

Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/SEA>

Additional services for *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Protestant conversion and social conflict: The case of the Hmong in contemporary Vietnam

Tam T.T. Ngo

Journal of Southeast Asian Studies / Volume 46 / Issue 02 / June 2015, pp 274 - 292

DOI: 10.1017/S0022463415000089, Published online: 05 May 2015

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0022463415000089

How to cite this article:

Tam T.T. Ngo (2015). Protestant conversion and social conflict: The case of the Hmong in contemporary Vietnam. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 46, pp 274-292 doi:10.1017/S0022463415000089

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Protestant conversion and social conflict: The case of the Hmong in contemporary Vietnam

Tam T.T. Ngo

This article analyses the social implications of the recent mass conversions to Protestantism by one-third of the one million Hmong in Vietnam. The conversions have been condemned by the Vietnamese state, while being understood by international human rights activists as acts of conscience on the part of the Hmong converts. This article focuses on the internal debate and divisions surrounding conversion among the Hmong themselves. The converts believe that Protestantism is the only way to alter the ethnic group's marginal status in Vietnam while the unconverted Hmong see conversion as a betrayal of Hmong ethnicity. Such conflicting views have been causing deep fractures in Hmong society.

One sunny day in late November 2004, during a visit to Windy Plateau,¹ I accidentally came across a crowd of nearly one hundred Hmong marching toward the local commune's People's Committee office nearby. Near the front of the crowd was a buffalo drawing a wooden cart in which sat a man whose hands had been tied behind his back. As the crowd came closer to the building, people became more and more excited. The wooden cart stopped in the front yard. Several young men came forward and dragged the bruised man out from the cart. They made him kneel in the yard, where people quickly encircled him. Somehow, I found myself standing close to the innermost circle, along with my Hmong assistant. A man who looked like a local official wormed his way through the crowd and halted right in front of us. Pointing his finger at the kneeling man, he shouted in Hmong: 'Talk! Confess your lies.' There was no response. The man shouted again several times and many

Tam T.T. Ngo is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: Ngo@mmg.mpg.de. The author would like to thank Peter van der Veer, Philip Taylor, John Chapman, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Oscar Salemin, Nguyen Van Huy, Birgit Meyer, and the two anonymous readers of *JSEAS* for their comments, suggestions, and editorial work. A special note of gratitude goes to Nicholas Tapp for his thoughtful and insightful comments on several versions of this article. I would like to thank the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Amsterdam Institute for International Development (AIID), the Southeast Asian Summer Study Institute (SEASSI) at the University of Madison, Wisconsin, and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Ethnic and Religious Diversity, for their institutional and financial support.

1 Place and personal names have been changed or omitted to protect the identities of those who brought me there and are also involved in the story.

others joined him. Still, there was no response. Keeping his eyes tightly shut, the kneeling man lowered his bruised face. His body trembled. Drops of sweat rolled down his temples. It was almost midday. The sun began to burn, but because of the plateau's altitude, the air was still cold. When the shouting died down a bit, an older man nearby pointed at the kneeling man and said, 'Yesterday he said Vaj Tswv is very powerful. He can protect anyone who follows him. Let's tie him tighter and see how his God can help him.' Right away, two young men came with another rope and tightened it around the man's arms closer to his elbows. The man bit his lower lip, but as the rope reached his elbows, his arms became seriously twisted, and he let out a scream. Tears ran down his cheeks as he cried out, 'I confess. I confess. I lied.'

As I gathered from my assistant's translation of the trembling confession, from members of the crowd, and from other local people, the kneeling man, whom I shall call Giang Seo Lữ, was a Christian Hmong from Sơn La province. He had arrived in Windy Plateau the previous day and stayed with a family of the Giang clan in the commune. From the moment he arrived, he had only talked to the family about Vaj Tswv and why they should all follow Vaj Tswv's way. Feeling that the family was listening to him, Giang Seo Lữ urged them to go and call on other families to spread his message. He also suggested that his host kill one of his chickens for their dinner. The family complied, but were not happy. The next morning, his host secretly sent his son to the commune's security officials, who quickly came to arrest Giang Seo Lữ. At first, they just kept him at his host's house and challenged him about the veracity of his claims about the New Way, Christianity. When Giang Seo Lữ refused to back down, insisting on how powerful his Christian brothers and sisters were, not only in Vietnam but also abroad, he began to irritate the security officials, who started to beat him up. It was at that point that the head of the commune — the man who would later make his way through the crowd and demand that Giang confess — arrived and immediately stopped the beating. He ordered the others to bring Giang to the People's Committee office so that he could confess his lies in public.

This shocking incident in Windy Plateau was just the beginning of what I came to witness as the disturbing consequences of Protestant conversion among the Hmong community in Northern Vietnam. The conversion to Protestantism by hundreds of thousands of Hmong in Vietnam is perhaps the most striking of all the changes that have affected this ethnic group in the last few decades. This religious movement started in 1989 with a small number of Hmong Protestants, but rapidly spread; roughly one-third of a million Hmong now refer to themselves as Protestant, while the rest of the Hmong see themselves as 'traditional Hmong' (*Hmoob uas kev lig kev cai*). Crucially, despite the great importance of ethnic solidarity nurtured by virtually all Hmong people, conversion has ripped apart many families, clans, and communities. Although up until my last visit to the field in 2011 anti-Christian conflicts appeared to have become less violent, certainly in comparison to the incident above, they remained prevalent.

The widespread conversions have unintentionally led to ongoing social conflict within the Hmong community. This discord has given the Vietnamese state authorities one more reason to suppress this religious movement. While missionaries and international human rights advocates respectively praise the conversions and converts

as the miraculous work of God or a sign of human agency,² the state views it as a troublesome phenomenon in various ways. While acutely recognising the socio-cultural problems which conversion causes for both the converted and unconverted Hmong, the government fails to acknowledge the importance of human agency in this religious movement.

The official view is clearly filtered through and reinforced by many Vietnamese scholars who argue that the Hmong people, with their extreme 'economic poverty' (*nghèo đói*), their socio-cultural 'backwardness' (*đời sống văn hóa xã hội còn lạc hậu*), and 'superstitious mentality' (*đầu óc còn đầy mê tín dị đoan*), are 'lured' (*bị lợi dụng*) into following a religion foreign to their cosmology and beyond their comprehension.³ In the view of such scholars, the illegal missionaries and foreign-linked activists are predators who use religion to provoke ethnic conflicts and anticommunism and create social and political instability.⁴ Social conflict in the Hmong community is cited as evidence of the problematic nature of conversion. Some state-employed analysts view the Hmong as simple-minded and illiterate, questioning their capacity to acquire, understand, and internalise the rather abstract Christian teachings.⁵ Questioning the converts' ability to understand and absorb religious doctrine in turn implies that the Christian Hmong are not committed to their new faith. Such perspectives on conversion become truly problematic when they form the basis of policies designed to distract the Hmong from Protestantism. Hmong areas where conversions have occurred have been subject to strict censorship and prohibition of evangelical missions on the one hand, along with development, education, and political propaganda programmes on the other. Yet these socio-cultural and economic

2 See for example, <http://freedomhouse.org/religion/news/bn2003/bn-2003-10-01.htm>; http://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/pch/alert_viewer.asp?Alert_ID=103 (last accessed 1 Nov. 2013); and <http://www.christianpost.com/news/vietnam-tries-to-portray-cult-gathering-as-christian-50143/> (last accessed 11 Feb 2015). Hmong conversion is often used by these organisations to criticise Vietnam's religious policies. The United States has also designated Vietnam a 'Country of Particular Concern' under the International Religious Freedom Act in 2004, 2005, and 2014: <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Vietnam%202014.pdf>.

