Hmong needlework is known as "pan 'dau," meaning "flower cloth." Dia Cha's collection of pan 'dau includes this piece with a snail's pattern. The artist used a technique of reverse appliqué (cutting one piece of cloth to reveal the layer below) to obtain a striking effect. Photo by Bea Roeder (Colorado Historical Society: MSS2450).

Look for these Icons for resources accessible on this website

Audio

Video

Lesson Plan

Hmong Cultures

Description: Students learn about Hmong history and culture then engage in classroom discussions.

Grades: 2 - 12

Author: Dia Cha

Materials Included: Essay on Hmong history in Southeast Asia and in the United States, Hmong food, music and daily life.
Activities and discussion questions.
Video segment #2 from "***Just Plain Art***" (available on this site or in VHS—see Resources Section for ordering information)

Materials Needed: World Map

Standards: These activities may be used to address these Colorado Model Content Standards:

Geography: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
History: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

Contents

Hmong Culture Background Essay

By Dia Cha, Hmong refugee, anthropologist, and longtime Denver area resident

Hmong History

The Hmong culture is at least four thousand years old. It is believed that the Hmong belong to a group of people referred to in early Chinese historical records as the 'Man,' which was the first to settle along the Yellow River. The Han Chinese (the dominant people in China today) arrived after this settlement, and the Hmong and the Han were able to live in peace for at least two thousand years. In the course of time, with population growth, depletion of fertile land, and the exhaustion of natural resources, the Hmong and Han conflict developed.

The Hmong were overcome and forced by the Han to disperse throughout the region in the belief that, in this way, the Hmong would assimilate into mainstream Chinese society. It was a theory that proved ineffective in practice, however, as the Hmong simply formed several distinct cultural groups, each with a different language, different customs, and different environmental adaptations. To this very day in China, there are many tribal groups who are believed to be descendants of the Man (or Hmong) people.

Strife between the descendants of the Man, and the Han continued, and the last Hmong royal family was executed as a group in Beijing in the 1700s. While many Hmong chose to remain in China after this, other Hmong fled to Southeast Asia in order to maintain their cultural heritage.

Hmong Language

Modern linguists assert that the Hmong language is not related to any other major language family. The only language that shares some similar characteristics to Hmong is Yao or Mien, a neighboring tribe that has lived and migrated along with the Hmong through centuries. Even today, most scholars cannot agree upon a language family into which to place Hmong. There are two Hmong dialects: White Hmong and Green Hmong. The difference between these two dialects is pronunciation; most words are the same.

Pan 'dau include embroidered scenes from nature and from the Hmong people's history in the homeland and in America. From Dia Cha's collection. Photo by Bea Roeder (Colorado Historical Society: MSS2450).

Hmong in Southeast Asia

As the Hmong began to arrive in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma in the eighteenth century, they settled peacefully in the unpopulated highlands. This peace did not last long. When the French came to colonize Southeast Asia in 1893, they penetrated Hmong territories and established a government infrastructure to rule the country and to collect taxes. This did not sit well with the Hmong. During the years 1918-1921, there was a protracted uprising which did not end until the French captured the Hmong leader, Pa Chai Vue. He was a messianic leader who led a group of Hmong to rebel against the French and Lao authorities. The French called the rebellion led by Pa Chai Vue the "War of the Insane" due to the recklessness with which many Hmong fought, believing in magical power and that God would protect them from bullets.

After the French left Southeast Asia in the 1954, Japanese, Americans, Russians, communist Chinese and North Vietnamese began to take an interest in the region. Both Americans and Russians recruited low land Lao, Chinese, Vietnamese, the Hmong and other hill tribes to assist them in furthering their political ends. From the 1960s to 1975, and in coordination with the war in Vietnam, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) appointed the Hmong leader Vang Pao their chief lieutenant in the recruitment of Hmong to fight against Lao communists, in what was often referred to by those in the know as "The Secret War."

