practices of Ee Bi Mi Nu deviate from regular Hmong shamanistic religious practices in that domestic animals are never required by the Ee Bi Hmong for any religious ceremonies, including those related to birth, marriage, and funerals. The opposite is true for those who practice traditional Hmong shamanism.
2. Rituals are supposed to be conducted for big trees when swidden agriculture is done, and some forest is to be protected. Burning of forests should only occur at night as it is generally easier to control swidden fires then.
3. No drinking whiskey, gambling, opium, or cigarette consumption are permitted.
4. No stealing and no lying are allowed.
5. Adultery is prohibited.
6. The customs of people from other ethnic groups should not be intentionally disrespected or violated.
7. Adherents are encouraged to study their own Hmong culture.

These seven rules or principles deserve some attention, even if it is not entirely clear how old they are, or what motivated Ee Bi Hmong leaders to adopt them. Ka Va claims that they came from "God," but it is noteworthy that many appear to directly address specific concerns and criticisms of lowlanders against the Hmong, including those related to environment narratives, Buddhism, and modernization. Therefore, it is worth considering the extent to which the emergence of these rules might have been influenced by interactions with non-Hmong lowlanders.

As a clue, Ka Va Her told me that the Thai government does not object to his religious group because they do not represent a threat to the state. Moreover, he mentioned that the government also see the value of the sect because it contributes to forest and wildlife protection. "We have no secrets from the Thai government," he assured me.[47] This indicates that the Ee Bi Hmong want to develop good relations with the Thai government, which is dominated by lowlanders. Smalley and Wimuttikosol (1996, 5) also reported that "[t]he illustrations and subjects included in the books show western influence as well as influence from Lao culture and Buddhism." This relates to a key part of the argument of this article, that this

reformist Hmong movement is at least partially due to outside critiques, which the Hmong have responded to by incorporating implicit responses to these criticisms within the movement's spiritual beliefs and practices. In the next section, I consider links between the prohibitions and lowland Buddhist critiques in more detail.

Response of the new religious group

Each of the seven key prohibitions of Ee Bi Hmong followers seem to be linked in one way or another to lowland critiques of the Hmong. First, Ee Bi Hmong are supposed to maintain harmony between humans and wild animals. Common Ee Bi Hmong are allowed to consume wild animals, but they are never allowed to kill them. This restriction may well be linked to criticisms of the Hmong as "destroyers of wildlife." They also appear to be linked to critiques founded in Buddhism. Indeed, Buddhism has variously influenced some Hmong communities (Tapp 1986; Baird 2013a), but despite various indications of syncretism, Ka Va Her insisted to Nina Wimuttikosol that no modern influences were present in the sacred books (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996). In any case, it is worth noting that as with Ee Bi Hmong, Thai and Lao Theravada Buddhist monks are generally permitted to consume wild animals, but they are never allowed to kill them. This prohibition responds to Buddhist lowlander critiques of the Hmong, whether in Thailand or Laos.

The second prohibition relates to conducting rituals to respect the spirits that inhabit big trees that need to be cut down when conducting swidden agriculture. Closely related to this, Ee Bi Hmong are supposed to be careful not to cause too much damage to forests when conducting swidden agriculture. This prohibition does not appear to be linked to Buddhism as much as the first prohibition but is rather oriented to respecting spirits found in large trees, following Hmong traditional spiritual belief. It also, however, responds to critiques of the Hmong by lowlanders, whether in Thailand or Laos, who often characterize Hmong swidden as destructive "slash and burn agriculture." Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the Hmong are frequently depicted as "forest destroyers" due to their agricultural practices (Forsyth and Walker 2008; Delang 2002). In Laos, for example, prior to 1975, when the communists gained control of the government, the Royal Lao Government did not support swidden agriculture, and USAID provided some funding to reduce swidden cultivation, especially in the context of opium cultivation reduction. Reflecting this view, as erroneous as it may have been, USAID (1976, 139) reported in their "Termination Report" for Laos that,

> Intensive slash-and-burn cultivation destroyed timber resources, damaged the watershed, promoted flooding and silting of waterways, promoted soil erosion, and decreased-population carrying capacity per unit area of land.

In reality, it makes more sense to consider swidden as Peter Kunstadter and E. C. Chapman (1978) did when they broke down swidden agriculture into short swiddening periods and short fallows for the Lua (Lawa) and Karen, and long swiddens and long fallows for the Hmong, Akha, Lahu, and Lisu. This analysis

was based on elevation, ethnicity, and farming practices, but was certainly still too simplistic. Those practicing longer-period swiddens and fallows are frequently referred to as "pioneer cultivators," and pioneering swidden cultivation is typically considered to involve the cutting of the largest and oldest trees, and therefore is believed to be the most environmentally destructive form of swidden cultivation. The prohibition of Ee Bi Hmong appears, therefore, to be a response to criticisms of Hmong farming by lowlanders. A Hmong informant told me, however, that it is hard for Ee Bi Hmong to follow the strict prohibitions related to swidden cultivation. He said, "Ka Va Her's group does not follow the rules. There are too many people to support with food. Therefore, they must do swidden. The prohibitions do not follow reality."[48]

