Collision or Cohesion? Hmong Shamanism and Ontological Holism in France

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Background

The Hmong are an ethnic group from Southeast Asia who’ve lived as forced migrants and political refugees for the past several hundred years. Current U.S. literature has attributed Hmong difficulties adapting to Western culture, specifically health care from shamanic practices. They claim that traditional and western healing practices are incompatible. (Franzen-Castle & Smith 2013, Fadiman 1997). While living in a small town in central France, we conducted an ethnographic study observing Hmong refugees and their interactions and beliefs between traditional healing practices and Western medicine to explore this claim.

Methodology

We collected our data during a period of three months living in a densely populated Hmong community in France. We each lived with a shaman and his family and participated heavily in community and cultural events. Ethnographic data collection, including participant observation, resulted in:

- 55 hours of semi-structured and informal interviews with Hmong community members and ritual experts
- 400 pages of ethnographic field notes, detailing observations of daily life, rituals, and interviews
- 5 hours of video recordings of rituals and cultural teaching

Conclusion

“You must take medicine first. You must be somewhat well, then you can go see a shaman and he can see why you’re sick.”

- VamMeej Thoj, Hmong shaman and healer