Hmong duties in this conflict fell chiefly under two headings; rescue American pilots and gather intelligence along the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail. These tasks were very dangerous, with Hmong troops required to fight at close quarters against indigenous communist forces while living in dense jungle terrain for months at a time. As has recently been seen in the Balkans conflict, one of the collateral consequences of any military conflict is dislocation of the affected populations, and it was no different in the case of "The Secret War." For the Hmong, the combined weight of these two effects was a disaster. Many Hmong were uprooted from their villages, and by war's end in 1975, most Hmong families had lost a father or son. As a result of the fierce and merciless combat and the dislocation inherent in warfare, the Hmong suffered ten times the casualties inflicted upon their American sponsors.

After the American withdrawal, thousands of Hmong who had supported the United States were harshly persecuted by the new communist regime in Laos, with the result that many opted to flee to Thailand, where they were placed in refugee camps. Ultimately, many resettled in the West, while some returned to Laos or lived somewhat surreptitiously in Thailand, hoping, perhaps, eventually to become Thai citizens.

Hmong in the West

Since 1975, the Hmong diaspora has spread throughout the world. There are about 250,000 Hmong Americans; about 10,000 Hmong live in France; 1,600 in Australia; approximately 1,500 in French Guyana; five hundred in Argentina; and about 2,000 in Canada.

Hmong Life in the United States

As the United States began to admit Hmong refugees in the late 1970s, government policy was, ironically, similar in nature to that of Han China some two millennia ago. That is, the Hmong were deliberately dispersed, in the hope they would assimilate into American society as quickly as possible. It will be self-evident that the Hmong knew nothing about American culture, society, food, beliefs, or values; and that most Americans knew nothing about the Hmong. As Hmong refugee families arrived in this country, they experienced all of the well-documented difficulties and culture shock of other immigrant groups.

In time, many Hmong families chose to move away from their sponsoring communities, and this movement –known as secondary migration– quickly became widespread, forcing the United States government to reconsider its dispersal policy. As a result, Hmong families were allowed to resettle where they had relatives. At the present time, the largest Hmong communities in the United States are in California, with 70,000; Minnesota, with 50,000; and Wisconsin, with 30,000. There are, in addition, smaller communities of a few hundred to a few thousand in Arkansas, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, Iowa, Nebraska, Nevada, Montana, Washington, Oregon, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Washington, D.C., Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

Hmong Food

Traditionally, Hmong food consists largely of rice, corn, meat, vegetables, spices, fruits, bamboo shoots, wild mushrooms, and fish. Rice and vegetables are eaten every day in Laos, as well as in the United States. Meat items, such as pork, beef, and poultry, are eaten when they are available in Laos, but the Hmong eat this meat every day in America.

In Laos, corn is steamed when it first ripens to eat as a snack. After corn has been dried, harvested and stored away, it is used to feed livestock such as pigs, chickens, and ducks. Hmong process dry corn to eat only if there is no rice available. Since the Hmong live in the highlands of Laos, fish is scarce. However, they will eat fish when it is available.

Hmong eat all sorts of green vegetables, including cabbage, lettuce, bok choy, green mustard, herbs, the tender tips of pumpkin vines, and black nightshade, and these vegetables can be cooked in a variety of ways. For example, the cabbage, bok choy, and green mustard can be steamed, boiled, stir-fried and pickled, while the pumpkin vine tips cannot be pickled.

Black nightshade is boiled into a soup most of the time, and people eat the boiled black nightshade with its broth. No salt or sugar is added. This is a dish particularly favored by older people and, as a consequence, it is often joked that you know you are old when you like to eat black nightshade soup!

Hmong also eat a lot of green beans, turnips, squashes, cucumbers, bamboo shoots, and wild mushrooms. Again, this produce can be steamed, stir fried, or boiled and all can be cooked either as a plain dish (tsuag) or a dish with salt, oil and meat (qab).

Hmong also cultivate many kinds of herbal plants, many of which have medicinal properties. Some have to be cooked in a specific way and eaten only during specific occasions, while others can be incorporated into daily diets and regular cooking styles. For example, during the first thirty days after a woman gives birth, she can only eat warm rice with chicken soup that has been boiled with specific herbs said to assist in the recuperation of her body. Lemon grass is a part of this special diet, as well as other regular diets.

