Tools of Perpetuation and Empowerment: “The Influences of Dab Neeg and Paj Ntaub on the Construction of Identity and Gender Roles among Hmong/Hmong American women”

By:
Veronica Pajtawg Vang

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for graduating with General Honors from the Department of Ethnic Studies

Thesis Advisor:
Elisa Facio, Department of Ethnic Studies

Committee Members:
Bianca Williams, Department of Ethnic Studies
Daryl Maeda, Department of Ethnic Studies
Glenda Russell, Counseling and Psychological Services

University of Colorado at Boulder
MAY 2013
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................1

Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................3

Chapter 1: Introduction .............................................................................................................4
  History of Dab Neeg and Paj Ntaub
  Thesis Description and Goals

Chapter 2: Literature Review ...................................................................................................12
  Paj Ntaub and Gender Performance
  The Vietnam War: Impact on Paj Ntaub and Gender Performance
  Contemporary Story Cloths and Generational Interpretations
  Hmong Diaspora and Women’s Identities

Chapter 3: Methodology ...........................................................................................................20
  Participants
  Questions Asked and Why

Chapter 4: Data Analysis .........................................................................................................28
  Dab Neeg, Identity, and Gender Performance
  Paj Ntaub, Identity and Gender Performance
  Western Cultures Influences and Education

Chapter 5: Conclusion ..............................................................................................................36

Appendix ....................................................................................................................................44

Bibliography ..............................................................................................................................48
ABSTRACT

*Dab neeg* (oral storytelling of Hmong folktales, myths, tales and legends) and *paj ntaub* (traditional Hmong embroidery) are cultural practices within Hmong culture. Hmong people have been practicing these customs for many centuries as means to continue cultural identity and heritage. Expose to these cultural practices at a young age, *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* impact gender identity and roles differently between Hmong men and women.

This qualitative project examines how *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* shapes and influences Hmong women's identities and gender roles within my family. I conducted in-depth interviews with ten women in my family. Thus, I argue that though *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* are cultural practices that perpetuate cultural identity, value, beliefs and history, they are also tools for 'policing' and reinforcing women's identity and gender roles reflecting the expectations associated with the "ideal" Hmong woman. The "ideal" Hmong woman is the 'good' Hmong daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and eventually mother. However, with access to education and influences from US-western culture, some Hmong women have constructed critical lenses that are contesting this notion. Consequently, subsequent formations of hybrid identities have provided women another space to navigate values and beliefs from both the US-western and Hmong cultures.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to give deep gratitude to the Department of Ethnic Studies in providing me a “home away from the home,” a community and allowing me to grow mentally, spiritually, emotionally and physically into a more critical and conscious woman. I’m grateful to the friendships and relationships I have made through this department. Some of my best moments at the University of Colorado at Boulder have been in spaces and places where professors and students engaged in critical and theoretical discussions.

Ua tsaug (thank you) Dr. Elisa Facio for sitting on this project as my thesis advisor and guiding me in this personal research that is so dear to me. You’ve helped me grow tremendously as a student and as a researcher in doing justice within Hmong community. I wouldn’t have finished this project if it weren’t for your constant mentoring and advice. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet and work with me. I will forever cherish our dinner meetings and talks.

I would also like to thank Dr. Bianca Williams, Dr. Daryl Maeda and Glenda Russell for sitting in as my committee advisors. Your assistances and perspectives expanded my thinking on this project to include other critical concepts. Thank you for your patience in working with me.

I also want to thank Chueyee Lor. Thank you for listening to me and supporting me throughout this process. You constantly stood next to me from the beginning to the end of this project.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the women who participated in this study and shared with me their stories, narratives and experiences on their identities and gender performances. I can’t express how grateful I am to be related and have gotten to know each one of you better through this project. This project could not have been done if it weren’t for your help and encouragement. Thank you so much!

Veronica “Nica” Vang
INTRODUCTION

During bright, sunny days, my mother places a couple of kuwv teem-small wooden chairs with plastic designed textiles on the surfaces-near the open entry door or, at times, by the largest window that brought in the most sunlight for the best vision to do traditional Hmong needlework or paj ntaub. Paj Ntaub is a cultural practice of embroidery in Hmong culture. The purpose of paj ntaub is to decorate the Hmong attire with elaborative bright designs. Women teach this cultural practice to female children beginning as early as age three (See Appendix 1,2 and 3).

I recall my earliest memory of learning how to sew traditional paj ntaub or needlework at the age of eight. Sitting near the right side of the doorway on a kuwv teem, my mother hands me a bright, neon pink thread from her big plastic bag. In that plastic bag, different colors for paj ntaub can be found. The neon pink thread will be used to fill the inside of the paj ntaub design. My mother’s hand moves over to her wooden basket, swiveling things around, she eventually pulls out a small, silver needle. Handing it to me, she tells me to copy what she’s doing, for she will slowly begin to teach me how to xaws paj ntaub—embroider traditional Hmong designs. At that time, I did not know why learning to sew would be important. However, throughout the years, and with much practice, I began to understand that sewing paj ntaub designs would be utilized to place on our Hmong attire.

My mother held the needle in her left hand and the thread on her right. As I imitate what she is doing, she states, “cev muas txoj xos los txim rau lus khov thaum nta koog”—now place the thread through the small needle hole. She pulls the thread through the needle for me then makes a small knot at the end of the thread. My mind
is not quite in the moment and space to start embroidering. Other actions and events throughout the household quickly distract me for the time being.

Across the front door, my father sits on the couch with my four older brothers watching television. On an elongated but small, burgundy couch, the men in my family sit closely and tightly to one another. I turn to view the television and back to the men to observe the intensity, and the seriousness on their faces. The player swishes his right leg kicking the ball and within a few seconds I hear, “GOALLLLLLLL,” yells the sports commentator. I see my father and my brothers jump up. Their joy is heard throughout the whole house, but my mother says nothing, she just sits quietly sewing her embroidered cloth.

It is the World Cup of Soccer, and all four of my older brothers, including my father are watching intensely and cheering excitemingly for Argentina to win the game. They are cheering for Argentina because my father spent 19 years of his life in the country, and it is the birthplace of my four brothers. Several steps east of the television is the kitchen area, where my sisters are cooking and preparing brunch. Being the eldest sister of five daughters, Ntsooj is chopping the green Asian lettuce that Ntsuab has just recently washed with cold water. Ntsooj, Mai Ntsuab and Mai Tsab, my older sisters, are cooking *nqaij npuas thiaj ntsuab*—pork meat with green lettuce. With the meat boiling, the house suddenly starts to feel humid and stuffy.

Migrating from Argentina to the United States at the age of 20, Ntsooj attends an adult school and is struggling to learn English as a third language. Mai Ntsuab is 17 and is the second oldest daughter in the family. Mai Tsab is 16 and the third oldest daughter. Being similar in age, Mai Ntsuab and Mai Tsab are sophomores in
high school. Gigging and laughing, they gossip about school life, boyfriends and mutual friends. As they talk, I see their hands and bodies moving back and forth from the sink to the stove. Their multi-tasking roles not only include making meals for the family but also standing constantly by the stove to watch over the meat, making rice in the rice cooker, mixing the green lettuce with the pork meat and washing the dirty dishes.

The sound of running water and the organizing of plates and pots reminds my stomach that food is on the way. My stomach starts to growl, and I begin to feel uneasy. Watching my sisters’ interactions, I am thinking one day I want to be like them. Their intelligence, beauty and cultural skills, at that time reflected the ideal Hmong woman. They exemplified the ideal good Hmong daughters—able to cook, clean, do chores and take care of the family. The sound of Ntsooj’s comment interrupts my thinking, and I hear her say, “Hay Mai Tsab, de quien estas hablando?” (Hey, Mai Tsab, who are you talking about?). Wanting to listen in more closely, I slowly rise to make my way to the kitchen.

“Yog koj sab uas ib tus ntxhais zoo, yuas tsuj paus xaws paj ntaub thiab uas khaub nucas Hmoob,” (If you want to be a good daughter, you have to know how to embroider Hmong designs and make Hmong clothes) states my mother. She directs me back into the space of sewing and clearly tells me that to be a “good Hmong daughter, I must learn how to sew and create my own Hmong paj ntaub.” The distractions of other events going on around me suddenly start to fade, and my attention is directed back to sewing. My mother’s firm hand, yet so soft and smooth slowly shows me how to place a piece of colorful thread through a small needle in
order to begin the process of paj ntaub. As she leads the direction of sewing, I closely watch her and mimic her style of paj ntaub design.

Later in the evening, before going to bed, my eight siblings and I sit around my mother as she starts to pias dab neeg —tell stories. Sitting in a circle on the living room floor, my mother positions herself on the sofa. In her nightgown, with her hair tied up, she makes herself comfortable to take us through an oral journey. Her tone, style of story telling, and the story she chooses to tell, reflects much upon the construction of what becomes Hmong culture to us, and for me in particular. As I stare up to look at her, her shoulders become slouch and relaxed, her small mouth starts to speak the opening, catchy verse of storytelling; I know for a fact, that a dab neeg is about to be told.

