

## **Spirit gatherer**

### **Shaman plays important role in Hmong New Year's**

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Anchorage Daily News

*(Published: November 26, 2006)*

Last Monday morning, Pasert Lee, a Hmong shaman, pulled open his apartment door in Mountain View, raised a mallet to a gong and began to play: Bow! Bow! Bow!

With the sound, he called spirits from neighboring homes and faraway continents, beckoning them to his four-plex on Parsons Avenue, over the live chickens and the old Top Ramen boxes in his snowy yard, through the door, past his wife, past the gutted pig on the tarp on the living room floor, to a glimmering altar. There he'd set out a spirit meal: egg, rice, water, smoke.

"We feed (the spirits)," he said. "Burn the candle. Water to feed. Rice to feed."

The clock chimed noon. For 50 or so Hmong people in the orbit of Lee's crowded house, the New Year's celebration had begun. Lee threw two halves of a buffalo horn onto the carpet, studied them, and shut the door.

## **THE SPIRITS WERE READY**

With gongs, bells and incense smoke, Hmong people from Muldoon to South Anchorage are calling to the spirits this time of year. Hmong New Year's celebrations, meant to cleanse the home, renew the spirit and honor ancestors, are not tied to a certain day, so families celebrate through November and December.

Ten years ago, there were very few Hmong living in Anchorage, but the community mushroomed recently, from 300 in 2000 to 1,200 in 2005, according to U.S. census estimates. More than 700 Hmong-speaking children attend Anchorage schools.

Some Hmong came directly from refugee camps in Thailand, others, including Lee and his extended family, moved here from the Lower 48, looking for better schools and more opportunity.

The Hmong are rural, southeast Asian clanspeople with their own language and culture. For centuries, they have resisted change. Hmong originated in China but were driven into Laos and other parts of Southeast Asia. During the Vietnam War, Hmong people in Laos fought for the United States, but by 1975, when U.S. support waned, Lao communists persecuted the clans and many fled to refugee camps in Thailand.

Over several decades, Hmong have immigrated to America, where they have faced a shocking, new culture.

Spiritually, some local Hmong practice Christianity, often Mormonism or evangelistic traditions. Others remain faithful to ancient practices, believing that a shaman communicates on their behalf with the spiritual world.

Lee is among a small group of Anchorage shamans. He busies himself year-round tending to the spiritual needs of his people, making bargains to improve their health and welfare, usually by offering food, money and sacrificed livestock.

In his living room on New Year's day, once he determined the spirits were ready to receive him, he pulled a red hood over his face. An assistant unbuttoned his collar. In the foyer, a rooster crowed. A sacred casualty of the day's festivities, it would soon be dead.

## **VISIT TO THE SPIRIT WORLD**

As Lee worked, men settled in folding chairs around the gutted pig, making conversation in Hmong. A few drank Budweiser. Some wore uniforms from gas stations and security offices. Others wore black suits. Women traveled in and out, hoisting babies, pouring green tea.

Already, Lee had blessed 30 chickens brought by families for the celebration. The birds, kept in sacks, cages and boxes, seemed to peek from every shelf and corner. A huge bowl, filled with hundreds of chicken eggs, weighed on the table.

"We use the chicken for the new year because the chicken knows everything. For the sun they know to sing, for the moon, they know to sing," Lee said. "The chicken knows about life and death. Only the chicken knows, for the chicken can talk to the spirits."

Many things on Hmong New Year's come in twos. Two eggs nestled in a bowl of rice with two incense sticks near the door. One egg was for the year passing away, the other was for the year beginning.

Lee's altar, a rough-hewn bookshelf across from a large-screen TV, had two identical sides. It was wrapped in metallic paper meant to represent money. Each side offered teacups of water, bowls of rice, boiled eggs and sticks of pungent incense.

Lee is a stocky man who just turned 60. He wore a black silk suit, with blue trimmed sleeves and a pink belt.

To begin his spiritual trance, he climbed atop a ceremonial bench that symbolized a horse he would ride through the other world. He slipped a metal bell on each index finger. Assistants braced the bench and held his waist to keep him from toppling. He hopped from foot to foot, jingling his bells, and lifted his voice in an ancient chant. At the end of his chant, he whistled, blew air through his lips and began again. Sweat collected on his temples. He would dance that way for the next six hours.

Steven Yang watched as the men around Lee burned bits of metallic paper in a turkey pan, sending riches so Lee could pay the tolls at the celestial gates of the spirit world.

Lee had to visit the spirits tied to all the people who brought chickens for the ceremony, Yang explained. The shaman visits not only the spirits of the dead, but also spirits lost by the living. When a living man loses his spirit, he falls into a depression or becomes fatigued, Yang said. On his shaman ride, Lee would collect missing spirits and return them home.

## **CHICKENS AND THE CITY CODE**

Next door, Lee's bell-ringing and chanting pattered faintly through the wall. Women brought in chickens, cradling them two at a time.

"We got a lot to kill," said neighbor Mai Xiong, whose pregnant belly was dotted with feathers.

Butchering chickens in the Hmong style is surprisingly gentle. When the birds are held upside down, they become calm and stretch out their necks, as if to offer themselves.

Standing on the second-floor patio, one woman held a bird while another plucked out a few neck feathers and made a quick incision. A stream of dark blood squirted into a bowl.

"When his eye close, that means it died," Xiong said.

The whole process took about a minute.