Hmong also cultivate many other kinds of plants for food. Green onions, cilantro, mints, and others are traditionally prepared with hot peppers as a side dish. People can mix them with rice, soup, stew, or stir fry them, according to their tolerance for hot peppers. However, it is also true that since the 1960s, when the Hmong were uprooted from their traditional villages, they have adopted many other neighboring tribes' dietary customs to mix with their own and used in soups, salads, and stir-fried dishes.

Hmong also consider some foods to have certain symbols, thus being more appropriate to serve in specific occasions and not in others. For example, during a wedding, no vegetable is served because vegetables symbolize poverty. In addition, no hot pepper is served, because the Hmong believe it will make the marriage unmanageable. Just as the hot pepper burns all over the mouth once ingested, the couple will tend to have heated arguments over little things.

Vocabulary Lesson:

Tsuag - plain vegetable dish

Qab - vegetable dish cooked with salt, oil and meat

Qeej - a bamboo mouth organ played during social events

During a funeral, the family of the deceased is responsible for providing food to all the guests. It is a very sad time, so the food is prepared in a simple manner. Animals that have been sacrificed for the deceased are cooked into soups to feed the guests, and neither vegetable nor any elaborate dishes are prepared.

The special foods prepared for the New Year holiday are purple sticky rice, tofu, and meat (beef, pork, and poultry). Since it takes a lot of time to prepare tofu, the Hmong utilize it mostly during the New Year celebration. At that time of the year, as well, a lot of meat is consumed since meat symbolizes wealth and prosperity in Hmong society.

Hmong also prescribe specific diets for the sick. For example, someone who is sick should not eat garlic, onion, cucumber, hot pepper, or any vegetables or fruits that are sour. The patient should eat only boiled and steamed food, not stir fried nor any smelly and oily food.

Hmong Music

Some people describe the Kleng (qeej) as a free-reed, multiple pipe, musical instrument, while other people call it a bamboo mouth organ. The Hmong call it a qeej. It is an important musical instrument in the Hmong culture. Among the Hmong of Laos and Thailand, only men and boys play this instrument, but among the Hmong of China, both genders play it. The kleng is a solo instrument played during social events, the New Year festival, and leisure time, as well as during funeral rituals with a drum accompaniment. The kleng is played horizontally; its six pipes varying in length from about two to five feet, depending on the preference and skill of the player. It is the only traditional Hmong musical instrument which is played as the player dances, and the kleng tradition has existed in the Hmong culture for at least four thousand years. It is one of the oldest harmonic instruments in the world.

Today, the kleng is most popular during parties at the Hmong New Year, where at least one player, or sometimes a team of players will perform on a high stage.

Hmong youth who want to learn to play the kleng must not only learn to operate the instrument, but also memorize all of the song texts that have passed from one generation to the next. These song texts are centuries old, especially the funeral recitations.

The Hmong view death as a long journey to life in another dimension, where their ancestors live for a time before eventual reincarnation. Thus, a dead person needs food, money, appropriate clothes, shoes, an umbrella, and a variety of animals, such as a horse to ride, which is symbolized by the parallel wooden structure that a corpse lies on, chickens, pigs, and cows that are sacrificed during the funeral.

During the funeral, the kleng is used to communicate with or speak to the dead person and any other spirits which may be involved in the passing, and there are song texts the kleng player must follow with each step. For example, after a person dies and has been cleaned or washed and dressed in burial clothes, the kleng player begins the first ritual by playing a recitation called, “Showing the Way” (Qhuab Kev). It is an instruction for the journey to the realm of the ancestors and an explanation of the creation of the world, including the reasons why death must occur. After “Showing the Way” is performed, the “Song of Expiring Life” (Qeej Tu Siav) follows. This song assures the deceased person that he is really dead and needs to go to find his ancestors, and imparts instructions for the dead person to follow.