“Pauv thawm us os...There was a young girl name Chue Yengpai and a young boy named La Sha-Pe. Both travel to a city away from their village to go to school. Chue Yengpai and La Sha-Pe attended school together for a very long time, but La Sha-Pe never knew that Chue Yengpai was a girl. On the weekend that Chue Yengpai and La Sha-Pe were going back to their villages during school break, Chue Yengpai told La Sha-Pe, ‘since it will be a while that we see each other, let’s have a peeing contest. If I pee further, we get to spend the night here at the crossroads before returning to our villages. If you pee further, then we will separate at the crossroads.’ La Sha-Pe willingly agrees and the two have a peeing contest. Being a girl, Chue Yengpai uses her fingers to reform her genital parts to squirt farther than La Sha-Pe. Losing, La Sha-Pe agrees to spend the night at the crossroads with Chue Yengpai. Before they go to sleep, Chue Yengpai reveals to La Sha-Pe that all along she’s been a
girl, and questions how La Sha-Pe has never taken a good look at her. Chue Yengpai tells La Sha-Pe that she loves him and in return he says the same thing back to her. They spend that night as lovers. The next morning, Chue Yengpai and La Sha-Pe separate and go to their homes in different villages. Afraid that they will never see each other or never be together, Chue Yengpai and La Sha-Pe promise to marry one another. After a few months, La Sha-Pe goes to visit Chue Yengpai, but unfortunately finds out that Chue Yengpai has been married off to another man. Dishearten and very sad for a long time, La Sha-Pe becomes very ill and passes away. On the day that the village members take La Sha-Pe’s body to be buried, Chue Yengpai learns about his burial, and runs to see him one last time. Heartbroken and unaware of La Sha-Pe’s death, Chue Yengpai looks for his grave. While the village members place the deceased La Sha-Pe to rest, Chue Yengpai runs toward his grave and jumps in his tomb with him. So, Chue Yengpai and La Sha-Pe represent the two rainbows after it rains. Their sad love represents a couple that could not be together even though they loved one another very much. Dying from illness, La Sha-Pe represents the clear rainbow. Not dying properly or throwing herself into La Sha-Pe’s tomb, Chue Yengpai represents the further, distant rainbow in the background.” Ending the story, my mother states, “and that’s the end. Now off to bed, it’s getting really late.”

As we climb into our beds, the dab neeg replays in my mind while I hold my fingers that ache from the continuous paj ntaub sewing. The images of La Sha-Pe jumping in Chue Yengpai tomb replay in my head again and again. Her love for Chue Yengpai is so strong, that in the end, she ends up sacrificing her own life to be with him. Being eight at this time, the story made me realize that true love was about
sacrificing everything to be with the one you love. La Sha-Pe represents the ideal
good Hmong woman who would do anything to be with her ‘soul mate.’ This story
provided me fantasies of wanting to be in love, and to find someone for who I would
be able to give up my life. The story also taught me that I need to be truthful and
loyal to the one I choose to love.

Growing up, I learned how to sew paj ntaub along side my mother and my
three older sisters. My mother would remind us over and over again about the
importance of sewing paj ntaub, and the capability to make these embroidered
appliques to place on Hmong attire. My mother always brought back the idea that
being able to make good, quality paj ntaub would shape the type of woman I would
become in the future. At the same time, I constantly heard dab neeg stories,
primarily from my mother and later on from my grandfather when we moved to the
United States in 1998. I was eight years old when my family migrated to the states.
We migrated from Argentina to be closer to my maternal grandparents and our
family who sponsored us to migrate to the U.S. My parents had spent 19 years of
their lives in Argentina farming and working long hours on fruit and vegetable
plantations.

Interestingly, I never once recall or remember my father telling my siblings
and I a dab neeg. Rather he would tell us about his past experiences or stories he
heard growing up. It wasn’t until I was much older that I questioned my father’s
silent teaching and form of discipline. Rarely did he yell, but rarely did he impose
any form of discipline on my siblings and I. Unlike some of the women in my family,
their fathers played crucial roles as the storytellers in their lives. The stories that
they recall and retold in this study reflect their particular interpretations about identities and gender roles. My interpretations of the stories I grew up hearing were greatly shaped by my mother’s own interpretations of the stories themselves. As she imposed her meanings of the *dab neeg*, I also grew to create my own interpretations of what the *dab neeg* stories meant to convey.

Thus, in my experiences, the storytellers in my life have been my mother, and at times, my grandfather. My grandfather died in 2009 and throughout our relationship, I only heard roughly three different stories from him. My mother’s endless teaching and practice of *paj ntaub* and *dab neeg* telling continues to this day. However, at different points in my life, my interpretations of the practices of *paj ntaub* and *dab neeg* have shaped my understanding of the woman I am becoming.

*History of Dab Neeg and Paj Ntaub*

Like the unknown truth of Hmong origins, *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* are cultural practices with no one explanation and description of how they came to be. Tracing *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* to the origins of Hmong history is limited because Hmong history itself is a representation of *dab neeg*, an oral narrative. However, historical Hmong oral narrative and traditional embroidering have become key cultural practices in influencing the upbringing of Hmong individuals and perpetuating the continuation of Hmong culture. In general, scholars usually cite China as the origins of Hmong people. Enhancing the narrative of Hmong history, elders such as my mother share the following *dab neeg*.

“A long time ago, many, many Hmong people lived near the yellow river, in the north lowlands of China with the different ethnic Chinese people. Elders indicate
that Hmong people had a country, that they had a king of their own and were a flourishing race. Wanting political power, the Hmong became a threat to the Chinese government. Not only did they kill the only Hmong king, but they also invaded and attacked Hmong villages killing men, women and children. Those who resisted against the Chinese soldiers were either killed or put to exile. With only wielding weapons to fight the Chinese army, the army killed many Hmong people. Those who survived, started to migrate towards the unknown southeast while others stayed and followed the rule of the Chinese government. Years down the road after Hmong people fled from the Chinese government, many Hmong people found their new homes in the mountains and rural areas of Laos and Thailand. Others migrated to different countries like Vietnam and Myanmar to flee Chinese persecution. Living in the highlands and mountains of Laos and Thailand were tough conditions and a harsh environment. However, over the years, Hmong people became accustomed to the mountains of Laos and had prosperous lives. Hmong were agriculturalists, pastoralists, and farmers. They made a living by selling their crops. During the wet season, Hmong people grew rice and harvested them during the fall season. In Laos and Thailand, Hmong people came into contact with French missionaries, and sided with them in the Indo-China war. French missionaries assisted Hmong people in creating a written Hmong language. Once the Indo-China war ended, Hmong people came into contact with American missionaries, soldiers, and the U.S. government. Around the early 1960, the American CIA started to secretly recruit Hmong soldiers from different villages and clans to assist South Vietnam and the U.S. in fighting the communist Pathet Lao and Vietcongs. Many Hmong men and boys were recruited to
be a part of a special guerilla force under the leadership of General Vang Pao. In return, the U.S. promised the Hmong people safety, a land of their own, and protection from the communist forces. The Hmong army was in charge of cutting enemy supplies on the Ho Chi Min trail placing bombs in the pathways of the enemy, rescuing American pilots shot down...and many other CIA assigned tasks. When the communist captured the city of Saigon, South Vietnam and America lost the war. Many Hmong people were captured, tortured and killed. In fear of persecution for their people’s part in the war, the Hmong fled their homelands in search of refuge. Some survived the horrendous journey and sought asylum in refugee camps provided by the Thai government. Hmong officials were airlifted from the city of Long Cheng in Laos and came to America, in particular General Vang Pao and his higher ranked military officials. Hmong people met a very harsh and difficult life after the war. Those who passed the different testing assessments were granted access for asylum in different countries like the U.S., Argentina, Germany, Australia and many others. As some Hmong people started to leave refugee camps, many stayed behind to await their turns and for the unknown future.”

From this dab neeg, Hmong history reflects an unknown timeline of when certain events occurred.

*Thesis Description and Goals*

The following thesis analyzes Hmong women’s identity and gender roles as told in Hmong folktales, myths, legends and tales (*dab neeg*), and reflected in traditional embroidering (*paj ntaub*). In particular, my study seeks to examine how *dab neeg* (oral folklore stories) and *paj ntaub* (Hmong embroidering) have
influenced Hmong women’s identities and gender performances. My overall goal is construct a critical narrative of how Hmong women’s identities and gender roles are constructed and shaped by the cultural practices of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub*. For this research, I asked the women in my family particular questions related to this limited area of academic research. In addition, these women are highly regarded as my personal role models. Therefore, to learn about their ideas about Hmong women’s identities and gender roles, personally, enriches the goal of this study.