3 Nghiem Van Dang, 'Về Việc Truyền Bá Đạo Vàng Chử Hay Giả Tinh Lành' [About the proselytisation of the Vang Chu cult or fake-Protestantism], in *Những Vấn Đề Liên Quan Đến Hiện Tượng 'Vàng Chử'* [Issues relating to the 'Vàng Chử' phenomenon] (Hanoi: Institute of Religious Studies, 1998); Huu Son Tran, *Văn Hóa Hmong* [The culture of the Hmong] (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hoa Dân Tộc, 1996); Duy Quang Vương, 'Ý Kiến Của Một Cán Bộ Người Hmong Về Vấn Đề Người Hmong Theo Đạo Hiện Nay' [Opinion of a Hmong cadre on the issue of Hmong conversion], in *Những Vấn Đề Liên Quan Đến Hiện Tượng 'Vàng Chử'*; Duy Quang Vương, *Văn Hóa Tâm Linh Của Người Hmông Ở Việt Nam Truyền Thống Và Hiện Tại* [The spiritual culture of the Hmong in Vietnam: Past and present] (Hanoi: Cultural Publishing House and Institute of Cultural Studies, 2005).

4 Government Committee for Religious Affairs, *Religion and policies regarding religion in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2006). See also Oscar Saleminck, 'Enclosing the highlands: Socialist, capitalist and Protestant conversions of Vietnamese highlanders', paper presented at the Politics of the commons: Articulating development and strengthening local practices conference, Chiang Mai, 2003, <http://hdl.handle.net/10535/1787> (last accessed 1 Nov. 2013); Oscar Saleminck, 'Christian conversion in Southeast Asian uplands: A comparative exploration', paper presented at EUROSEAS conference, Paris, 2004; Tam T.T. Ngo, 'The New Way: Becoming Protestant Hmong in contemporary Vietnam' (Ph.D. diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2011).

5 Dang, 'Về Việc Truyền Bá Đạo Vàng Chử Hay Giả Tinh Lành'; Vương, *Văn Hóa Tâm Linh Của Người Hmông Ở Việt Nam*.

policies do not pay enough attention to the religious needs of the Hmong and consequently have little chance in succeeding.

In the vast and fast-growing literature on ethnic minorities in Asia, conversion to various Christian denominations is often seen as an act of redrawing ethnic boundaries. C.A. Kammerer, for example, observes that the practices of Christianity among tribal minorities of Southeast Asia and China have resulted in 'dialogues of identity'.⁶ One such dialogue is inter-ethnic, with dominant lowland majorities, in which Christian conversion and affiliation are claims to difference and equality. The other type of dialogue is intra-ethnic, in which tribal Christians also engaged in dialogues of identity with traditionalist members of their own group, as in the Akha studied by Kammerer.⁷

Protestant conversion has also generated multiple dialogues on Hmong identity. I have analysed in detail elsewhere the inter-ethnic dialogue in which conversion to Protestantism is the way in which many Hmong converts in Vietnam seek to distance themselves from their marginal and subordinate position in relation to the Kinh, Vietnam's dominant lowland group. I have also showed how Protestant conversion promised them a double membership, of the global Protestant community and of a transnational Hmong community, both imagined to be beyond Vietnam.⁸ In this article, I focus instead on the intra-ethnic dialogue on Hmong conversion, which as the vignette at the beginning of the article shows, is not limited to discussion. By examining both the physical and discursive aspects of this dialogue, I hope to demonstrate that both conversion and resistance to Christianity have been intimately influenced by the establishment of Kinh political and cultural domination; the resistance to such domination; and other aspects of Hmong–Kinh power relations. Similarly, the diffusion and ultimate institutionalisation of religious innovations within a society are significantly affected by its internal power relations. It is important to take into consideration the agency of both those who choose to convert and those who refuse to do so.

The material presented in this article comes from my ethnographic fieldwork.⁹ I shall explore how social divisions and conflicts can be traced back to the different, sometimes contrasting, perceptions of Protestantism and of the act of conversion by the Hmong. I shall show how these views interrelate and interact, how this in turn affects the outcome of and/or resistance to conversion, and, last but not least, how both conversion and resistance to Christianity are related to various dilemmas

6 C.A. Kammerer, 'Customs and Christian conversion among Akha highlanders of Burma and Thailand', *American Ethnologist* 17, 2 (1990): 277–91, and 'Discarding the basket': The reinterpretation of tradition by Akha Christians of Northern Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27, 2 (1996): 320–33.

7 Kammerer, 'Customs and Christian conversion among Akha'.

8 Tam T.T. Ngo, 'Ethnic and transnational dimensions of recent Protestant conversion among the Hmong in Northern Vietnam', *Social Compass* 57, 3 (2010): 332–44.

9 I carried out fieldwork, mainly participant observation and extensive interviews, for fifteen months in Vietnam and six months in the United States, along with eight short field trips to the other side of the Chinese border, one visit to Chiang Mai, Thailand, and one trip to several provinces in Laos. I studied the Hmong language at Madison, Wisconsin in 2006, while visiting Hmong communities in Milwaukee, Sheboygan, Wausau, St. Paul, and Minneapolis. The contacts established in that year formed the core of my fieldwork networks in 2008.

that the Hmong face in contemporary Vietnam. But first, let me provide a brief overview of the Hmong, their traditional religion, and how they were introduced to Evangelical Protestantism.