Today, only the Hmong who still maintain their traditional religion, animism, use the kleng during funerals. Hmong who have become Christians or converted to other forms of worship have

abandoned the use of the kleng in their funerals. Generally, they will have simply a sermon at which people play together, rather than observe the tradition according to which one may hear the funeral drum and the kleng play loudly throughout the day. Nevertheless, these Hmong still play the kleng for social events and during leisure hours.

Other Hmong instruments include the violin (xim xaus), three types of Hmong flutes: the reed flute (Daj nplaim), the leaf flute (daj plooj), and daj pwm liv, and the mouth harp. In Asia, both men and women play flutes during both their leisure and courtship times. In Laos, people play these instruments as they walk between their fields and homes, and they create the most wonderful music when heard in accompaniment to the voices of singing tropical birds and insects. In the United States, however, the Hmong can only play these flutes at parties or inside their houses. Not surprisingly, if they sit on their porches to play, neighbors often do not understand the music and thus do not care for the practice.

The mouth harp is played by both males and females and during courtship at night. In Laos, an unmarried woman will sleep in her bedroom, while her boyfriend stands outside her bedroom wall and plays the mouth harp as he tells her how much he loves her or wants to see her. She may reply by playing another mouth harp from her bedroom, or she may whisper to him about her feelings. The Hmong mouth harp produces a soft and gentle music that is not much louder than a whisper. The gentle tone it produces is the reason it is used mostly among courting people to chat in the evenings of peak courtship time.

Vocabulary Lesson:
Daj nplaim, daj plooj, daj pwm liv - three types of Hmong flutes

Traditional folk songs are sung during the New Year festival, during leisure time, while traveling between home and field, or whenever they are requested. There are many types of folk songs, which give expression to such situations as being a daughter-in-law, being in love, being an orphan, confronting death, or migrating. For example, Kwv Txhiaj Ua Nyab are songs about the process of becoming a daughter-in-law and about living life as a daughter-in-law. These songs discuss how challenging and miserable some daughter-in-laws' lives can be. Love songs (Kwv Txhiaj Plees) express feelings about all aspects of love, loving relationships, courtships, and broken hearts.

Orphan songs (Kwv Txhiaj Ntsuag) are about children who have lost their parents and how hard life is without parents to love and care for them. Such songs also touch on the experiences of a wife who has lost her husband or vice versa. This kind of song talks about how much the bereaved misses the lost partner, or about how life has been without the company of the missing one.

Death songs (Kwv Txhiaj Tuag) discuss how people die, where they go, and what happens during the funeral, and depend on whether or not the deceased has a brother, sister or parents to arrange all the necessities needed on the journey to the other life.

Migration songs (Kwv Txhiaj Tsiv Teb Tsaws Chaw) point to the collective Hmong or individual singer's movement from place to place and country to country, discussing who and what was left behind and how much the old places, families, and friends are missed.

This is traditional Hmong music. Most of it is still practiced within the Hmong community in the United States, but fewer Hmong are able to play the instruments or sing the songs herein mentioned.

The older generation is forgetting Hmong music because they do not have many chances to enjoy it. Generally, the younger generation is not interested or too busy with school and work, and have no time to learn this centuries-old traditional music that take so much time, patience, and effort to master.

Today, to entertain themselves, the Hmong have incorporated all kinds of modern music into their traditions. Hmong youth today can play guitar, piano, drums, Western violin, organ, and other types of modern musical instruments better than they can play a Hmong reed-flute, kleng, or mouth harp, or create the tunes associated with leaf blowing. There is more contemporary Hmong music and modern instruments for sale at Hmong grocery stores than there are traditional music or instruments. At the Hmong New Year festival, modern Hmong music is played out louder and more by participants than traditional Hmong music. When the Hmong youth today listen to American songs or to contemporary Hmong songs, they may dance, laugh, and enjoy themselves because they can relate to and understand them. But oftentimes, when they listen to traditional Hmong music, they say it is boring nonsense because they do not understand or appreciate it.