Some specific questions that were asked include the following: 1) Do you believe that certain *dab neeg* stories are about what it means to be women? Also, do *dab neeg* stories teach us something about certain roles that are for women only? 2) Do you believe *paj ntaub* affects a woman’s understanding of her identity as a woman, and how she acts in her family and community? 3) What roles do *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* play in the Hmong culture? These questions asked, guided me to a much more complex comprehension of how the stories and interpretations of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub*, effect identity and gender roles among Hmong women.

This study relates to other Hmong research in that it gives primary voice to women, by analyzing the construction of identity and gender roles through the cultural practices of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub*. More specifically, this project illustrates the agency and power of the women by allowing their perspectives to become voiced on how *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* have influenced their identity formation. The scholars’ works discussed in the literature review critically examine story cloths and *paj ntaub*. However, in general, they lack an analysis of how *dab neeg* relates to the practice of *paj ntaub*. Mary Buley-Meissner provides an excellent discussion by
incorporating the two cultural practices of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* as ways to describe the Hmong experience and identity (2012). Buley-Meissner also demonstrates the changes of how traditional *paj ntaub* (embroidery) techniques became implicated with oral *dab neeg* (oral story telling) telling onto newer forms of Hmong folk art—story cloths (2012).

My research project contributes to the area of study similar to Mary Louise Buley-Meissner. The thesis explores *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* as cultural practices, and how it influences the interpretations of women’s identity and gender performance. It seeks to introduce a new way of understanding Hmong identity and experiences but from a women’s perspective. In addition, this study relates to Hmong Studies and Ethnic Studies because it creates a different space and discourse in examining Hmong women’s identity and their gender roles. More specifically, this research challenges the authenticity of the “ideal” Hmong woman by critically examining how the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman is portrayed in *dab neeg* stories. A major question guiding this research is how is this ideal role performed and whom does it really affect? This study also allows for Hmong women to use a different set of critical lenses in analyzing the making of the “ideal” Hmong women—the “ideal” daughter, daughter in law, wife and mother. In other words, the women in this study are able to reflect on their understandings of the “ideal” Hmong woman, and the implications for identity and gender roles for Hmong women.

This thesis was first initiated by the thought of a favorite hobby I really enjoyed as a young girl. My mother used to constantly tell us *dab neeg* (oral Hmong folktales, myths, legends and tales) that I still remember and clearly recall today.
Though I learned to sew paj ntaub at a young age, it wasn’t until I was in my teenage years that I really started to enjoy doing paj ntaub (embroidering). It takes years to gain skills to sew nice Hmong designs onto Hmong attire. Therefore, when I was young, I did not quite understand the purpose of paj ntaub. On the other hand, I never thought of my own personal growth and development as a woman and the gender roles that I perform until I started taking Ethnic Studies courses.

It was in the courses of Ethnic Studies that my first encounters with the discourses of feminism became an eye-opening experience. I started to take the knowledge that I gained in classes to critically understand Hmong culture, community, and my own family. This study is crucial to me because I never stopped to think that the practices of dab neeg and paj ntaub would ever contribute to the making of my womanhood and the gender performances that I act upon. Thus, I argue that though dab neeg and paj ntaub are cultural practices that perpetuate cultural identity, value, beliefs and history, they are also tools for ‘policing’ and reinforcing women's identity and gender roles reflecting the expectations associated with the "ideal" Hmong woman. The "ideal" Hmong woman is the 'good' Hmong daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and eventually mother. However, with access to higher education and influences from western culture, some Hmong women have constructed critical lenses that are contesting this notion. Consequently, subsequent formations of hybrid identities have provided women another space to navigate values and beliefs from both the western and Hmong cultures.

---

This project is very dear to my heart as it provides a space for the voices of the women in my life. Through their voices, we learn about their lives and who they are. More specifically, this thesis allows for us to learn about their identities and roles in Hmong families. The continuous storytelling and teaching of sewing paj ntaub are early reminders of the reinforcement of women's identity and gender performance. These reminders serve as tools for socializing the ideal, “good” Hmong women throughout stages of womanhood. However, these cultural practices have been rarely critically analyzed. More specially, we know little about how the meanings and implications of dab neeg and paj ntaub have affected Hmong women, in general.

Thus, as previously stated, this study provides a platform for the voices of the women in my family, and especially for myself. This thesis provides a site or space where Hmong women can provide their interpretations of Hmong women’s identities and gender roles. Also through sharing this thesis with other women via conference and community presentations and possibly publishing in community newsletters and academic journals, provides Hmong women the opportunity to share their experiences and create a ‘womanist’ movement. More importantly, these women can contribute to the discourse about the relationship between dab neeg and paj ntaub.

Thus, in critically analyzing the practices of dab neeg and paj ntaub, we are better able to comprehend the ways in which the making of the “ideal” Hmong women has been constructed. Second, this thesis offers explanations as to how these gender expectations affect our personal interpretations about womanhood and the
gender roles we perform. With this study, I do not intend to dismiss and debase *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* as cultural practices. Rather, I hope to contribute knowledge about how these cultural practices can be critically analyzed in Hmong Studies, Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies.
**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Scholarly work about Hmong *dab neeg*, oral narratives or storytelling, is extremely limited. Even though *dab neeg* is largely practiced in the Hmong community, there are scarce resources about the history of *dab neeg* in academia. Literary resources are limited because *dab neeg* is an oral practice, and Hmong people did not have a written language until the 1950s. *Paj ntaub* itself has also become a practice that is passed down through keen observation. Like *dab neeg*, the practice of how *paj ntaub* became incorporated into Hmong culture was not written down or documented.

Hmong elders and parents in the Hmong Colorado community who practice *dab neeg* are obviously the most knowable. One elder states,

“This *dab neeg* was a way to discipline children at a young age, and to put them to sleep. These *dab neeg* must have happened a long time ago, or they were real experiences to Hmong people back in the old days that eventually they became *dab neeg*.”

Regarding the historical origins of *dab neeg*, there is no one direct source that clearly addresses the beginning of *dab neeg*. However, eventually there was a historical point as to when *dab neeg* became documented, namely in the 1960s through story cloths.

There are many versions of *dab neeg* or stories (legends, myths, tales) about the loss of the Hmong written language. Some stories state that the Chinese government outlawed the Hmong language because they found the Hmong people living in China as threatening (Buley-Meissner 2012). Other tales indicate migration

---

as another factor for the loss of a written language. Beginning in the 18th century, many Hmong people migrated out of China to avoid genocide, and to search for a land to call their own (Buley-Meissner 2012). A dab neeg states that during this migration journey, a starving horse ate the only book containing the written language causing the loss of the written language (Buley-Meisser 2012). Others believe that Hmong people never had a writing system until they came into contact with Westerners.

During the 1950s, when Hmong people came into contact with American and French missionaries, the written language was developed and recorded through the Western alphabet language (McCall 1999, Johnson and Yang 1992). The invention of a written language allowed Hmong people to start recording their knowledge about history, traditions and cultural values (Lo 2002). Before Hmong people came in contact with Westerners, Hmong history and cultural practices were traditionally and primarily passed down orally from generation to generation (Lo 2002). Also, it has been primarily women who have told legends and myths because they have traditionally been the caretakers and nurturer of their families (Lo 2002). Women were held responsible for upholding cultural practices and knowledge (Buley-Meisser 2012, Craig 2010). Hmong women have always been key players in Hmong culture. Their identities as women and females have obligated them to pass on certain roles with regards to their identities. When it came to spaces of teaching paj ntaub or telling dab neeg, Hmong women acted as cultural transmitter. As cultural teachers, their teachings contributed to a Hmong identity and perpetuated specific gender identities and roles.
Traditional expectations of Hmong women as caretakers and nurturers of their families are further documented by Lo. Thus, it can be argued that the responsibility and expectations of Hmong women as the primary caretakers in the family, and as the transmitters of cultural knowledge, influenced how Hmong women raised their daughters. Lo argues that historically, Hmong women raised their daughters to be obedient women who would one day become successful mothers. They taught and disciplined their daughters to respect parents, relatives, and elders by serving them, listening to them, staying home, and doing house chores (Lo 2002). The daughters and women in the household were in charge of doing farm work, gathering vegetables, feeding the animals, sewing Hmong attire, caring for siblings and preparing meals. People, who came as guests, were treated with the utmost of respect by daughters who fully acknowledged them, brought snacks to the table, and cooked a meal for them to feel welcomed.

Ka Vang also states that these characteristics reflect expectations enforced by men in the Hmong culture. Today, these characteristics socially associate a Hmong woman as the “good Hmong girl” (2012). In addition, given their place in the family, Hmong women have immensely influenced the shaping of their children’s knowledge about Hmong culture and society. In particular, they have been influential with respect to their daughters’ and other close family Hmong member’s upbringing about cultural knowledge and expected gender roles and performance. More specifically, dab neeg are ways to pass on Hmong cultural knowledge primarily to Hmong women. Hmong women who pass on dab neeg to younger generations impose their influence as they choose how and what stories to tell. Most dab neeg
consists of a male hero and savior who is rewarded at the end of the story with a beautiful, ideal Hmong woman who is docile and submissive. The main protagonists are rarely females, and there is minimal representation of a strong, female voice. Many _dab neeg_ retell the stories about the creation of the world, the first Hmong shaman—Shee Yee, or the tale of the famous Ntxawm thiab Tsov. The _dab neeg_ of Nthxawm thiab Tsov revolves around Nu Pliab (a male protagonist) fighting Tsov (main antagonist) to get Nthawm (female protagonist) back after Tsov kidnaps Nthawxm to be his wife. Such folktales, myths, and legends continue to be significant for Hmong beliefs, values and cultural practices (Johnson and Yang 1992).