The third prohibition is both linked to Buddhism and a major criticism of the Hmong by lowlanders. It prohibits Ee Bi Hmong from consuming alcohol, opium, and tobacco. It also says that gambling of all types is inappropriate. Indeed, the Buddhist *vinaya* (rules of conduct) prohibits the consumption of alcohol and opium, and also prohibits all forms of gambling. Although many Buddhist monks in Thailand and Laos do smoke cigarettes, some strict Buddhist monks, particularly forest practitioners, do not. As mentioned earlier, the Hmong have long been negatively stigmatized through their association with opium, heroin, and other illegal drug use and trade. Therefore, the prohibition addresses this common critique of the Hmong by lowlanders in Thailand and Laos. It also reflects the fact that the Royal Lao Government adopted legislation in 1971 banning opium production (USAID 1976, 28).

The fourth and fifth prohibitions would appear to be linked to important fundamental Buddhist prohibitions, as the fourth prohibits stealing and lying, and the fifth prohibits adultery. Some Hmong have previously been accused of being thieves, whereas adultery prohibitions may be linked to criticisms of Hmong polygamy by lowland Buddhists.

The sixth prohibition specifies that Hmong followers of Ee Bi Hmong are prohibited from intentionally violating the rituals of other ethnic groups. This seems intended to help reduce bad feelings and conflict between those with different religious traditions, which might also have emerged as a response to lowland critiques of the Hmong as not being sensitive to the cultures and religions of other groups. It might also reflect the desire of the Ee Bi Hmong to improve their relations with lowlanders more generally.

The seventh and final prohibition relates to gaining knowledge about one's own ethnicity, about being Hmong. This seems to be linked to developing a stronger sense of ethno-nationalism among this group of Hmong, and this can also be seen as a response to pressures from lowlanders to become more assimilated into mainstream Lao and Thai society. It also indicates, however, Hmong agency in resisting outside critiques, something that is common within millenarian and messianic movements. Indeed, the Hmong have a long history of rising up to try to gain their own territory or state (Lee 2015).

Conclusions

It is well known that millenarian and messianic movements frequently emerge at times when particular social groups are experiencing rapid and sometimes traumatic change, including when they are facing heavy critiques from others. The Hmong have a long tradition of involvement in such movements, some violent and some not. In this article I have argued that the Ee Bi Hmong religious movement, which is centered in northern Thailand, but which originated in Laos, is presented by its Hmong followers as being hundreds or thousands of years old, even though it is likely to actually be a much more recent response to various forms of marginalization, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination against the Hmong, especially by the lowland Buddhists who politically dominate the governments of Laos and Thailand. Indeed, this article demonstrates how the Hmong have been variously marginalized and victimized in recent history, and how the Ee Bi Hmong have responded through religion. More specifically, I have argued that the particular prohibitions that group members are required to follow are imagined as being "original Hmong" but also as being supportive of a particular variety of Hmong modernization. This article, thus, demonstrates how social and economic pressures from mainstream society in Thailand and Laos are gradually, although albeit only partially, leading to the Buddhistization of Hmong religiosity and the adoption of forms of frontier modernism, or modernism that occurs in relation to social, cultural, and national borders. Indeed, there are many Buddhist, environmental, lowland, and state influences visible within parts of the Ee Bi Hmong doctrine.

It is unclear if the prohibitions that are seen as fundamental for the Ee Bi Hmong were developed in Laos or more recently in Thailand, as the group has crossed the international border a few times, and their circumstances have been greatly complicated by border politics and conflict. What is clear, however, is that they represent a way in which Hmong millenarianism can be linked with Buddhism, environmental protection, and modernization ideas associated with the lowland Lao and Thai societies that the Ee Bi Hmong have interacted with. While all the details remain somewhat vague about exactly when and how all the changes occurred that led to the emergence of the Ee Bi Hmong religious group, this article suggests that Hmong religion is one avenue through which the Hmong followers of Ee Bi Mi Nu continue to respond to lowland Buddhist criticisms and produce new "borderland modernities" in the frontiers of both Laos and Thailand.

Indeed, Hmong reformist religions, such as the Ee Bi Mi Nu, may be interpreted as divisive by some, but their followers often see these movements as leading to unity and internal harmony within Hmong society, and with other groups. This seems to be especially important for a borderland group like the Ee Bi Hmong, which has been disrupted by the international border, high-level political conflict, and political pressures from governments and other more dominant groups. Moreover, the Ee Bi Hmong can also be seen as playing an important role in spreading ideas about modernization at the borders, through their various prohibitions, and also about reconciliation through the adoption of ethical norms and non-violence practices. Thus, the Ee Bi Mi Nu religion represents more than

simply an attempt to separate from the state but is rather an innovative way to promote reforms in Hmong society designed to allow the Hmong to more easily unite and modernize in line with lowland Buddhist society, while also protecting Hmong society and culture into the future.