The Hmong and Protestantism

In 2009 there were 1,068,169¹⁰ Hmong in Vietnam; they belong to one of the country's 54 officially recognised ethnic groups. Originally from China, where they are members of the Miao group, the Hmong migrated to Vietnam during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and made their home in the highlands near the border between Vietnam and China. Based on some minor distinctions in their customs and the colour of their clothing, the Hmong are divided into a few subgroups or 'cultural divisions', to borrow Robert Cooper's term.¹¹ Although several dialects are spoken by the different Hmong groups, most of them are closely related. The group discussed here refer to themselves as the 'Flower Hmong' — *Hmoob Leeg* in the Hmong Romanised Popular Alphabet (HRPA).¹²

Most Hmong traditionally believe in ancestral spirits dwelling in realms such as houses, forests, mountains, rivers, who can be contacted by shamans. Many also believe in the existence of *Fuab Tais*, their mythical saviour, who is also known as *Vaj Tswv*.¹³ Enshrined in Hmong folklore as the 'Lord of the Sky', *Fuab Tais* has been at the core of their messianism, which is based on the belief that in time immemorial the Hmong had their own country somewhere in China. Ruled by a kind-hearted and powerful Hmong king, the kingdom was prosperous and unified. The Hmong had their own writing. Then, as the story goes, the evil Han Chinese came,

10 National Population and Housing Census Directing Committee, 'Appendix ii', in *Official Report of the Result of National Population and Housing Census 01/04/2009* (Hanoi: National Population and Housing Census Publishing House, 2009).

11 Robert Cooper, *Resource scarcity and the Hmong response: Patterns of scarcity and economy in transition* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1984), p. 28; Tran, *Văn Hóa Hmong*.

12 In this article, I use HRPA, which was invented and improved by a number of Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the 1950s and used to transcribe the Bible and other religious materials. HRPA has been widely adopted by the Hmong in Laos and Thailand as well as in the West (mostly in North America, France, and Australia). In China and Vietnam this script was only adopted in the early 1990s, thanks to increasing contact with the Hmong diaspora, Hmong-language media, and religious materials. See Joakim Enwall, 'Hmong writing systems in Vietnam: A case study of Vietnam's minority language policy' (Stockholm: Working paper No. 40, Center for Pacific Asia Studies at Stockholm University, 1995).

13 *Fuab Tais* (or *Huab Tais*) means 'great ruler, emperor, legendary Hmong King, Lord'. See Ernest E. Heimbach, *White Meo-English dictionary* (Ithaca: SEAP Data Paper No. 75, Cornell University, 1969), p. 56, and Thomas A. Lyman, *Dictionary of Mong Njua, a Miao (Meo) language of Southeast Asia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 115. The term is often used to address the supreme deity *Fuab Tais Ntuj* (Lord of the sky), which Catholic priest Yves Bertrais translated as equivalent to the Christian God in *Dictionnaire Hmong-Français* (Vientiane: Mission Catholique, 1964). *Vaj* means king and *Tswv* means lord, master, owner, or proprietor; together, the words usually refer to God. Vietnamese scholars insist that *Vàng Trử* (*Vaj Tswv*) originates in the Chinese expression '*Miao Wang Chu Shi*' (*Miêu Vương Xuất Thế*; 'the Hmong King is coming'), probably used in documents about the Hmong involvement in millenarian movements in southwest China. I agree with Nicholas Tapp (pers. comm., Dec. 2005), however, that it is flawed to translate *Vaj Tswv* as 'the King comes' as neither the Hmong nor the Chinese would construct such a linguistically incomplete expression. See also Nicholas Tapp, *Sovereignty and rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989).

treacherously trapped and killed the beloved king, and stole their writing.¹⁴ Ever since, the Hmong have lived in exile, in a state of suffering and illiteracy. However, the king announced before his death that he would return one day to rescue his people from their lives of suffering and bring back the righteous Hmong kingdom and its magical script. This messianic belief has fuelled Hmong involvement in numerous millenarian movements in the past.¹⁵ In Vietnam this messianic tendency continues to arouse state suspicion and suppression.

Some Hmong groups in China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos have been Christianised since the late nineteenth century. In early-twentieth-century China, Samuel Pollard of the Bible Christian China Mission wrote about thousands of A Hmao in Yunnan (a subgroup of the Miao closely related to the Hmong), whom Pollard himself brought to Jesus Christ. Pollard mentions that poverty and political and social suppression at the hands of Yi landlords made the A Hmao particularly appreciative of the Protestant missionaries' material and political support.¹⁶ But mass conversion only came about when thousands of A Hmao read the Bible — translated into a Miao vernacular script that Pollard had devised based on their spoken language — as their long-lost book now returned to them.

In French Indochina, Catholicism was promoted by the colonial authority, but missionary work among the Hmong in both Vietnam and Laos had only modest results.¹⁷ Besides compiling the massive monograph *Histoire des Miao*, Francis Savina, the French missionary who came to open a parish in the hill station of Sa Pa, Lào Cai province, could only convert some dozen Hmong families in the area to Catholicism.¹⁸ Despite having had little influence on the sociocultural life of the Hmong, the few early conversions and the presence of two Catholic churches in Sa Pa and Tram Tau have often been cited by Vietnamese authors as evidence of Hmong willingness to accept colonial rule.¹⁹

14 James Scott in *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) argues that for the Hmong as well as other ethnic minorities in Zomia who share this myth about the loss of literacy, the legibility of the state was best resisted by deliberately dispensing with the written arts. In *Sovereignty and rebellion*, Tapp provides an alternative reading of this narrative of literacy loss as a manifestation of the Hmong's inferiority complex vis-à-vis the highly literate Chinese which tells us more about upland peoples' knowledge of writing in nearby state systems.

15 Millenarian beliefs have been a feature of Chinese religions and continue to be manifested in groups like the Hmong which migrated to Southeast Asia. Hue-Tam Ho Tai states in *Millenarianism and peasant politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) that the Miao were known for their tradition of rebellion, which often went hand in hand with millenarianism. Robert Jenks, in *Insurgency and social disorder in Guizhou: The 'Miao' Rebellion, 1854-1873* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), pp. 58-73, points out that less than half of the followers of the late-nineteenth-century 'Miao Rebellion' in China were Miao, the majority being Han or other non-Miao. Millenarian religion, Jenks argues, offered justifications for the non-Miao crossing ethnic boundaries to participate in the rebellion as well as its organisational framework.

16 Samuel Pollard, *The story of the Miao* (London: Henry Books, 1919) and *Tight corners in China* (London: Andrew Crombie, 1921).

17 Jean Michaud, 'French missionary expansion in colonial Upper Tonkin', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, 2 (2004): 287-310.

18 Francis Savina, *Histoire des Miao* (Paris: Société des Missions-Étrangères, 1924); Tran, *Văn Hóa Hmong*.

19 Tran, *Văn Hóa Hmong*; Dang, 'Về Việc Truyền Bá Đạo Vàng Chữ Hay Giả Tinh Lành'.

Protestant missionaries (mostly from the American Baptist churches and the Christian and Missionary Alliance) also explored potential converts in upland Indochina. While their work yielded some small success among the Hmong population in Laos,²⁰ there were no reported Protestant conversions of the Hmong in Upper Tonkin (Northern Vietnam).²¹ It was only in the early 1990s that the Vietnamese state authorities were suddenly alarmed by reports about thousands of Hmong who had abandoned their traditional beliefs to convert to Protestantism, called ‘the New Way’ (*Kev Cai Tshiab*) in Hmong or the ‘Good News Religion’ (*Đạo Tin Lành*) in Vietnamese.