Drawing from the works of Michel Foucault, this thesis provides a different approach to understanding _dab neeg_ and _paj ntaub_ shaping women’s identities and gender roles. Foucault’s description of Bentham's Panopticon Tower as being a tool used to discipline people to mentally and physically learn to ‘police’ themselves to become obedient and submissive. The Panopticon tower resembles _dab neeg_ and _paj ntaub_ as cultural practices that ‘police’ Hmong women's upbringing to be the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. Hmong women act as the disciplinarians in ‘policing’ women to uphold expected gender identities and roles reflected in _dab neeg_ and _paj ntaub_. In _dab neeg_, as a cultural practice performed for small children, imposes certain messages of identity and gender roles through the portrayal of the female protagonists in the stories as the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman.

_Dab neeg_ myths tend to touch upon the struggles of life, asking the gods for guidance on farming, fighting against evil spirits or beings or worshipping the spirits of the earth and the sky (Johnson and Yang 1992). _Dab neeg_ legends and folktales
usually focus on a male hero and a female protagonist, their journey together, a person’s hard work and patience that leads to happy endings, and wisdom in using spiritual power (Johnson and Yang 1992).

In general, many dab neeg stories also trace historical information back to the origins of Hmong people residing in China (Johnson and Yang 1992). Though Hmong oral stories are still told today, it is a practice that is not commonly practiced with Hmong youth but mainly with young children by parents and grandparents. Western influences such as Internet, television and other technological use have decreased the interest and practice of dab neeg among Hmong American youth (Johnson and Yang 1992).

The practice of dab neeg gradually changed from oral narratives to pictorial images. During the mid 1970s, Hmong dab neeg started to become depicted onto story cloths—pictorial images that are created from the combination of traditional paj ntaub designs with modern colors and materials (Buley-Meissner 2012). Access to new materials and strategies of art allowed Hmong refugees in camps to develop new paj ntaub techniques and strategies of portraying the experiences that they faced. Some of these experiences included their traumatic war and resettlement experiences. This resulted in the making of new paj ntaub and story cloth productions. In addition, many of the first story cloths also stitched pictures on cloths that were the first Hmong people living as refugees in refugee camps (McCall 1999).

**Paj ntaub**, a Hmong textile art, contributes to the construction of story cloths. Paj ntaub, which directly translates to “flower cloth,” refers to the needlework that
is done mostly by women, and used to decorate Hmong attire (Petersen 1988). Though *paj ntaub* is sewn onto everyday wear, there were particular Hmong clothing reserved for the Hmong New Year festival, which falls in December after all the crops are harvested in the fields back in Laos and Thailand (McCall 1999). U.S. Hmong communities today celebrate the Hmong New Year festival at different time periods. *Paj ntaub* is also sewn onto traditional Hmong clothing as a way of identifying their particular clan, subgroup, and region (Petersen 1988). In Laos and Thailand, the geographical regions and clan identify the particular type of *paj ntaub* design wore on an individual’s Hmong attire. In addition, Mary Louise Buley-Meissner indicates that sewing *paj ntaub* reinforced the values among family, nature, animism, shamanism, the community, the home and the clan (2012).

Symbolically, the meaning of *paj ntaub* also represents signs and symbols of rites such as births, marriages and funerals (Buley-Meisser 2012, Cohen 1989). In some cases, particular *paj ntaub* designs were sewn onto baby carriers to protect them from evil or unfriendly spirits (McCall 1999, Peterson 1988). Some *dab neeg* even suggest that a child from the age of being a newborn to four years old experience seeing supernatural beings, and are most likely to be visited by such beings because of their vulnerability. The *paj ntaub* on baby carriers represent symbols of hope and protectance. Some *paj ntaub* designs were also going away presents when the daughter of the family was married off to her suitor (McCall 1999). In addition, these *paj ntaub* are either embroidery that the wife made herself before getting married or *paj ntaub* on Hmong clothes when a parent or parent-in-law passed away, a way to show respect was to provide paj ntaub designs (McCall
The daughter-in-law and/or at times the daughter would be responsible to provide her parents, or the deceased parent-in-law, clothing with paj ntaub sown on so that the deceased would have clothing to wear in the afterlife when meeting their ancestors (McCall 1999).

Paj Ntaub and Gender Performance

The techniques of sewing paj ntaub include reverse applique, cross stitches chain, stain, and running stitches (Buley-Meisser 2012, McCall 1999). Girls as young as three, begin to learn how to sew side by side with the women in their family (Buley-Meissner 2012). McCall mentions that older sisters, mothers and grandmothers, taught younger sisters, daughters and granddaughters to sow different paj ntaub designs (1999). By the time a girl had acquired enough skills to produce paj ntaub, she would be given a nice, clean paj ntaub cloth to start producing her very own design and embroidery. Mary Louise Buley-Meissner indicates that sewing paj ntaub taught women home training, patience, industry, diligence and creativity (2012). In the long run, the ability to produce paj ntaub illustrated a women’s worth for marital status and success in her life path (Buley-Meisser 2012). As a primary form of gender performance the production of paj ntaub is also used to define and control Hmong women’s identity as a daughter, sister, daughter-in-law, wife and mother. Hmong women at a young age are exposed not only to this historical cultural practice but are also expected to learn to do paj ntaub, as this will shape their womanhood.

The policing and controlling in teaching and enforcing a young daughter to learn paj ntaub is analyzed with Michael’s Foucault interpretation of Bentham’s
Panopticon tower. Foucault’s describes this tower as follows, “this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows... all that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a center tower and to shut in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker, or a school boy” (Foucault 1994, 2004). Paj ntaub, like the Panopticon tower, disciplines and polices a Hmong women’s upbringing where she is expected to produce Hmong embroidery. The mothers who supervise their daughters in learning to do paj ntaub are a direct mirroring of the supervisor in the tower. Though paj ntaub passes on cultural knowledge and identity, like the Panopticon tower, paj ntaub acts as “a marvelous machine which, whatever use one my wish to put it to, produce homogeneous effects of power” (Foucault 1994, 2004). The practice of paj ntaub is a constant reminder for Hmong women to uphold gender roles and their gender identity in Hmong culture. Because paj ntaub has been traditionally passed down as a role for Hmong women, Hmong women are policed at a young age to think that the ideal Hmong women is the Hmong women that knows how to eventually make clothing and Hmong attire for the family.

Reflecting in my own experiences of learning paj ntaub and listening to dab neeg were cultural practices that influenced the woman I am today. My mother’s constant teachings reflect her gender identity and role as an ‘ideal’ Hmong woman because of her continuous ‘policing’ and observation of my upbringing. If she had not sat with me during the many times we sewed together, she would have been
considered a bad mother, as a Hmong women who did not respect her family, and one who does not represent the “ideal” Hmong woman.

Though these are cultural practices that policewomen regarding expected gender identities and roles, the customs also provide space for gender construction. Melissa Buley-Meissner states that *paj ntaub* and story cloths speak to Hmong women creating spaces for the development and perpetuation of gender identity and roles (2012). Hmong women practice *paj ntaub* as a way to empower one another in their artwork contributing to a Hmong identity. Ava McCall states that these textile arts—*paj ntaub*, included women’s voices and views about the making of Hmong identity in general (1999). In creating *paj ntaub*, Hmong women have agency in choosing the types of colors, designs and Hmong attire they desire to produce. They not only have power in formulating gender identity through Hmong attire but also incorporating their creative, individual Hmong designs and technique. Furthermore, the making of *paj ntaub* allows for Hmong women to develop their own distinct identities (McCall 1999). Buley-Meissner (2012), Sally Petersen (1988) and Geraldine Craig (2010) also indicate that traditional *paj ntaub* and story cloths not only represent Hmong history but also allow for the documentation of historical events, and provide a collective and individual identity.

*The Vietnam War: Impact on Paj Ntaub and Gender Performance*

In the early 1970s, Hmong people residing in Laos grew anxious about the Vietnam War and their people’s participation in the war. Worried about a Communist take over, small waves of Hmong people began to migrate to Thailand. The fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, increased the number of Hmong fleeing
persecution and genocide into Thai refugee camps. Once in Thai refugee camps, many awaited refugee status (C. Y. Vang 2010). Those who survived the migration and arrived successfully to the camps, looked to other nations for political asylum and refugee status (C. Y. Vang 2010).