"The experience of my generation has been war, as well as being the teenage offspring of refugees and becoming citizens of foreign countries such as the United States, Canada, France, Australia, Thailand, and many others." Dia Cha, aurthor of this section.

Hmong Life in America

Most of us who are Hmong have long struggled to survive in order to maintain not only our personal desires, but our identities, culture, and traditions. Different generations of Hmong experience different challenges and struggles. For my great-great-grandparents, who fled from China some time in the long distant past, and for many Hmong people of their generation, the struggle was to find a land where they could live in peace without persecution and suppression, and perhaps to find better land upon which to cultivate their crops. For my grandparents' generation, the struggle was to maintain the precious cultural traditions and identity for which their ancestors had fought so hard for thousands of years and to deal with invading foreigners — French, Chinese, Vietnamese — who attempted to trade with, colonize and proselytize them. My parents' generation spent their young adult lives involved with war, escaping from war, and becoming refugees in foreign lands.

The experience of my generation has been war, as well as being the teenage offspring of refugees and becoming citizens of foreign countries such as the United States, Canada, France, Australia, Thailand, and many others. The challenges and opportunities we face are quite different from those of our parents, grandparents, and great-great-grandparents. Our parents brought us into these various countries without much education, experience of urban life, or financial support with which to start afresh. We came with open minds and open hearts. We have always attempted to regard our present lives as better than our past; otherwise, the road of loss and change would have seemed impossible to traverse.

Considering the short time that we have been in the United States, and that at least eighty per cent of our parents were illiterate when we first arrived in

this Promised Land, much of the progress we have made is quite astounding. For example, when we first arrived in this country, we had only one person who had received his Ph.D. By the year 2000, 120 Hmong had completed doctoral degrees, over 200 had received their M.A. degrees in various fields. Ten to fifteen percent of the Hmong holders of advanced degrees are women. Over 2000 Hmong have completed their B.A. or B.S. degrees, of whom about one third are women. Hmong women are now taking many non-traditional roles. We now have doctors, lawyers, directors, authors, professors and many other professionals who are Hmong women. When we look back at our history, we have never before had this kind of opportunity or achievement.

Many other positive changes have taken place in Hmong American daily life. Today more Hmong are in monogamous marriages than in polygamous unions. Arranged marriages are also no longer practiced among Hmong Americans. Young people are free to choose whoever they want to marry. Hmong couples learn to express their feelings to each other more than in the past. While the trend of early marriage still exists in Hmong communities across the country, there are many Hmong youths who delay marriage until they finish college or have found full-time employment.

Many Hmong parents are learning to encourage their daughters in the same way they have traditionally done with their sons. Many Hmong male professionals are learning to respect the abilities demonstrated and achievements won by their female counterparts. More Hmong youths and scholars are interested in recording, researching and writing about their unique cultural traditions and history, in addition to the Western core curricula required in school for their chosen field.

Most Hmong have made every effort to adjust their lives to the education and labor systems in the United States. For the Hmong who have small children but have no parent living with them to attend to babysitting chores, the wife will often work the first shift and the husband work the second, alternating to take care of the children. The husband sends the children to school in the morning, while the wife picks them up in the afternoon. Many Hmong still maintain strong family or clan ties and manage to stay on top of their daily challenges, obstacles, and hardships, but most who engage in manufacturing are unable to take vacations, except the occasional, once-every-few-years, trip to visit family members in other states. The breakup of Hmong families is one of the factors that have created a generation of rebelling and misbehaving Hmong youth.

In Laos, Hmong youths go from childhood directly to adulthood. Hmong teenagers will start to marry at age thirteen or fourteen, and most Hmong will be married by the age of seventeen or eighteen. They have no time to be teenagers. Hmong parents in the past did not have to deal with teenagers, they only dealt with children and adults, and they have carried this practice with them to America. Hmong parents expect their children in this country, when they have “grown” or are “big” (loj), to behave like adults no less than they would in Laos. For the parents, the mature stage of “big” begins with puberty.