This mass conversion to Protestantism among the Vietnamese Hmong was not due to the intense missionary efforts that have been reported elsewhere, however.²² Instead, conversion was initiated by accidental listening to an Evangelical radio station, the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC). In the late 1980s FEBC, a California-based radio ministry, began a proselytising programme in the Hmong language, produced by Hmong preachers in California, but aired from its broadcasting station in Manila. The programme was not meant for Hmong listeners in Vietnam, but for Laotian Hmong, who were hiding in the jungles of Laos or waiting in refugee camps in Thailand. After the Secret War in Laos, hundreds of thousands of Hmong became refugees in the West, the majority resettling in the United States.²³ Although these Hmong came mainly from Laos, their ethnic networks extended well beyond that country’s national boundaries. As part of an older diaspora, the Hmong in Vietnam share with their Laotian, Thai, and Burmese counterparts a history of southward migration from China and a memory of a historic homeland, both of which influence messianic tendencies.²⁴ There are interesting connections between overseas Hmong groups with those left behind in Southeast Asia; many of these twice migrants have close links to Christian broadcasting radio. FEBC makes use of the emotional repertoire of the Hmong migrant experience to win the sympathy and hearts of the Hmong in Asia. A number of Hmong in Vietnam have told me how convincing, heartening, and moving it is to listen to these programmes. ‘Never anywhere else can you find such empathy. They know all our sentiments, emotions, thoughts and it seems that they live here with us daily to witness our daily hardship and needs.’

It was by accident that the message about Vaj Tswv, the name that FEBC broadcasters consistently use to refer to God, was caught by short-wave receivers owned by Hmong in the highlands of Vietnam. At first, Hmong listeners primarily interpreted

20 See George Linwood Barney, ‘Christianity and innovation in Meo culture: A case study in missionization’ (M.A. diss., University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1957).

21 Tran, *Văn Hóa Hmong*; James F. Lewis, ‘The Evangelical religious movement among the Hmong of Northern Vietnam and the government response to it: 1989–2000’, *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 16, 2 (2002): 79–112.

22 Siu-woo Cheung, ‘Millenarianism, Christian movements, and ethnic change among the Miao in southwest China’, in *Cultural encounters on China’s ethnic frontiers*, ed. Steven Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), pp. 217–47; Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism and consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Webb Keane, *Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

23 In 2010, there were approximately 260,000 Hmong in the United States; <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf>.

24 Tapp, *Sovereignty and rebellion*.

as messianic the messages broadcast by FEBC, which skilfully employed an ‘indigenization of Christianity’²⁵ by weaving biblical stories into Hmong folklore. Identifying the Christian God with their mythical messiah Fuab Tais/Vaj Tswv prompted thousands of Vietnamese Hmong to join various millenarian movements. When Hmong broadcasters identified Vaj Tswv as the father of Jesus Christ and emphasised that believing in Vaj Tswv requires believing in Jesus Christ as well, thousands upon thousands of Vietnamese Hmong began the arduous journey to become Protestants.²⁶ Today, after two decades of massive growth, Protestantism is the claimed religion of roughly one-third of a million Hmong in Vietnam.

Conversion

In answer to my question about why he became a Christian, a former shaman in his 60s told me:

Twenty years ago, when I was still living in Bac Ha, my father passed away. At that time I could still do a ‘fresh funeral’ (*laig dab*) for him. I planned to do the ‘dried funeral’ (*nyuj dab*) for him a few years later once I had more money. But then we had three more children and the last one was sick all the time. Most of the chickens we raised were used to do *ua neeb* [shamanic healing ritual]. Once we even had to sacrifice a young buffalo when the spirit tortured my son by making him both hot and cold. It even took his soul away sometimes. Luckily the spirits did not ask for a white buffalo because — I remember — there was no white buffalo in the whole region. But my child died anyway. We lost everything, our son and all the money we saved for doing *nyuj dab* for my father. My uncles and brothers constantly asked me to be ready soon to perform the ceremony. So in 1990, when communal cadres told us that the soil in Phong Hai was much richer than in Bắc Hà, that we could grow more maize and rice, we could also join the state-owned tea farm and we could have a regular income in cash — opium was not allowed to be grown there anymore — we moved. But five years later I still could not do *nyuj dab* for my father because we did not have that much more maize to sell and no cash income because we could not speak Vietnamese well enough to work with Kinh people. We could raise barely enough pigs for family use let alone have spare ones to sell because the weather is much hotter here than up there in Bắc Hà. So not only did we get sick more often but so did our pigs. Around that time, I heard from Hmong radio [FEBC] that if I prayed to the Lord about our difficulties, he would protect us so that we would not have to do *nyuj dab* and still not suffer any punishment. In 1996, after some consideration, we signed the form that my wife’s friend gave us to register at the Protestant Church in Hanoi.²⁷

In this narrative, the shaman’s decision to convert to Christianity was not induced by a miraculous or tragic experience, but by the economic and spiritual distress that his

25 Lewis, ‘The Evangelical religious movement’; Charles Keyes, ‘Being Protestant Christian in Southeast Asian worlds’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27, 2 (1996): 280–92; Saleminck, ‘Christian conversion in Southeast Asian uplands’; Tran, *Văn Hóa Hmong*; Anthony Walker, *Merit and the millennium: Routine and crisis in the ritual lives of the Lahu people* (New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corp., 2003)

26 See further Tam T.T. Ngo, ‘The short-waved faith: Christian broadcastings and the transformation of the spiritual landscape of the Hmong in Northern Vietnam’, *Mediated piety: Technology and religion in contemporary Asia*, ed. K.G. Francis Lim (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

27 Interview, Phong Hai, 18 Jan. 2005.

family suffered at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The shaman's conversion to Christianity cannot be divorced from his membership of a poor and marginalised ethnic group. The end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s were the beginning of a difficult time for the majority of Hmong in Vietnam. Since the economic reforms began in 1986, many subsidised programmes in the mountainous regions were deregulated. From then on, the Hmong and other ethnic groups had to pay cash for necessities such as salt, sugar, medicines, at the price demanded by itinerant traders. Opium, which had been until then the main source of cash income for Hmong families, was soon banned. Shortly after that, the National Land Law implemented in 1993 imposed tighter conditions and stricter regulations on land use. In mountainous areas, the Law designated that each family could only claim usage of up to 10 hectares of forest land which, like all land in Vietnam, belongs to the state. In reality, there was hardly enough land for such large allocations: the Northern Highlands of Vietnam saw a dramatic population increase, partly thanks to higher birth rates but also due to a massive relocation of Kinh (the majority Vietnamese ethnic group) from crowded provinces in the Red River delta to the highlands. Making use of the Land Law to privatise and commoditise land use rights, many Kinh immigrants to the highlands used cash to obtain control of more land of a better quality. When all the land in the region technically had owners, the Hmong's traditional livelihood of shifting cultivation faced a dead end.