Once in refugee camps, Hmong women continued to practice paj ntaub. From the mid to late 1970s, the techniques of traditional paj ntaub gradually formed into new Hmong folk art—story cloths. Due to of migration and resettlement out of their villages, women formed story cloths, as ways to remember and pass down their observations of the war and what their lives were like in Laos (Buley-Meissner 2012). With influences of a written Hmong language, story cloths became a physical way to record historical events of the Hmong experience. The early productions of story cloths made in refugee camps depicted narrations of Hmong in combat, war, loss of life, and historical moments of migration (Petersen 1988). The early story cloths included embroidered figures, animals, and scenery of Hmong history and culture (McCall 1998). This form of Hmong archival practice allowed for an experience that was an unexpected turn of events, namely, the Hmong experience not only being recorded with the written but with pictorial showings as well. These story cloths eventually shifted to also include depictions of the Hmong New Year in Laos, daily rural life, village festivals, and folktales—dab neeg (Buley-Meissner 2012, McCall 1998). To make folktale story cloths, women took the stories they grew up hearing and combined them with traditional paj ntaub to intersectionally create story cloths in refugee camps along the Thai-Laotian border (Cohen 1989, McCall 1999, Petersen 1988).
Though women performed the majority of the sewing, men in refugee camps participated and contributed in the production of these new textile art story cloths. Working collectively, men would mainly draw the penciled outlines for most story cloths instead of sewing, as *paj ntaub* was considered a “women’s task”. The task of sewing *paj ntaub* was primarily a woman’s role and performance (Petersen 1988, McCall 1999). Occasionally in the camps, male artists also gave their drawings to relatives to stitch or to a woman who was good with needlework (McCall 1999). Stacey Lee also indicates that Hmong women were also precarious of their representation of their people, thus resulting in control of the images being produced (1997). Furthermore, all who contributed to the production of the story cloths gained a shared income (McCall 1999). A significant influential factor that triggered the mass production of story cloths in refugee camps was the need to make money or a living.

Due to limited resources for earning a stable income in refugee camps, story cloths were created not only to represent the Hmong experience but also used as textiles objects to make a living income that supported the family (Cohen 1989, Craig 2012, McCall 1999). Story cloth productions attracted and were viewed by international audiences, namely Hmong in America and missionaries who visited these refugee camps (Cohen, 1989). Through the years, the re-modification of story cloths designs and shapes has also been affected by other significant factors.

Buley-Meissner states that from 1976 to the early 1980s, simple human and animal shapes were sown onto small cloths and on a plain background (2012). From the mid to late 1980s, the figures started to be sown as lifelike and with more
detailed backgrounds (2012). In the early 1990s, diagonal or winding paths were sewn to allow better direction for the viewers’ eye (Buley-Meissner 2012). During the mid 1990s, women were able to develop the “intricate stitching, the skill at texturizing, the complexity and sophistication of the designs, and the general high quality of workmanship” (Buley-Meissner 2012). Throughout time, women acquired new skills and techniques of continuous sewing that resulted in a generational transformation of story cloths and *paj ntaub*.

Erik Cohen also examines the transformation of story cloths in different time periods: the war Vietnam War, the period of Hmong people in Thai refugee camps and the period of Hmong people resettling in various nations (1989). Cohen concludes that these time periods affected the ways story cloths were produced based upon their audiences and buyers (1989). Geraldine Craig also argues that story cloths were part of major tourism consumption in which many western missionaries and non-governmental organizations (NGO) consequently shaped the production and marketing of story cloths (2010).

In addition, Craig mentions Hmong textile productions were influenced by resettlement patterns of Hmong people in different places (2010). The Hmong diaspora and the disparities between Hmong experiences in rural, agricultural and urban settings are factors contributing to story cloth changes (Craig 2010). The different experiences Hmong people encountered produced various makings of story cloths (Cohen 1989). Story cloths may have similar designs and contain similar depictions, but it is rare to find identical story cloths.
Craig also states that story cloth production was a making of women in refugee camps and rarely seen being made outside of the camps (2010). Craig states that story cloths were made by women in the refugee camps in order to make a living. Hmong women living outside refugee camps focused more on doing the traditional *paj ntaub* (2010). Though war was a huge impact on the formations of *paj ntaub* and story cloths, villages that were not directly impacted by the Vietnam War did not cause as much changes among women doing traditional *paj ntaub*. Women whose villages were destroyed by war and had to resettle into refugee camps, changed the outcomes of traditional *paj ntaub*. Their experiences of the war, migration and resettlement were the catalyst to the creation of the first story cloths produced. Though story cloths represent pictorial art of Hmong history and experience, the politics of story cloths production have shaped generational changes among *dab neeg* and the subsequent forms of storytelling (Craig 2010, Buley-Meisser 2012).

The factors that change the constructions of *paj ntaub* and story cloth have also shifted the styles of story telling and the stories themselves. Different generations among Hmong people have constructed different tellings of particular *dab neeg* stories. Thus, I argue these shifts in story telling can create differences regarding gender identity and gender performance. Similarly to *paj ntaub* and story cloths, the forms of *dab neeg* are also dynamic.

*Contemporary Story Cloths and Generational Interpretations*

Story cloths as a form of storytelling have allowed contemporary Hmong women to create generational interpretations of the meanings and messages story
cloths convey (Buley-Meissner 2012). At the same time, these women have been able to question and reflect on their gender practice and performance by taking into consideration the meanings they make from story cloths (Buley-Meissner 2012). These changes among dab neeg, paj ntaub and story clothes have also resulted in different interpretations of women’s identity and gender performance. Thus, I also argue that story cloths are forms of story telling by which many of these textiles provide a visual to the orally told dab neeg. Story cloths are a contribution in that they enhance the literature regarding dab neeg, paj ntaub.

As Petersen (1988), Cohen (1989), McCall (1999), Craig (2010) and Buley-Meissner (2012) all state, previous story cloths that depicted war and migration are now also portraying the legends and folktales that have been orally passed down to generations. Though stories are still orally told, factors of diaspora, migration and western influence have influenced the transformation of story telling from oral to visual. Similar to the changes in story cloths and paj ntaub, the ways or methods of storytelling have also been shaped by diaspora, migration, resettlement and western influences. These factors have influenced the shift of these stories to the creation of a bigger, broader and more complex story telling about Hmong culture, people and history.

*Hmong Diaspora and Women’s Identities*

The experiences of the Hmong Diaspora and western contact have influenced Hmong women in constructing multiples identities, values and beliefs. Hmong women’s agency and ability to represent themselves and their gender performances are critically scrutinized by both the Hmong culture and larger dominant society.
(Vang 2012). More specifically, Hmong women today, in general are judged based upon their educational and marital statuses and their life paths and/or life cycles (Wozniaka 2012, Vang 2012). Ka Vang also states women’s actions, performance, and judgments are monitored by Hmong men, the community and their mothers (2012). As every generation of Hmong women weave their own personal narratives and beliefs about Hmong culture and history, these generational interpretations, create a collective identity for Hmong people, in general.

A brief discussion of Hmong Diaspora is provided in order to fully understand the relationship between Hmong Diaspora and women’s identities. Though some scholars and researchers argue that Hmong history and origins can be traced back to Siberia, the majority of literature notes Hmong origins began in China. Scholars trace Hmong presence in China as early as 2500 B.C. Around the 1800s many Hmong people migrated to the south regions of China to avoided death and seek a land of their own and freedom (McCall 1999). During the 1850s, Hmong migration increased southward out of China to Vietnam then to Laos and eventually to Thailand (C.Y. Vang 2010). In Laos, Hmong came into contact with Westerners, particularly, the French government. Some Hmong men assisted and aligned with the French government during the Indo-China war. French contact shaped and highly influenced Hmong culture. Not only did French missionaries help establish a written language, but during the time that France was in Laos, money was introduced to Hmong people.

For example, today the money on Hmong attire are French coins from the 1900s. From 1961-1973 Hmong people, particularly men and young boys, were
recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to help assist the US in victory against communist Vietnam and Laos (C. Y. Vang 2010). “Though history includes many Hmong who fought along side the US, many Hmong were also recruited to ally with the communist party. This resulted in many Hmong fighting against one another depending on the region they were located and resided.”

In 1975, loosing the Vietnam War to the Communists, the US withdraws from the Vietnam War resulting in Hmong people having to migrate and avoid persecution for Hmong’s assistance against the communist parties. From 1975 to 1992, over 100,000 Hmong escaped to refugee camps in Thailand in hopes of seeking refugee asylum status to avoid genocide (McCall 1999). With the Communists in power, the rates of Hmong fleeing out of Laos to neighboring countries such as Vietnam and Thailand increased.

As many Hmong awaited asylum and refugee status, different waves of Hmong people settled in different places. In 2007, Chia Vang, created a map of numerical statistics of the Hmong population in the world and in the US. The map clearly illustrates that today; China still has the largest Hmong population in the world. Other countries that offered asylum/refugee statuses to Hmong people after the Vietnam War included Germany, France, Canada, Australia, and Argentina. By 2007, California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin included the largest Hmong populations in the US (C.Y. Vang 2010). Charles Johnson and Se Yang note that certain waves of Hmong people have been able to escape persecution. However, they face the threat of cultural annihilations because of imposed Western dominant majority modes of

---

living, norms, beliefs and values (1992). Ironically however, partly benefiting to women, the effects of migration and resettlement have allowed them to contest cultural constructions of identity and gender roles.