A few years ago, a neighbor complained about butchering chickens outside the house. Xiong, who speaks good English, worked with Lee and others to put together a written packet for the city, police and animal control, explaining the ritual, she said.

The city's animal ordinances require that chickens be given food, water, housing and care, but they also permit animals to be killed as long as they are dispatched "in a humane manner." The city hasn't defined specifically what "humane" means in the code when it comes to the method of killing an animal to eat it, said Myra Wilson, a veterinarian and center manager for Anchorage Animal Care and Control. The American Veterinary Medical Association says an animal should be stunned or sedated before its throat is cut, she said.

Julie Hasquet, Mayor Mark Begich's spokeswoman, confirmed Hmong leaders contacted the city to make sure laws were not broken with their religious tradition. As long as the birds are not treated cruelly and Hmong people take care not to bother the neighbors, the city does not have a problem with it, she said.

After the chickens closed their eyes, the women brought the birds to the steamy kitchen where they worked around an enormous pot on a propane burner, blanching and plucking. A wet pile of feathers grew around their ankles.

The chickens, cooked with their heads and feet on, would be served for dinner, along with boiled eggs, symbols of fresh beginnings.

"To bless everybody for the new year comes," Xiong said.

## **GENERATIONS FEAST TOGETHER**

The sun had been down for two hours when Pasert Lee finally climbed from the bench, returning from the spiritual world. He sat, out of breath, and sipped bottled water. The men broke into a raucous drinking ritual, throwing the buffalo horn and cheering as each downed two small cups of Bud and burned metallic paper. The smoke alarm went off.

Next door, the children were home from school and sons and daughters in their 20s and 30s began to arrive from work.

Thai Lee, 31, Pasert Lee's son, supervised the chopping of peppers, ginger, chicken and onions, which would be dressed with pig blood for a salad. The Jacksonville Jaguars were playing the New York Giants on TV. He chose not to play the drinking game with the older men, joking that his dad would drink his share.

"The younger generation is, let's say, more Americanized," he said. "Us younger generation only difference is we celebrate Christmas and Thanksgiving."

They celebrate the holidays as a time to give gifts and eat turkey, to be part of American culture, he said. They don't go to Christian church.

"It would dishonor my dad," he said.

Across the hall, the men took places at the table, pouring more Bud into pairs of small glasses arranged on plates. The women brought bowls of fragrant greens, rice, eggs, the salad with pig blood, boiled chickens and a roast pig. Among them, Seng Chang sat back. He felt renewed.

"(The ceremony) made me feel like I come back to my homeland ... I have memory, remember back to my own culture like my great-grandfather and grandmother they always do for the Hmong culture," he said. "I feel like I live back to my old rules."

Boua Ger Vang, among the oldest men, examined a boiled chicken, eyeing the position of the claws for signs of good luck. He parted the beak and pulled out the tongue, holding it up to the light. The men leaned in

"You look at the chicken, you looking at the future," Yang said.

The chicken was not so lucky, Vang announced, but he could eat it because he was old. The men roared and toasted. Vang cracked the legs at the knees and gobbled a papery strip of ankle skin.

Lee stood, and the men around him bowed in thanks. He pulled his knife across the pig and filled his plate to begin the feast. Soon everyone was dipping eggs in spice and chewing mouthfuls of fatty, gingered pork.

Lee took one glass of beer from a plate and Thai Lee took the other. Father and son drank, each protecting the top of his glass with his hand as a man protects his family.

"Mr. Lee says he is shaman today, the chicken and the egg are good luck and happiness," Yang said. "The spirits are coming home."

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## **HMONG NEW YEAR'S**

Hmong New Year's is commonly celebrated in the United States in November or December. Celebrations often include feasting, dancing and games meant to introduce young men and women. New Year's religious rituals, performed by a shaman, are meant to cleanse and renew, reach out to departed loved ones, guide the spirits and bless the coming year.

Source: Pasert Lee, Anchorage Hmong shaman

## **HMONG BELIEFS**

- Many spirits, good and evil, inhabit the world.
- The dead, places, things, animals and living people have spirits.
- Bad spirits and dead ancestors cause illness and depression in the living. A living person may also lose his spirit.
- Shamans communicate with spirits, chasing away evil and helping lost spirits come home.
- Honoring dead ancestors, feeding them with sacrificed animals and money, brings blessings and heals illnesses.
- Spirits of the dead may be reincarnated and return to life as someone else.

Sources: Txong Tao Lee, executive director, Hmong Cultural Center; Pasert Lee, Anchorage Hmong shaman.

## **HMONG HISTORY AT A GLANCE**

- 4,000 years ago -- Hmong culture originated in central China, was pushed into the mountains by expanding Chinese
- Early 1800s -- Hmong migrated to Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar

- 1950s -- Fought against communists in Laos
- 1960s-70s -- Helped American soldiers fight the Vietnam War.
- 1975 -- Were persecuted in Laos by communists; 300,000 fled to Thailand and refugee camps
- 1975 -- First immigration, mostly soldiers, to U.S. was under 1975 Refugee Assistance Act
- 1980 -- First families began arriving in U.S. with passage of 1980 Refugee Act
- 2000s -- The latest wave of migration, which began a few years ago, brought 15,000 Hmong to join the approximately 250,000 living in the U.S.
- Today -- Close to 200 Hmong refugees resettled recently in Anchorage, with the help of Catholic Social Services Refugee Assistance and Immigration Services. Of those, about half came from other cities. The rest came directly from refugee camps. Many more have moved here independently from other states to be with family