The implementation of the Land Law has also seen the intensification of forced sedentarisation, through a programme designed especially for the Hmong called *Hạ Sơn* ('bringing ethnic minorities, mainly the Hmong, down from the mountains').²⁸ The ideology underlining *Hạ Sơn* is that the traditional Hmong lifestyle based on shifting cultivation results in deforestation, and that living in the highlands results in their social and cultural isolation. The shaman and his family above are among tens of thousands of Hmong families who have either been forced or encouraged to move down from the mountains, a move which has affected their lives in several negative ways. First, there is the hardship during the transition from one mode of production to another, and adaptation to a new environment. The Hmong need time to clear their new fields and adapt to sedentary cultivation, and to the much smaller pieces of land that they are often assigned. Second, the programme also breaks up the traditional clan or kinship-based structure of Hmong villages: a *Hạ Sơn* village is often made up of at least three to four clans instead of one. *Hạ Sơn* has resulted in the geographic dispersal of clans, with a resulting loss of closeness and mutual support. One notable phenomenon is that the rate of conversion among the newly resettled communities is extremely high. In five *Hạ Sơn* villages that I surveyed, relocated families often chose to convert if their new neighbours were Christians despite the ongoing persecution of converts by the authorities. If they convert, they will be in conflict with relatives they have left behind who remain traditionalists. If they do not convert, they will face difficulties and be marginalised by their new neighbours.

28 Salemink, in 'Enclosing the highlands', describes a similar development in the Central Highlands. There the sedentarisation programme completely changed the demographic composition and negatively impacted ethnic relations, which indirectly facilitated the massive rise of Protestant conversions among the minorities.

Still, many Hmong in Hạ Sơn villages have decided to move back to their former villages or other places. Since 1997, an increasing number of Hmong have migrated spontaneously to Đắc Lắc and Kon Tum, in the Central Highlands. Given the complicated dynamics of Hmong conversions in the North and the ethnic unrest in the Central Highlands in 2001 and 2004, allegedly involving Protestantism,²⁹ such spontaneous migration has been strictly prohibited. It is ironic that migration to the Central Highlands has become a channel for Christian Hmong escaping the pressures and interventions of the Northern Highlands authorities. I was told by several officials that a number of key congregational leaders had escaped to the Central Highlands and crossed the border into Cambodia, and were later given refugee status in America. This information could not be verified, but what is important is that it created a rumour which was soon taken to be fact by some officials and, more importantly, also by some Hmong. That is, by going to the Central Highlands, one could cross the border into Cambodia and from there look for the Lord in the Philippines or America, in the language of the Christian Hmong — or become foreign reactionaries, in the language of government officials.

Socioeconomic dislocation was the direct cause of the spiritual distress which further attracted many Hmong people to Christianity. Because of his poverty, the shaman in the case described above could no longer afford the cost of conducting traditional ancestral and healing rituals even for his own sick child. Again his predicament is not unique among his peers. The financial demands of Hmong tradition include, for example, a high bride price and expensive weddings. Many of my informants confided that they converted to Christianity in order to be exempted from paying a high bride price. During my fieldwork, I observed an increasing number of young Hmong men who were considering conversion because they could not afford the bride price still asked by non-Christian parents, as well as the high cost of a traditional wedding, which often requires a lot of alcohol. Protestant Hmong do not drink.

Exemption from paying the bride price is but one of the perceived attractions of Christianity. Conversion also seems to promise an escape from the hierarchy based on seniority usually found in non-Christian Hmong communities. Younger Hmong are often the first to receive the gospel and be converted, but it is still not common for younger converts to be supported and followed in their new faith by more senior members of a community. But when an entire community does convert, younger converts can earn their community's respect because of their theoretical knowledge, linguistic skills (fluency in HRP and in Vietnamese), and socio-political skills needed to lead their church communities under state persecution. These skills are more often possessed by younger Hmong who have been to school and travelled. All the active church leaders in my fieldwork area, for example, are men in their 30s or 40s, while among the ordinary members of their church are men of significant seniority who would be leaders in the traditional social hierarchy.

Becoming Christian seems to be more attractive for women than for men as it can be a path to empowerment; women play a leading role in many cases of conversion. Many women explained to me that their lives would change significantly for the better if they, and ideally their husbands, were to become Christian. As a Christian, a

29 See Saleminck, 'Enclosing the highlands'.

Hmong woman could enjoy a Sunday free from labour. She would also not have to spend money to host all kinds of ceremonies which often involve lots of cooking and cleaning. If her husband is Christian, in theory, he would give up drinking alcohol. The Lord also prohibits men from beating women and from having two wives, so some Hmong women contemplate conversion as a form of protection against domestic violence and having to share their husbands with other women.

It is clear that the increased poverty and intensified marginality of Hmong communities directly and indirectly influence the decision to convert. Radical socio-economic dislocation has been cited as the cause of conversion in many cases of rapid Christianisation elsewhere.³⁰ As Pollard noted in 1904 economic despair in the aftermath of the suppression of the A Hmao rebellion encouraged this group to convert.³¹ Since Pollard, scholars have consistently pointed out that for the Hmong Christianity often seems to have carried with it something of a mass appeal, particularly in situations of severe economic distress. In his account of this process in several Hmong villages, Robert Cooper states that Christianity appealed to the poor and that the six families whose members converted to Christianity in the village of Khun Sa were the poorest in the community.³² The attraction of becoming Christian, according to Cooper, was not only about gaining the support and resources which missions and missionaries could provide. Conversion was also a means of escaping costly traditional ritual obligations. Cooper suggests, in line with the findings above, that the poor Hmong of Khun Sa were led to convert because it spared them from paying the bride price and having to provide animals for sacrifice in traditional ceremonies.³³ Similarly, based on research on the Hmong in Thailand in the 1980s, Nicolas Tapp raised the question of the connection between economic deprivation and the enthusiasm for Christianity.³⁴ He describes the major reason for conversion as being relieved of the economic burdens of tradition. The same explanations are also offered in scholarly analyses of the conversion of Hmong in the United States and Canada.³⁵

While economic pragmatism, spiritual distress, and aspirations for empowerment provide the cause and context for the Hmong converts' change of religion, it is their agency that carries them through the arduous process of becoming Protestant, during which they have to endure the sometimes unbearable consequences of their choice. On the one hand, the shaman above saw his family's economic betterment as the reward for becoming Protestants. On the other hand, although he was not punished by the ancestors for not performing the *nyuj dab* for his father, the punishment from his living relatives was clear. His uncles and their children, as well as four of his own brothers, officially cut off their relationship with him. Although he stood by his

30 Cheung, 'Millenarianism, Christian movements, and ethnic change'; Joel Robbins, *Becoming sinners: Christianity and moral torment in a Papua New Guinea society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

31 Pollard, *The story of the Miao and Tight corners in China*.

32 Cooper, *Resource scarcity and the Hmong response*, pp. 82, 169, 179.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

34 Tapp, *Sovereignty and rebellion*.

35 Vayong Moua, 'Hmong Christianity: Conversion, consequence and conflict', 1995, <http://www.drug-war.com/akhahmong.shtm> (last accessed 11 Feb 2015); Daphne Winland, 'Christianity and community: Conversion and adaptation among Hmong refugee women', *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 19, 1 (1994): 21–41.

decision, the shaman expressed to me on numerous occasions that the joy of being redeemed by Christ was not and is still not able to compensate for his sorrow over the family breakup.