Roberta Julian indicates that diaspora, migration and resettlement have led Hmong women to create transnational identity formations because of the impact by displacement and their exploration in investing themselves into new spaces with which they are unfamiliar (2004). In this sense, Julian proposes that Hmong women create transnational identities resulting from the impacts of spaces and places, which affect their femininities. With transnational identities, women create spaces to construct different interpretations of their identities. Hmong women create different discourses on the interpretations of different Hmong femininities (Julian 2004). Linda Vang also argues that these transnational identities reflect a group of people that involves a transplanted culture and history that are in the process of forming communities across multiple places and spaces (2009).

Though Hmong people became displaced and resettled in different spaces, Hmong people still retain cultural values, and customs and beliefs that allow them to relate to Hmong people from different places. This is what Julian and Vang argue when referring to transnational identities. Linda Vang also states that transnationalism incorporates identity being grounded to one particular place regarding their origins (2009). Vang indicates that though migration causes processes of fluidity, these processes create and construct identities across spaces. Vang includes viewing transnational identities as an overall building of a global Hmong community (within the borderlands). Julian (2004) and Vang (2009) also
state that the Hmong transnational identity transcends beyond physical borderlands because through the global community Hmong people are still aware of one another. Vang also relates Anzaldúa’s theoretical concept of Borderlands to the formation of Hmong identities. She argues that the idea of negotiating identities within a border culture also relate to Hmong individuals navigating between a US-Western and Hmong culture. She utilizes Borderlands to creates an inclusive space to include the Hmong experience, history, diaspora, culture and rhetoric. Vang speaks of the Hmong rhetoric as being, “Hmong American as a rhetoric that is bicultural and that signifies a process of the Hmong’s negotiation of their identity” (2009).

Kaying Lo also states that immigration has given women new opportunities for self-exploration. In some way, resettlement rewarded women with knowledge and power to contest and redefine their roles among a patriarchal Hmong community and culture (2002). Women affected by diaspora and resettlement face similar experiences. In their comparative studies of resettlement among Hmong women, Ruchira Gaguly-Scarse and Roberta Julian also examine Radi Das women in West Bengal in India and their resettlement struggles that might capture similar themes to Hmong women in Australia (1998). They conclude that women from different communities, who are unknown to one another, face similar struggles as minority women in diaspora (Scrase and Julian 1998). In general, minority women face similar oppositions as individuals subjected to diaspora, resettlement, and assimilation into new societies. In addition, Gaguly-Scarse and Julian also conclude that both groups of women face community positions that are gendered, oppression in a patriarchal community, and the perpetuation of a patriarchal system (1998).
**Diaspora and Hmong American Women**

Particularly in the U.S., the Diasporic experience has affected Hmong women’s identity and gender performance in many spaces and places. Among a younger generation of Hmong American women, Lee indicates that the Hmong diaspora and resettlement have greatly impacted the relationships teenage Hmong Americans formulate in school, with family, and friends (2001). She argues that Hmong American teenaged girls are at odds with inter-generational conflicts: the pressures from society, parents, community, and friends (2001). Because of these inter-generational factors, Hmong teenage girls are more likely to be motivated into early marriage. Lee states that Hmong teenage girls use marriage as an escape to “freedom” and resistance towards strict family household rules (2001, 2007). Bic Ngo adds that early marriage is a form of expression of the opposition these students have toward Hmong structure, and their experiences with school and family (2002).

Though early marriages constitute a traditional practice, Hmong female students dismiss the cultural significance of early marriage and use it as a means of resistance (2002). Ngo also concludes that Hmong female students, who are marrying at early ages, use marriage as a way to contest Hmong patriarchy, gender roles and the experiences of isolation from school (2002). However, early marriage is also a way to escape negotiating both American and Hmong cultures. Particularly young Hmong female students believe that early marriages will provide more freedom and better support and comfort (Lee 2001, Ngo 2002). Though Lee and Ngo acknowledge early marriage as resistance to patriarchy, they dismiss how early
marriages also perpetuate a traditional, historical practice. But how much ‘freedom’ do these young female students truly experience once married? What do their gender performance and identity look like after early marriages? Ganguly-Scarse and Julian argue that it is important to acknowledge how the impacts of diaspora, migration and resettlement have allowed Hmong women to contest culture and different performances of femininity. Hence, this also illuminates generational interpretations of women’s identity (1998).

Along with diaspora, migration and resettlement, another factor that affects identity are western influences. Lee (1997, 2004) and Gosnia Wozniaka (2012) indicate western influences such as cultural values and education have affected some forms of resistance among Hmong women. These forms of resistance are reflected in the greater opportunities Hmong women seek in the U.S. They also indicate that contemporary Hmong American women contest and, in ways, reject traditional gender norms, gender stereotypes and culture itself (Lee 1997, 2004; Wozniaka 2012).

Throughout the years, research and scholarly work have illustrated the increased pressure placed on Hmong women in utilizing education to their advantage. This cultural transformation not only asserts women’s resistance against gender roles and identity imposed onto them unwillingly, but also allows them to perform their identities and roles based on their own agency. Lee argues that higher education influences these women to challenge women’s identity and to act out as agents of cultural transformation (1997). Furthermore, she argues that education gives women empowerment to vocalize their own interests (1997). Ganguly-Scarse
and Julian state that education and other western practices give women opportunities to resist male dominance and act as agents of social change (1998). In this sense, women are utilizing education and other western practices to challenge identities that have been perpetuated onto them by society and the community. These women are contesting patriarchy in order to create social change. Ganguly-Scarse adds that Hmong women in the U.S. are also achieving and succeeding further in life than what traditional Hmong gender norms dictate.

Drawing from Gloria Anzaldúa’s concepts of the “borderlands” and “mestiza consciousness,” she refers to the make-up of hybrid identities among Latinos and Chicanos (1998). She states, “the U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta (an open wound) where the Third world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a sab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.” Anzaldúa indicates identities going through a process of transformation that result in hybrid identities. Linda Vang argues Hmong women’s identity changes contact with western values and education places them in processes of identity changes (2009). In other words, they negotiate identities between Hmong and US-Western culture.

Anzaldúa states the formation of a hybrid identity is, “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes un choque, a culture collision.” Hmong women create fused identities from their negotiation between both cultures that also allow them to construct critical

perspectives about their gender identity and roles.

Vang states, “Hmong American hybridity is a result of associating with the American mainstream culture, and as a result of this contact, some aspects, beliefs, and values have been adopted and incorporated into the Hmong community, creating a hybridity of both Hmong and American values and ways” (2009). Furthermore, she argues, “Hmong Americans recreate and contest identities in a borderland that transcends geographic boundaries” (2009). In regards to Hmong women, educational opportunities and western influences, values and beliefs seem to have an impact on their identities. For example Vang states that, “Hmong women contest their traditional roles when they became exposed to and aware of the status and rights of women in America. Hmong women are gaining this new consciousness through education, reading and writing” (2009).

In addition, education acts as a motivational factor, which inspires Hmong women to achieve more than what their mothers and grandmothers have accomplished. For Hmong women, educational opportunities are tools of empowerment, respect and recognition in the community (Vang 2009). Lee lists that some of the reasons why women pursue higher education is to be financially successful in the future to be capable to contest gender roles, norms and identity in a patriarchal society, and desire more than an early marriage with children at a young age. Challenging sexist stereotypes is also an important perspective Hmong women gain with the opportunities of higher education (1997).

Hence, Hmong women today believe that education can create a different future for them and, thus they embrace education as a gateway to avoid early
marriage and traditional roles imposed upon them (Lo 2002). In Laos, more traditional practices are performed in that Hmong parents negotiate the choice of sending their daughters to schools to obtain an education. It has been historically believed that the educational knowledge a woman gained from attending school, would leave the natal family once she was married out to another family (Lo 2002). To avoid this, the men in the family were sent to school for an education that would benefit the natal family and the community in which they lived (Lo 2002).

In addition to Western influences, resettlement, migration and diaspora, educational opportunities have influenced Hmong women in the U.S. to challenge patriarchy and expected gender roles in Hmong culture. Lo argues that education becomes a threat and challenge to patriarchal standards for Hmong men and elders who endorse patriarchy. In this sense, the home becomes a battleground and space in which gender performance and identity is negotiated, performed and contested. Educated women are threatening because it shifts set identities and gender roles in the Hmong culture (2002). This emasculates male privilege and power dynamics within the Hmong household. Wozniaka also indicates that within Hmong communities, tensions are rising because of the increased numbers of women pursuing higher education, and who subsequently challenge gender roles and identities of the Hmong gender binary (2012). She states that the shift of women contesting male domination in households and in the community are upsetting men who feel as if they are losing control of their households and creating further generational splits among Hmong people (2012). This is a direct link to men loosing power and agency over Hmong women's lives. Some community members even lash
out at women who are “supposed” to uphold culture and tradition and are accused of only forsaking their cultural identity (Wozniaka 2012).

