

January 19, 2021

Dear readers,

First, happy new year! I'm thankful that you've chosen to begin 2021 by taking the time to read this chapter.

Before you read the chapter, I should mention a few details. First, to help you put this chapter in the context of the broader book manuscript, I've included an overview of the book project and a table of contents. Second, due to the length of this chapter, I've omitted a few sections, which I noted in the text.

I'm grateful for any and all advice you can offer on how to improve this chapter. I'm particularly interested in getting your feedback on the following questions:

- Is it coherent? This chapter is the Frankenstein chapter of the book project: an unholy combination of pieces that had once appeared in other sections of the book and are now located here, upon the request of one reader to make the book more chronological. I did my best to join a couple arguments and ideas together and smooth the seams, but the chapter is still something of a monster. Does it hold together? Or should it be split into two chapters?
- Is it interesting? At one point, a reader told me that she found the opening chapters of my book "boring." I'm personally quite fascinated by the details of church-sponsored pig-raising projects in refugee camps, although I acknowledge that this topic might not have universal appeal. If this chapter is boring, please let me know how I can make it livelier.
- Is it persuasive? Do I marshal enough evidence and express my ideas with enough clarity that you buy my argument?
- Is it enough? Am I missing anything? What broader contexts should I illuminate, if any?
- Is it too much? Like any historian who enjoys research, I fall in love with every treasure I discover in the archive. As a result, I tend to be indulgent in my description and detail. Which darlings should I kill? Is a massacre of darlings in order?

Thank you again for all of your help. I look forward to our conversation.

With gratitude,

Melissa

Follow the New Way: American Refugee Resettlement Policy and Hmong Religious Change

Book Overview

The past four decades has witnessed significant religious changes in Hmong American communities. About 80% of Hmong refugees identified as ancestor worshipers and animists when they first arrived in the U.S., but according to some estimates, Christians now account for 70% of the Hmong population. How did this religious change happen, and what did it mean for Hmong people to convert to Christianity and follow “the new way”? To investigate these questions, I focus on American refugee resettlement policies, which were administered through religious institutions and which had a significant impact on the religious beliefs, practices, institutions, and identities of Hmong refugees.

I argue that American refugee resettlement policies changed Hmong religious life in two main ways. For one, American resettlement policies disrupted the practice of traditional Hmong beliefs and practices. American resettlement policies unintentionally deprived Hmong people of the human and material resources necessary for their traditional rituals. Because American refugee policies prioritized younger Hmong refugees for admission, Hmong refugees were resettled in the United States without the elders who were the traditional ritual experts but who were left behind in refugee camps in Asia. Moreover, because American refugee policies geographically dispersed refugees across the country, Hmong refugees were separated from their kin, who were needed to conduct ceremonies.

At the same time, the administrative arrangements of refugee assistance facilitated the decision by many Hmong refugees to adopt Christianity. At the federal, state, and local levels, governments relied heavily on religious agencies and churches to provide essential resettlement services. This public-private, church-state system meant that Christian voluntary agencies and congregations were often the first point of contact for Hmong refugees looking for food, jobs, and housing. Because governments delegated much of the work of resettlement to Christian organizations, the refugee resettlement program produced close and dependent relationships between Christian resettlement workers and non-Christian Hmong refugees. The resettlement program thus helped to introduce new religious alternatives to Hmong refugees at the same time that they rendered traditional religious options unviable.

Refugee resettlement set these religious changes in motion despite efforts by governments and voluntary agencies to make refugee assistance a religiously neutral enterprise. The people who envisioned and administered the resettlement program publicly championed ideals of pluralism and celebrated their commitment to serving refugees across boundaries of creed and culture. The pluralist intentions on the part of the agencies and individuals who worked with refugees appear to have been sincere. However, the ramifications of resettlement policies tell a different, more complicated story, and the religious changes experienced by Hmong refugees exposed the difficulty of putting ideals of religious pluralism into practice. Even if governments and churches committed to respecting religious differences and protecting religious freedoms, the ambiguous definition of “religion” made these goals elusive. Uncertainty about what constituted religious activity in Christian resettlement work meant that religion was difficult to delimit and control. At the same time, uncertainty about whether Hmong beliefs and practices constituted a rightful religion made Hmong traditions difficult to accommodate and protect.

Changes in Hmong religious life reveal not only the impact of American refugee resettlement policies, but also the religious agency and innovation of Hmong people, who were highly responsive to changes in circumstances and often willing to adopt new practices or adjust old ways in order to ensure their spiritual security. While government policies helped introduce Hmong people to Christianity, Hmong people adopted Christianity on their own terms, and “conversion” was not a simple bimodal process. Many Hmong people continued to follow traditional Hmong rituals at the same time that they practiced Christianity, or they switched back and forth between the two throughout their lifetime. Significantly, the religious logic behind Hmong people’s decision to become Christian reveals the endurance of their traditional cosmology and religious framework: Christianity, they believed, offered access to rituals and religious entities that facilitated harmonious relations with the spirit world. Put another way, conversion to Christianity was an additive process that allowed Hmong people to acquire new ways of managing old spiritual problems.

As Hmong refugees adapted to life in the United States, so, too, did they adapt their Hmong traditions to an American setting. Over time, they transformed Hmong ways—their beliefs, practices, institutional forms, and even the language used to describe it—into a Hmong American religion that aligned with American laws and customs. Throughout this process, Hmong people have been strategic in their efforts to both claim and disclaim religion, and at times, they have categorized their traditions as religion, while other times as culture, and sometimes as both. Using the ambiguous status of their native beliefs and practices to their advantage, Hmong people have found creative ways to preserve their traditions and to ensure accommodation and respect.

Based on both archival research and multi-lingual oral history interviews, this book connects multiple subfields—immigration history, religious history, political history, and Asian American history—and makes several interventions. First, it explores the history and significance of religious organizations doing public work in the United States. Second, this book offers one of the first investigations into the religious repercussions of this entanglement of church and state, and in particular, the consequences that it brought for religious minorities. Third, this book is the first historical study of Hmong American animism and is among the first investigations into how Asian ethnic groups addressed problems of incommensurability and illegibility by preserving, transforming, and translating indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices as “religion” in the United States. Finally, this book is among the first histories of refugee resettlement narrated from multiple geographic, social, and institutional sites and one of the few studies to pair a history of national resettlement policy with a close study of its local impact on Hmong individuals, families, and communities.

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