Similarly, while Protestantism promises a better position for women compared to that offered by traditional Hmong religion, not all conversions initiated by women are destined to be successful. In one of my host families, the mother was the first person in the household who heard about Protestantism and converted in the early 1990s with the help of her sister in the neighbouring commune. Soon after she successfully guided her grown up children to follow her new belief. Her husband was at first not convinced about this 'strange behaviour', but changed his mind when their oldest son met a Protestant girl whom he really wanted to marry. The girl's parents were willing to marry her off to the son for a small bride price³⁶ on the condition that the father would also become Christian. The bride would also be given a sizeable dowry by her parents. Under pressure to secure their son's prospects and given his wife's ceaseless persuasion, my host converted a week before the wedding. A few years later, however, he reverted to his old religion. There were various reasons for this reconversion. It had turned out to be difficult for him to learn the Hmong script in which the Bible and other religious materials are written. Therefore he could not really acquire the Christian message. Besides, since his wife was more knowledgeable about Christian doctrine and practice, she could win the obedience of their children more than he could. Moreover, he realised that his non-Christian kinsmen now hesitated to come to his house. Lastly, the most important reason for his reconversion was that in 1997 he was asked to join the local 'Fatherland Front' (*Ủy ban mặt trận tổ quốc xã*), one of whose tasks was and still is to propagate against conversion. He is quite happy with the new position except that his new colleagues constantly criticise his family's Christianity.

Latin American studies of conversion assert that Protestantism, especially Pentecostalism, provides its followers attractive ecstasy in the domain of private life and discipline as well as social mobility through enhanced educational opportunities.³⁷ Protestantism's appeal lies precisely in the promise of economic betterment combined with the re-creation of a kin-like voluntary community, which, because of its apolitical stance, creates a 'free cultural space' for these groups. David Martin identifies the social groups in Latin America that are most liable to Pentecostalism's 'peaceable cultural transformation' as the 'poor and marginalised' groups consisting of independent producers, rural-to-urban migrants and minority groups — often tribal groups in remote areas — for whom evangelical Christianity is an opening to the often dangerous wide world and the broader national community.³⁸

Such a positive assessment is not shared by Charles Keyes in his overview of Protestantism in Southeast Asia.³⁹ Conversion, in his view, does not create 'free

36 This was only VND1,600,000 (about US\$150 at the time) and 100 kg of pork. This is much less than the standard bride price of at least VND5 million, excluding some silver coins, pork, and one buffalo.

37 Paul Freston, 'Pentecostalism in Latin America: Characteristics and controversies', *Social Compass* 45, 3 (1998): 335–58; David Martin, *Tongues of fire: The explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

38 Martin, *Tongues of fire*, pp. 202–11.

39 Keyes, 'Being Protestant Christian in Southeast Asian worlds': 288.

space', but is more a response to either personal or collective crises, which in Keyes's view, are connected to prevailing crises of political and religious authority and legitimacy.⁴⁰ He detects crises at multiple levels, in different contexts, and for different groups. These complex and multiple crises require solutions, not just at the instrumental (social and economic) levels, but also at a deeper existential level. One example of such a crisis concerns tribal groups whose 'practice of localized animistic religions is markedly disjunctive with the world in which they now live'.⁴¹ Several scholars share Keyes's view in their analyses of Southeast Asian peoples who convert once they realise that their old beliefs no longer enable them to navigate the new world that they have come to live in.⁴² They opt then for a new belief system, which they perceive to be better suited to their current circumstances. Protestant conversion, then, becomes a form of 'modernisation' through an alliance with a major world religion that is different from the dominant religion of the nation-state and thus allows for ethnic differentiation without inferiority.⁴³

For the Hmong in Vietnam, the attraction of a Christian modernity promised by Protestantism is hard to miss. The way the Evangelical message was electronically delivered and attractively packaged has something to do with Hmong acceptance of it. The FEBC programme over the years has been carefully tailored to Hmong interests, needs, and psychology. Until 1994, when the Vietnamese government launched its first Hmong-language programme, the only radio broadcast in the medium was transmitted by FEBC. Even after the government station began competing for Hmong listeners, FEBC's strong signal, lively music, and easy-listening format continued to appeal to the Hmong. Portions of letters written to FEBC are often read aloud, thereby creating an empathetic bond with the listeners and their difficulties. The husband-and-wife Hmong broadcasting team addresses practical issues such as abortion, marital difficulties, and believers' conflicts with non-believers. Broadcasters pray by name for those whose letters express ill health or other practical needs.⁴⁴ Government radio programmes, by comparison, are thought by many to be boring and unappealing.

However, acts of conversion cannot be simply equated to opening up for modernisation.⁴⁵ Protestantism is a mixed blessing, since it brings not only modern attitudes but also a new set of demands that can confuse and burden the new converts. At the same time, modern conditions can help to propagate traditional religions, which not only continue to thrive and expand globally but to innovate. Laurel Kendall has

40 *Asian visions of authority: Religion and the modern states of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles Keyes, Laurel Kendall and Helen Hardacre (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

41 Keyes, 'Being Protestant Christian in Southeast Asian worlds': 288.

42 Tapp, *Sovereignty and rebellion*; Keane, *Christian moderns*; Lorraine V. Aragon, *Fields of the Lord: Animism, Christian minorities and state development in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000); Kammerer, 'Customs and Christian conversion among Akha highlanders'; Kammerer, 'Discarding the basket'.

43 Salemink, 'Enclosing the highlands'.

44 A border police cadre admitted, 'Foreign radio has studied the Hmong psyche very thoroughly. They understand the Hmong and that's why their programmes are so eagerly received. Plus almost every Hmong household has a radio receiver now. When Hmong cadres come along, the household immediately switches to another station so we can never catch them.'