S. Suh (2007) and Kao Lee Yang (2010) indicates that Asian American women who immigrate to the U.S. experience gender role identity crisis with the influence and values also imposed onto them by western society. Though Hmong women are contesting their expected identity and gender performance, they also deal with cultural imbalances among the Hmong and American culture (Lo 2002). Kaying Lo also indicates that Hmong women receive conflicting messages about gender roles, the ideal role model, and using higher education for a successful future (2002).

Lee (2007) also argues that Hmong women act upon the cultural nuances that they negotiate on a daily basis (Lo 2002, Vang 2012). They perform and interpret different meanings of the beliefs and values from different cultures. Kao Lee Yang examines the gender role endorsement of Hmong women and the factors that influence the ways of decision-making among Hmong women (2010). She concludes that Hmong women in the U.S. are taking more advantage of western opportunities. With exposure to western ideals and values, Hmong women in the U.S. challenge and resist gender roles and male patriarchy. This new form of political consciousness that Hmong women embrace challenges the status quo in the Hmong culture as well. However, their struggles and navigation among different cultures create fear among Hmong women who want to resist gender oppression, but fear the outcomes of resistance from their families, communities, and society.

Newly derived forms of story telling, story cloths, and dab neeg have
provided Hmong women the opportunity to contribute various interpretations about the diasporic experiences of women's identity and gender performance. In addition, these generational interpretations of dab neeg and story cloth contribute to the fluidity of Hmong women's identity and gender performance. The changes of Hmong story cloths have also changed the narratives of dab neeg. The changes among dab neeg and story cloths in different spaces and places have allowed for Hmong women to challenge the norm, the beliefs, values, and cultural expectations imposed onto them as women.

Hence, I propose to critically examine how women construct various interpretations of their identity and gender performance from dab neeg. More specifically, this thesis examines how paj ntaub implements certain messages to women about their identity and gender performance. Also, after reviewing the literature, additional questions such as the following will also be explored: 1) How do dab neeg and paj ntaub assist in the construction of an ideal Hmong woman? How does access to higher education and western values and beliefs affect the ways in how Hmong women contest traditional gender identity roles and performance?
METHODOLOGY

The women in my family have always been and will forever be the backbone of the critical and significant Hmong culture and knowledge that I have obtained in my life. From cooking rice, making traditional dishes such as *nqaij npuas thiab zaub ntsaub* (pork with Asian lettuce), *laab* (grounded meat with cilantro and onions) and teaching me about the cultural practices of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub*, these women have been major influences in shaping the woman I have become today. As the ‘subjects’ of this study, the women have particular opinions and life perspectives that can only come from the lenses of a woman, a daughter, a mother and as a wife within Hmong culture. The life experiences of these women provide contributions to the overall narrative of Hmong women’s identity and gender roles, which I intend to construct. Their lives exemplify what it means to be a Hmong woman in a patriarchal cultures that favors and benefits men and grants privileges.

This thesis project is a qualitative study that seeks to understand how *dab neeg* (Hmong oral folktales, tales, myths, legends) and *paj ntaub* (embroidery) as cultural practices influence Hmong women’s identities and gender roles. Because of the limited scholarship on *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub*, I analyze these cultural customs to better comprehend how women’s identity and gender roles become shaped by these practices. Whether it is intentional or non-intentional, the women in this study ‘police’one another to live as of an ideal Hmong woman.

In *Ethnic Studies Research: Approaches and Perspectives*, Timothy P. Fong’s work is an anthology that acknowledges the history, the purpose and the use of

---

Ethnic Studies as a intersectional, academic discipline. This anthology serves many purposes and highlights some of the important topics in Ethnic Studies. Fong states, “the academic discipline of Ethnic Studies emphasizes giving a real voice to those who had been merely seen as ‘research subjects’ for narrow academic publication purposes.” Though some may view the women in the study as the ‘research subject’s, they are individuals with important experiences and stories about Hmong women that need to be heard and told to remember. Their willingness to participate in this study speaks to their power and agency in talking about taboo topics in the Hmong community.

Drawing from what Fong states about Ethnic Studies methods, I want to give voice to the women in this study. I want to create spaces for them to speak about their identities and gender roles within a patriarchal Hmong culture that minimizes and ignores their perspectives and opinions. Second, this research contributes to an overall discourse about women’s identities and gender performances. These women’s stories and interpretations contribute to an “unnamed” movement of women unintentionally deconstructing the notion of the ideal Hmong women. Fong also states that, “ethnic studies sought to break down the artificial barrier between researchers and the community and encouraged a ‘new breed’ of researchers equally versed in rigorous applied data gathering and expansive information dissemination.”

Fong refers to students and teachers being disciplined within the Ethnic Studies academia. He indicates the formation of a ‘new breed’ of researchers

---

as Ethnic Studies students who are doing social justice work in communities of color. Personally relating to Fong, I am a part of this 'new breed' of researchers Ethnic Studies encourages. As an insider of the Hmong community, I am conducting a thesis project that takes a feminist approach in analyzing the formation of women’s identities and gender role through dab neeg and paj ntaub. This study opens doors and gateways to new interpretations and approaches in examining women’s identities and gender roles. More specifically, this research contributes to a new field of study for Hmong American women studies.

Hence, this qualitative study can be considered a pilot study that examines 1) gender implications of paj ntaub and dab neeg and 2) acknowledges their voices and interpretations. As a Hmong American women and an insider of the community, this insider perspective that I bring into the study allows me to reflect on my political, social and cultural consciousness. Also, this thesis allows me to develop a critical lens in understanding these cultural practices beyond cultural customs.

Nationwide, the influences of education and western values and beliefs have implemented a new form of consciousness, which allows Hmong women to construct critical lenses in contesting patriarchy and identity and gender roles. As mentioned in the literature and the findings of this study, there is a national movement which Hmong American women are participating. With the influences of education and western practices, these women create hybrid identities that allow them to act as agents of social change. They contest patriarchy in order to fight for gender equality and for a voice of their own to reinforce what it means to be a Hmong woman. Secondly, how they understand women’s identity and gender roles
get played out in these cultural practices. The Hmong woman in the study along with other Hmong American women are involved in an “uncalled” or unexpected social movement that calls for challenging gender roles and identities that patriarchy imposes on Hmong women.

Fong also states that, “Ethnic Studies research is predominantly, though not exclusively, qualitative rather than quantitative, and welcomes interdisciplinary perspectives from both the social sciences as well as the humanities. The interpretive approach does not accept that everything can be precisely measured and rather closely examines social context and individual experiences. The interpretive approach tries to give voice to individuals marginalized by society and works to develop a more empathetic understanding of people’s lives.”

The women in this study along with other Hmong American women act as agents of social change in changing gender roles and identities. Hmong women utilize their critical lenses and hybrid consciousness to either accept or reject certain values and beliefs within the cultures they navigate.

As a qualitative study, I also conducted in-depth interviews. I interviewed ten women in my family from different generations. Other women might also be able to find cultural practices in their culture that have influenced their identities and gender role. A goal of this project is to be critical and dynamic in expanding these narratives that construct identity and gender role.

---

These interviews took places in their individual homes, in coffee shops, in women’s bedrooms and in my house. The location of where the interview took place was chosen by the interviewee herself as a sign of respect, and to give appreciation to the women for their commitment to my study. I wanted to make them feel as comfortable as they could and interview them from an informal approach. I wanted to interview women from different generations as they include different voices and perspectives about their identities and gender roles. I interviewed my mother, two sisters in laws, two sisters and five blood female cousins.

The interviews were recorded using a recording device and subsequently transcribed. All of the data analysis was taken verbatim from the interview recordings in order to preserve these women’s voices and the authenticity of the data. From the data, key themes and factors were selected and analyzed in understanding how dab neeg and paj ntaub influence identity and gender roles. Messages from these cultural practices and their intentions in socializing the ideal Hmong women are analyzed.

Participants

All the women I interviewed grew up in different time periods with different storytellers in their lives. The stories they heard and listened to growing up differ and include different meanings about identity and gender roles. Part of my research is to listen to the dab neeg they grew up listening to and what these stories meant to them. I want to understand how these stories helped construct meanings of what it means to be a Hmong woman, and how they are supposed to act based on their gender.
This project is a reflection of the stories, struggles, and the resistance deployed by the women in my family. Additionally, this research touches upon discourses and themes that have influenced their identities and gender performance in a culture that places males as the dominant figure. Their interpretations of certain stories they heard while growing up will be critically analyzed in order to understand the impact of changing identity and gender performance in Hmong culture. Below is a brief demographic profile of the women interviewed. As the insider interviewer, I can culturally identify with these women because of familial ties. The following profile lists their names, age, nationality, place of birth, marital and education status and individual self-identification.

