

# Women and Religion: "Mennonite Hmong"

by Daphne Abergel

The Hmong of Laos, a traditionally animist and preliterate people, speak a Sino-Tibetan language and are culturally close to the Chinese. Due to their strategic location and scouting and fighting skills, the Hmong were singled out during the war in Indochina to collaborate with the CIA as front line guerrillas. The eventual assumption of power in 1975 in Laos of communist-backed Pathet Lao forces, resulted in increasing hardships and danger for those Hmong who had complied with the U.S. Army Special Forces. By 1980, more than 110,000 Hmong were forced to flee Thailand. Most Hmong from Thai refugee camps resettled in the U.S., France, Australia and Canada. The Mennonite Central Committee's (MCC) policy to aid sponsor cases like the preliterate and non-industrial Hmong resulted in a proportionately high influx of Hmong to Ontario; hence Kitchener-Waterloo (K-W) has been dubbed the "Hmong Capital" of Canada by immigration officials.

Of the fifteen to twenty Hmong families that initially resettled in Kitchener-Waterloo in 1979, only five or six were baptized Christians before their arrival. Over the last seven years in Canada there has been a steady increase in the numbers of Hmong converting to Christianity, specifically the Mennonite faith. The Hmong Christian Church (Mennonite), established under the auspices of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Québec in 1984, has proven to be an important arena for the negotiation of Hmong beliefs, values and norms, specifically those relating to male-female relationships.

Of the estimated sixty-five Hmong families now living in the Waterloo region, approximately one half attend the Hmong Christian Church, a substantial increase from six years ago. The Hmong church has adopted an "open door" policy for those Hmong who are intimidated by rigid institutional rules or structures. Among older Hmong in particular, the church serves more as a facility for social interaction with other Hmong than as a source of spiritual help. The church

leadership has struggled over the last few years to get people involved. Recently Hmong women began to be very active in the church. Although the young Hmong pastor tried to draw women into the church by offering Hmong literacy classes to women and organizing workshops on nutrition and hygiene, the women themselves have taken the initiative by contributing their services to the congregation.

When Hmong women first arrived, they were unresponsive to volunteer efforts. They were also reluctant to get involved in government and community-sponsored language and job-placement programmes. When asked why they resisted attempts to resettle and integrate them into their new community, they responded that they felt uncomfortable participating in these programmes with Hmong men. Hmong women were in these and other cases abiding by traditional norms governing male/female roles. For example, the traditional custom of arranged marriages between young teenagers continued until Mennonite church officials intervened and counselled Hmong on acceptable Christian and Canadian legal practices concerning marriage.

The involvement of women in the workforce has brought about significant changes to the traditional notion of the family as an economic unit, particularly in those cases in which women are the sole source of family income. Virtually all Hmong women are wage earners working on assembly lines in local factories. Women now exercise greater freedom in choosing marriage partners and are marrying later.

Although these changes to some extent parallel those of the much larger Hmong communities in the U.S., there are major differences between Canadian Hmong and their American counterparts. In American cities such as Denver, Minneapolis and Orange County, segmentary kinship based on corporate sub-lineages at the clan and lineage levels is common. Relationships based on common descent link many Hmong families within the wider Hmong

clan-based system in the U.S., providing them with a wide range of networks and support structures. By contrast, K-W Hmong are a small and highly differentiated community consisting of people from all parts of Laos, most of whom are not related to others in the area. Thus what one finds in K-W is a relatively small community of Hmong, internally differentiated along geographical, ethnic, linguistic, religious and other lines. It is clear then that a significant number of Hmong attend church out of a desire for community and not doctrine. The Hmong Christian Church thus provides an opportunity for regular social interaction which would otherwise be severely curtailed. However, the church provides additional incentives for women in particular. The Women's Fellowship Committee is available as a forum in which women can share their ideas and concerns. Church attendance not only gives women the chance to socialize but also share information and make use of educational facilities and other services offered by the church. Most importantly, it provides an opportunity to build important support networks.

Although it may be a while before these women gain the confidence to face new challenges, the congregation will continue to provide them with a non-threatening environment in which they can continue to negotiate their identities as Hmong women in Canadian society.

*Daphne Abergel is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at York University working on "Mennonites" in Kitchener-Waterloo.*

## A Note on Lowland Lao Women

In Toronto, Lao women actively support the establishment of a Lao Buddhist Temple. Refugee groups such as the Lao have lost their own religious institutions at the very time they face the most severe personal stress and alienation. Although women cannot be ordained as monks, they actively participate in ritual events and provide both financial and food resources to the temple. Women outnumber men at services, and it is women's donations of food and money that make it possible for the Lao to maintain their ritual traditions in Toronto.