45 Peter van der Veer, 'Afterword: Global conversions', in *Mixed messages: Materiality, textuality, missions*, ed. Jamie S. Scott and Gareth Griffiths (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 221–32.

shown how the global financial crisis actually gave new opportunities for shamanism to flourish in Christian Korea.⁴⁶ While Hmong evangelists penetrate the heartland of Hmong society in Asia, Hmong shamans and ritual specialists from China, Laos, Thailand, and even recently from Nghe An province in Vietnam are being flown all over the world to provide services to the diaspora.⁴⁷ To some extent, perhaps thanks to the fact that they dwell in the new context of Christianity, many traditional religious practices are today being redefined and restructured and are gaining new strength to rebound onto the global religious stage. For example, Christian missionary expansion on Sumba in eastern Indonesia resulted in spirit worship being redefined by its practitioners as ‘religion, moving from adherence to ritual practice to conversion to a rational reflective belief’, while Buddhist revival in the former Soviet Buryatia has brought Buryatian shamans together to promote their local *Tengeri* — connoting both sky and the highest god in the shamanic pantheon in Buryatia — in a multinational space.⁴⁸

To sum up, economic and spiritual distress, as well as the perceived advantages (literacy, gender equality, and membership in the global Christian community), constitute the context in which many Hmong are led to believe that conversion to Christianity is a way to speed up their pursuit of a better life, and of modernity. Protestantism or the New Way has become the most powerful vehicle for transforming Hmong life, collectively, and in very significant ways, individually.

Conflicts and dilemmas

As sweeping as its expansion has been, however, Protestantism has only been able to claim a third of the Hmong population. Some 700,000 Hmong still see themselves as ‘traditional’ and many also strongly oppose Protestantism. Their resistance is expressed verbally or physically, as in the incident in Windy Plateau. Most non-Christian Hmong perceive conversion as an act of betrayal or apostasy. First, they denounce the converts’ repudiation of ancestral worship and spirit offerings. This behaviour is thought to be morally wrong as well as leading to serious consequences not only for the converts themselves but also for the rest of the community in the form of acts of vengeance and punishment from ancestors and spirits. When I met with unconverted Hmong, I constantly heard their criticisms of the strange and alienated behaviour of their polluted cousins and neighbours who sang their wishes to Jesus Christ. A Hmong man said to me:

46 Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean popular religion in motion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009).

47 I was told of a Hmong shaman association based in Sacramento, California, whose task is to identify powerful Hmong shamans and herbalists around the world. When possible, the association will facilitate the tours of shamans from Asia in the United States or Australia to conduct rituals for Hmong communities there. When a shaman cannot travel abroad, the association will help Hmong patients from the diaspora go to Asia and find the shaman. Even the son of a prominent Hmong scholar in Minnesota travelled all the way to a remote village in Guizhou to obtain both spiritual and herbal treatment from a shaman there.

48 Janet Hoskins, ‘Entering the bitter house: Spirit worship and conversion in West Sumba’, in *Indonesian religions in transition*, ed. R.S. Kipp and S. Rodgers (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), pp. 136–60; Justine Buck Quijada, ‘Opening the roads: History and religion in Post-Soviet Buryatia’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2009).

I am so worried for those who worship ‘Western ghosts’ (*dab fabkis*). They must be out of their minds to be able to burn their ancestral altars. They are insulting the people who gave birth to them. I ask you, who are closer to you, your parents or people whom you’ve never met. Who is more important? Your parents, right? So your parents’ spirit must be closer to you and therefore can protect you better than the spirit of Western people who live so far away.

A 70-year-old man whose sons converted ten years ago said:

I often cannot sleep because I am scared. Many times when I have dreamt about my parents and grandparents who constantly confront me [and ask me] if I die who will worship them? I am also worried for myself. If I die, my sons will not do *nyuj dab* [cow sacrifice ritual] for me and I will not be able to enter the village of ancestors. I will have to wander without knowing where to go.

Conversion is seen as damaging the solidarity of the group and destroying Hmong culture and identity. Similar to Jan Ovesen’s observations of Laotian Christian Hmong, the non-Christian majority feels that the most serious issue is the refusal of Christian converts to participate in common ritual obligations towards relatives, particularly in connection with funerals.⁴⁹ The Hmong believe that it is very important to provide for deceased relatives to ensure their safe passage to and reception in *the village of the ancestors*, for which the sacrifice of a number of farm animals is necessary. Such animal sacrifice is not tolerated by Christians, which means that many elders whose sons have converted or whose daughters have married Christians are both resentful and more than a little concerned about their posthumous fate. The practice of animal sacrifice is deprecated by Christians as not just sinful but also irrational and wasteful. Moreover, the Christians refuse to participate in ritual ceremonies because they do not want to risk having to eat sacrificial meat and food, which they are prohibited from doing.

Most of the converts tend to make a radical break from their pre-Protestant life; this has an unintended consequence of separation from the groups to which they once belonged. One young non-Christian Hmong told me that he was willing to be my guide and interpreter in his home village but not in the neighbouring one. This was not because of the inconvenience of distance — the two villages are separated from each other by a 20-metre wide road yet belong to two different administrative units — but because of mutual antagonism: ‘I can’t even come close to these guys — the Christian Hmong — not to mention talk to them. They don’t want to talk to us. If they talk, they call us “the long tails” (*bõn dài đũa*).’ This is a term of mockery developed since Protestantism was introduced to the Hmong. The Protestant Hmong ridicule the non-Christian Hmong for still dragging behind them the long tail of traditional burdens. I observed in several communes young Hmong Protestants who refuse to pursue or marry a non-Protestant partner. Some explained that this was because ‘they [the non-Christian Hmong villager] laughed at us and ridiculed us as “Hmong with wings”. They often provoked us by shouting to their

49 Jan Ovesen, ‘A minority enters the nation state: A case study of a Hmong community in Vientiane province, Laos’ (Uppsala: Uppsala Research Reports in Cultural Anthropology, No. 14, 1995).

friends in our presence “Look! Look! They are flying!” or ‘Why don’t you stay home and eat your Lord’s words instead of coming here to work in the field?’ The reference to ‘wings’ and ‘flying’ is a way to shame the converts because when they first listened to FEBC’s programme, many of them had mistakenly interpreted the Christian message as being about the coming of the Hmong King. Practising to fly was one of their most extreme preparations for the return of the King.

The disapproval of the converts is partly the result of political pressure. The messianic character of Hmong Christianity not only causes anxiety within the Hmong community but also intensifies external political pressure upon both the converted and unconverted Hmong. In many cases, condemnation only became significant when the unconverted were made responsible for the behaviour of their converted family members or kinsmen. The use of forced public confessions, the commune head told me, was taught to him and other local officials at a number of government meetings on how to prevent conversions in their community. More than 90 percent of the Windy Plateau residents are Hmong. With a very small number of Christians until 2006, many communes in Windy Plateau were praised as ‘model communes’ in the Lào Cai government’s campaigns against conversion. It is unclear which level of the authorities was responsible for detailing how to carry out such public confessions, especially the more violent method. But it is clear that what happened in Windy Plateau was a disturbing enactment of the propaganda that the central government had published and distributed to local administrations (Figure 1).