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Notes

1. Interview with Nina Wimuttikosol, Nakorn Phanom, Thailand, July 13, 2015.

2. Note that over the last few years a different reformist Hmong religious group has developed in the United States of America, centered in St. Paul, Minnesota. That movement is known in English as Temple of Hmongism. It also involves simplified rituals and is more suited to life in the United States. According to the group's website, "The mission the Temple of Hmongism is to simplify our traditional religious practices in order to dramatically reduce time and money and to inspire future generations to proudly remain with Hmongism as their faith." In this sense, the Temple of Hmongism is similar to the Ee Bi Mi Nu movement, but they vary significantly in other ways.

3. Nina Wimuttikosol, personal communication, November 2016.

4. The books were reported to have been deposited at the archive of the Indochina Studies Committee of the Committee of Southeast Asia, and located in the Record and Sound Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Smalley included them with materials he had used when studying Shong Lue Yang (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996).

5. Both the *Pahawb* and *Ntawv Puaj Txwm*'s scripts are different than the main script presently used by Hmong in the United States and Southeast Asia, which was created by Father Yves Bertrais and others in the 1950s, known as Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1996).

6. Interview with Ka Va Her, July 21, 2012.

7. Interview with Chong Lor Her, January 28, 2012.

8. However, Smalley and Wimuttikosol (1996) called it the Sayaboury writing system or the Sayaboury script.

9. Interview with Thongrean Douangkham, Surrey, BC, Canada, March 26, 2016.

10. Interview with Ka Va Her, July 21, 2012.

11. Interview with Lee Long Fu, August 11, 2015; and interview with Nina Wimuttikosol, July 13, 2015.

12. Interview with Nina Wimuttikosol, Nakorn Phanom, Thailand, July 13, 2015.

13. Later she married a Thai and changed her last name to Wimuttikosol.

14. Interview with Nina Wimuttikosol, Nakorn Phanom, Thailand, July 13, 2015.

15. Interview with Nhia Ja Sae Xiong (Sahai Soo), Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim District, Nan Province, Thailand, June 20, 2018.

16. Interview with Khammy Vang, Pua District, Thailand, October 15, 2016.

17. Interview with Thongrean Douangkham, Surrey, BC, Canada, March 26, 2016.

18. Interview with Khammy Vang, Pua District, Thailand, October 15, 2016.

19. Interview with Khammy Vang, October 15, 2016.

20. Interview with Col. LyBlong Lynhiavu, Waterloo, Ont., Canada, April 2016.

21. Interview with Thongrean Douangkham, Surrey, BC, Canada, March 26, 2016.

22. Interview with Lloyd Dakin, February 22, 2016.

23. Interview with Lee Long Fu, August 11, 2015.

24. Interview with Thongrean Douangkham, Surrey, BC, Canada, March 26, 2016; and interview with Khammy Vang, Pua District, October 15, 2016.

25. Fa Tha camp in Uttaridit Province closed in 1980, while Sob Tuang camp in Nan Province closed in late 1982; Chiang Khong camp, in Chiang Rai Province, closed in 1983; and Nam Yao camp in Nan Province closed in 1984 or 1985. Chiang Kham camp, in Phayao Province, actually closed twice. The first time was in early 1982, but it was opened up again two weeks later. It did not finally close until the early 1990s.

26. Nina Wimuttikosol, personal communication, November 2016.

27. Confirmed in interview with Nina Wimuttikosol, Nakorn Phanom, July 13, 2015.

28. Interview with Ka Va Her, July 21, 2012.

29. Interview with Yang Thao, St. Paul, MN, USA, April 1, 2012.

30. Interview with Nina Wimuttikosol, Nakorn Phanom, Thailand, July 13, 2016.

31. Interview with Lee Long Fu, August 11, 2015.

32. Interview with Khammy Vang, October 15, 2016.

33. Interview with Ka Va Her, July 21, 2012.

34. Interview with Thongrean Douangkham, Surrey, BC, Canada, March 26, 2016.

35. Interview with Khammy Vang, October 15, 2016.

36. Nina Wimuttikosol, personal communication, November 2016.

37. Interview with Ka Va Her, July 21, 2012.

38. Interview with Thongrean Douangkham, Surrey, BC, Canada, March 15, 2014.

39. Interview with Nina Wimuttikosol, Nakorn Phanom, Thailand, July 13, 2015.

40. Interview with Thongrean Douangkham, Surrey, BC, Canada, March 15, 2014.

41. Interview with Nina Wimuttikosol, Nakorn Phanom, Thailand, July 13, 2015.

42. Interview with Yang Thao, St. Paul, MN, April 1, 2012.

43. Interview with Nhia Ja Sae Xiong (Sahai Soo), Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim District, Nan Province, Thailand, June 20, 2018.

44. Interview with Nhia Ja Sae Xiong (Sahai Soo), Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim District, Nan Province, Thailand, June 20, 2018.

45. Interview with Nhia Ja Sae Xiong (Sahai Soo), Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim District, Nan Province, Thailand, June 20, 2018.

46. Interview with Ka Va Her, July 21, 2012.

47. Interview with Ka Va Her, July 21, 2012.

48. Interview with Lee Long Fu, August 11, 2015.

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