Hmong American teenagers, on the other hand, refuse to behave like adults and, in any case, probably have little clue as to how that might be done when they are surrounded by mainstream American teenagers. These American teenagers, after all, behave the same way the Hmong American teens do, and it is considered perfectly okay. Hmong children today have more interaction with the media, with American culture, and with their peers, especially during the school years,

than with their own parents, grandparents, and traditional culture. They are more fluent in English than in Hmong. They know more American heroes than Hmong heroes. But when it comes to the skills necessary for survival in society, many of them are handicapped in both the Hmong and mainstream American cultural systems. Many Hmong parents are heartbroken to see this youthful Hmong American "Lost Generation," a generation in trouble with the law, and in rebellion against its parents and elders.

While many Hmong youths are valedictorians and continue their education beyond high school, we also have a generation of Hmong youth who have dropped out of school, joined gangs, committed violent crimes and become addicted to drugs and alcohol. Many Hmong teenagers run away.

Above are some issues that Hmong Americans are facing in their lives. They represent the struggles, challenges, and successes of life in America. These issues also illustrate that Hmong culture is changing and adapting to new circumstances. Most Hmong interact daily with the American culture in manners ranging from TV and radio to schools and the workforce to the health care system.

Considering the range of experiences to which the Hmong have been exposed, it is understandable that within the Hmong population, there will be displayed a variety of personality differences. Hmong Americans are different in age, personality, gender, education, and stage of acculturation. Some Hmong speak no English, while others have a U.S. college education. Some Hmong still believe in and maintain their traditional animist religion, while others have converted to Christianity. Some Hmong prefer shamans rather than doctors, while other Hmong prefer the highest technology that Western health care providers have to offer. As is the case with all people, Hmong do not want to be treated as second-class citizens or to be stereotyped.

Pretest:

- Who are the Hmong?
- What part of the world are they from?
- Many Hmong came to America as refugees after a war. What war?
- If you know a person who is Hmong, what is that person's name?
- Explain one thing you know about Hmong food, dress, history, or people.

Activity Guide

As a teacher attempting to create a presentation on the Hmong, you may find it of value to:

1. Get a world map and show the students all of the countries in which Hmong live today.

2. Have a discussion or ask each student to write out his thoughts (to be shared with another student or the whole class), on the following:

Imagine that you and your family have to move to a foreign country tomorrow to save your lives.

a. What are the three most important things you would bring with you?

b. Assuming you can never return to your homeland, what are some of the things you would miss most?

c. Assume you find yourself in a foreign school, where you have no friends, do not speak the language of instruction, and cannot understand the ways of the other students. What would be the most difficult thing(s) for you to manage in adapting?

d. Imagine you and your family are the only people like yourselves in an entire community of others, with whom you cannot communicate. How would you feel, and what steps might you take to adjust to your situation?

e. Do you think you would assimilate to your new situation in life completely? That is, for the sake of becoming a member of your new community and new nation, would you give up entirely the way of life you knew in the past? If you answer yes, why? If your answer is no, what aspect(s) of your old culture or way of life would you want to keep in the new country?

3. Show Segment 2 of "***Just Plain Art***" which shows that Hmong embroidery folk art tradition is alive in Colorado and is being passed on to younger generations.

4. Print the following questions on a sheet and pass one out to each student. Naturally, you may add more questions as they occur to you or delete some of those below:

a. Draw a line composed of arrows showing the Hmong historical journey to the United States.

b. Why did some Hmong migrate from China to Southeast Asia?

c. Why did the Hmong flee Laos?

d. Why did the Hmong come to the U.S.?

e. Name four countries in Asia in which the Hmong currently live.

f. Name three countries in the West in which Hmong currently live.

g. Name the Hmong leader recruited by the CIA as their chief lieutenant in "The Secret War" against the Lao communists from 1960 to 1975.

h. Discuss the two main duties of the Hmong during the course of "The Secret War" and the more overt War in Vietnam.

i. What is the approximate Hmong population in the United States?

j. Which U.S. states have the largest Hmong populations? The smallest?

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