Neither the converts nor the non-converts intend to cause social conflict and division, however. Continuing a strong tradition of ethnic solidarity, the converts believe that Christianity is the answer to the Hmong’s current problems and that conversion will help them gain a powerful spiritual resource, one which will enhance and strengthen the unity of their community. The unconverted Hmong, however, do not share this view even if they share the wish for a strong and unified people. Their commitment to traditional beliefs and practices — not to mention the government discrimination against the converts — makes it difficult for them to associate practically and spiritually with the Protestant members of their community.

Yet, a complete break between the converts and the non-converts is impossible, as most Hmong still need to rely on clan-based relationships for social and economic survival. Although solidarity can in general be expected from fellow clansmen, substantial assistance in economic and social matters requires the presence of blood relations. The Hmong primarily turn to close relatives for money, practical assistance, and consolation in times of need. A man wishing to relocate his household will almost invariably have relatives in the new area who should be prepared to sponsor his entry by giving or loaning him land, rice or money and helping him to build a house. The importance of relatives also applies to spiritual matters. Ovesen observes that ‘[a] Hmong can only be really happy when he is together with his relatives, since such close contacts represent emotional assurance, social support, spiritual comfort as well as the greatest possible economic security.’⁵⁰

This explains why conversion creates a dilemma for the entire Hmong community. For those who choose not to become Christian, the conversion of relatives and

50 Ovesen, ‘A minority enters the nation state’, pp. 22–3.



Figure 1. Propaganda. The caption on the left reads: ‘Don’t listen to bad elements, one must know to preserve national culture.’ On the right, it reads: ‘Do not follow a strange religion, say no to illegal proselytising.’

Reproduced with permission from: *Cục Văn Hóa Thông Tin Cơ Sở* [Ministry Department of Grassroots Level Culture and Information], *Đừng Theo Kẻ Xấu* [Don’t follow bad elements], (Hanoi: National Cultural Publishing House, 2004), pp. 8; 12.

acquaintances often signals the need for broad changes in Hmong social and cultural life — even if Christianity itself is not seen as the solution. These conflicts with non-Christian Hmong, who are sometimes one’s parent or one’s spouse, gives rise to tensions which have no foreseeable end. For the converts, the divisions and conflicts with their unconverted kin are the most painful consequences of the process.

Still, many unconverted Hmong also understand the readiness of others to accept the Christian faith as connected to various state campaigns. Even more than internal migration, greater changes in traditional Hmong culture have resulted from campaigns against ‘superstitious’ practices. Tran, for example, tells us that from the 1960s to 1990, the government forbade any festivals or ceremonies and restricted the Hmong of Lào Cai to celebrating the New Year for only a few days rather than the traditional month, officially to avoid wastage.⁵¹ Resistance to such measures was often severely punished. Authority over the lives of ethnic minorities has become increasingly ‘extra-local’ as decisions about economic, agricultural, social, and cultural matters have been taken over by Vietnamese government programmes and cadres.⁵²

51 Tran, *Văn Hóa Hmong*, pp. 174–8.

52 Trong Cuc Le and Terry Rambo, *Bright peaks, dark valleys: A comparative analysis of environmental*

These policies led the Hmong to a further loss of control over their religious life. For years they were forced to see their traditions as 'superstitious' and outlawed. When part of the Hmong community opted to become Protestants, new policies ironically demanded that they partially return to ancient traditions previously forbidden, as a way to deny their choice of a new faith. Loss of autonomy in these matters has left many Hmong frustrated and resentful. As one of my unconverted Hmong hosts once complained:

They [government officials] don't want us to worship Jesus Christ or to *uas neeb* [conduct shamanic rituals]. They ask us to organise communal festivals, but when we did, they complained that we did it wrongly. For each festival, they sent us their researchers who told us to do this and to do that. Lately, I attended a meeting in the district cultural office about what to do to bring our Hmong people away from Christianity. I asked them, since all gods/spirits are forbidden, can we Hmong people worship Uncle Ho, for example? Next day, our commune officers came and warned me not to attempt mocking the national leader. I did not mean to mock anyone when I proposed to them to let us worship Uncle Ho.

Conclusion

This essay discusses some of the complexities presented by conversion to Protestantism for the Hmong community in Vietnam. The ongoing marginalisation of the Hmong provides a context for understanding the converts' desire to seek in Christianity a way out of their difficulties. Conversion for those who choose it represents a passage to a new landscape of modernity.⁵³ Hmong conversion is intrinsically connected to the ongoing globalisation of Christianity, a movement which involves the conversion of tribal and non-state peoples to more expansively organised 'world' religions.⁵⁴ Throughout my encounters with the Hmong in Vietnam, I have realised that they are increasingly aware of the changing world as well as of their changing place in that world. Not only are they aware of their own marginality, they also see the Hmong diaspora in the West as successful members of a global Hmong community. Converting to Christianity has come to be seen as a way to become members of this greater transnational community.

Yet, despite the huge number of converts, at least two-thirds of the Hmong population remains unconverted and many are quite critical of Christianity. The continued co-location of Christian and non-Christian Hmong in many areas has had a direct impact on the establishment of a Protestant Hmong community. Although more than two decades after the first big wave of conversion, the majority of Hmong converts are determined to remain Christian, some continue to slide back, lapsing into millenarianism or reconvertng altogether. One of the consequences of reconversion,

and social conditions and development trends in five communities in Vietnam's northern mountain region (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2001).

53 Peter van der Veer, 'Introduction', in *Conversion to modernities: The globalization of Christianity*, ed. Peter van der Veer (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1–21.

54 Robert Heffner, 'Introduction: World building and the rationality of conversion', in *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and anthropological perspectives on a great transformation*, ed. Robert Hefner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 3–44.

as I show elsewhere,⁵⁵ is the revitalisation of Hmong tradition. At the same time, Christianity and the global connectivity provided by modern technology and media expose the Hmong in Vietnam to millenarianism, as in the case of a recent uprising.⁵⁶ Such episodes often draw unfavourable attention from the state and the Kinh majority; this can hinder the earnest efforts of other Christian Hmong to establish their faith.

To sum up, in the process of establishing their church and new community, the Hmong converts in Vietnam have been trying to connect to the rest of world. These attempts, however, have brought the Hmong into deeper conflict both with the Vietnamese state and amongst themselves. Thus, while becoming Protestant does provide a possible solution to their marginality, it does not simply end it. On the contrary, being a Hmong convert has meant being mistrusted by both the state and their fellow Hmong who remain traditionalists.

55 Ngo, 'The New Way'.

56 *Ibid.*, chap. 4.