Tswb is 55 years old. She is Hmong and was born in Teb Tong Yia, Laos. She is married and received little to no education. She is a mother and a wife and has nine children. Ntsuab is 34 years old. She is Hmong and was born in Laos. She is a wife and a mother to four children. She is Charge Nurse (CN) certified. Nina is 33 years old. She is Hmong Argentinian and obtained a high school junior level education. She is single and is a daughter and a sister to a family of ten. Nthawm is 27 years old. She is Hmong and was born in NaKa, Laos. She is a wife and a mother to three children. She is currently pursuing her graduate degree in human resource management. Jou is also 27 years old. She is Hmong American and was born in Merced, California. She is married and received her Bachelor’s degree in English and Elementary Education. She also is a sister and a daughter to a family of five. Xia is 21 years old. She is a Hmong American and was born in Merced, California. She is currently pursuing her undergraduate degree. Mai Xia is 20 years old. She is Hmong
Argentinian and was born in Argentina. She is single and is a sister, a daughter and an aunty. She is currently a sophomore at a university pursuing an undergraduate degree. Ntxhais is 19 years old. She is Hmong American and was born in Fresno, California. She is single and is a daughter and sister to a family of eight. She is an undergraduate student. Kee is 16 years old. She is Asian American/Hmong and was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. She is single and is a daughter to a family of five. She is currently a high school junior. Npaum Npais is 14 years old. She is Hmong and was born in Thornton, Colorado. She is single and is also a sister and a daughter to a family of five. She is currently is a high school ninth grader.

Questions Asked and Why:

The questions listed below are the key questions that were asked during the interviews. They were constructed as such to direct me in comprehending the implications of dab neeg and paj ntaub in shaping identity and gender roles. Some of these questions also led to other topics that the women brought into our discussion such as story cloths, western opportunities and influences such as education.

Demographics:
Tell me a little about yourself. What is your name? How old are you? Where were you born? Where were you raised? Your education level status? Or any other ways that you identify yourself.

These questions were asked to gain a better understanding of their individual interpretation of how they viewed their identities and other factors that have shaped the women they are today.

Who are/were your role models?
This question was asked to further analyze if there was a connection between the storytellers of dab neeg and people who they considered as influential to them. I asked this question because in my personal narrative, my mom was an influential person in my life and was a primary storyteller. My upbringing was primarily shaped by the teachings she imposed onto me growing up.

Who were the ones that told you dab neeg and what were some of these stories?

This question is a follow up to the previous question. I’m interested in learning if there is direct correlation between their roles models, and the storytellers they grew up listening to. This question was also asked to further comprehend the storytellers’ gender identity and certain types of stories they choose to tell.

How do you think these stories relate to you? Do you believe these stories implemented any sort of meanings to who you are?

This question was asked in order for the women to make any connection from the dab neeg stories they grew up hearing and to their current gender identities and roles. This question was also utilized for the women to reflect the dab neeg stories they recalled from childhood memories to their contemporary lives.

Do you believe that certain dab neeg contain certain implications of Hmong women’s identity and gender role?

This question was asked for the interviewee to reflect if dab neeg played a role in influencing women’s identity and gender roles. Those who agreed dab
*neeg* implied certain meanings of gender identity and role were asked follow up questions to analyze some of the implications they believed *dab neeg* imposed onto women.

How do your current duties and roles reflect this *dab neeg* that you have retold to me?

This question was asked for the women to analyze how their contemporary gender roles and performances related to their individual *dab neeg* they recalled from childhood. Thus, this question sought for women to reflect how *dab neeg* shaped their gender roles within Hmong culture.

How do you think gender identity plays a role on how *dab neeg* is interpreted?

This question was asked, to learn if the women believed a gendered audience or storyteller would affect the interpretations of the implications *dab neeg* imposed. In other words, did these women believe *dab neeg* was understood differently from male audiences?

Did you learn to do *paj ntaub* at a young age? How do you believe *paj ntaub* have affected the reinforcement of who Hmong women are and our duties?

This question examined rather *paj ntaub* shaped these women’s gender identity and roles from a young age. This question also asked for a further explanation of how *paj ntaub* imposed an expected gender identity and role among Hmong women.

What role does *paj ntaub* have in Hmong culture?

I asked this question in order to better understand each of these women’s interpretation of how they examine the importance of *paj ntaub* in Hmong
culture. I wanted to examine what *paj ntaub* meant to them and how it affected the making of their gender identities and roles.

Do you believe *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* have a relationship together?

I asked this question in hopes that the women would see a correlation of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* intersecting to reflect the cultural practice of story cloths. I wanted to examine what the women interpreted from these story cloths in correlation to oral storytelling and traditional embroidery.

These stories and interpretations vary from woman to woman. Overall, they collectively contribute to a deeper comprehension of how *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* influence women’s identities and gender roles. These questions help guide in understanding the complexity of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* as cultural practices that perpetuate specific gender identities and roles in forming an ‘ideal’ Hmong woman identity.
DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, I illustrate how place of birth and age contribute to the participant’s interpretations of Hmong women’s identities and gender roles interpreted in dab neeg and paj ntaub. Furthermore, I draw from the works of scholars mentioned in the literature review. More specifically, I quote them directly in order to demonstrate how western influences and education are influential factors in this study. For example, a number of women mention that access to education has influenced how they think about these cultural practices in relationship to the construction of the ‘ideal’ Hmong women.

Many of the women were raised in different places, from small villages in Laos such as Naka, Teb Tong Yia to cities such as Luis Beltran, Argentina, and towns in the U.S. such as Merced, California. Three of the 10 women were born in Laos with two primarily raised in Laos. Among the remaining seven women, two were born in Argentina and the other five were born in United States. It is important to acknowledge the places where these women were born and raised because their upbringing helps in comprehending their cultural values and beliefs. In addition, the places where they were raised also help us to understand how their upbringing has shaped their identities and gender roles.

Age is another factor that is important to consider in the interpretations of women’s identity and gender roles. My study focuses on their interpretations about identity and gender roles in dab neeg and paj ntaub. However, age acts as a factor that influences the personal views of each woman. Therefore, their values and beliefs are influenced by the places where they were raised and also by their age.
In addition, western influences and access to higher education have also led Hmong women to negotiate their identity and gender roles differently. Hmong who incorporate values and beliefs from the US-Western society and the Hmong culture construct their identities in a “border” culture. They reject and accept different practices and ideals depending on what culture they associate themselves with in that particular space and place. These negotiations allow Hmong women to become agents of cultural transformation and construct hybrid identities and consciousness to contest certain imposed patriarchal identities and gender roles. The following section is divided into three categories; 1) dab neeg, identity and gender performance, 2) paj ntaub, identity and gender performance and 3) western cultural influences and education.

Dab Neeg, Identity, and Gender Performance

This section focuses on women’s interpretation of how dab neeg affects identity and gender performances. The data is presented beginning with each woman’s name, their age and place of birth. This ordering of data is presented as such in order to assist the reader in understanding the overall discussion of the data. The stories or dab neeg, that the women recalled, expressed many opinions and interpretations of how dab neeg has influenced and shaped their identities and gender roles. The different dab neeg or stories centered primarily on the life journey of a male protagonist or of a female protagonist whose qualities as a woman were being tested. Such dab neeg focuses on life’s morals, and how these morals shape women’s identities and gender roles. In the dab neeg (stories) of the male protagonist, the female characters play a minor role compared to their male
counterparts. The women in the dab neeg are described as submissive and docile or fall at the other end of the gender dichotomy; they are the evil, cunning witches.

The plot is similar in these stories. For example, the male protagonist faces many hardships and obstacles in his life. He is struck by bad luck and must pass different tests to prove that he is worthy to survive in a cruel world. If he passes all the challenges, he is then rewarded with the ultimate prize; the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. The ‘ideal’ Hmong woman is a female that is highly valued because she exemplifies obedience, is a caretaker, is well mannered, is subordinate to her partner, can sew paj ntaub, and be a good wife and mother. Not only is the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman able to cook and clean, she also has the skills to become a good housewife. This good housewife is able to place the needs of her husband and family before her own either through sacrificing herself or submitting to a higher power. Acquiring the ultimate prize at the end of the dab neeg supposedly reflects the male protagonist’s perseverance and determination for a successful life. The ‘ideal’ Hmong woman along side him determines his fate and success in life. Achieving the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman to be his wife also demonstrates that he is manly enough and capable to encounter any struggles he confronts. As dab neeg perpetuates the female protagonist as the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman, and serves as an example for Hmong women, such dab neeg also perpetuates patriarchy in the Hmong community. These dab neeg have tremendous influences on women’s identity and gender roles that shape women’s upbringing, beliefs and values. Thus, I argue that the practice of dab
neeg is a tool that polices Hmong women’s identities and gender roles by socializing them to follow the expectations of an ‘ideal’ Hmong woman.

Jou, age 27, born in the U.S., recalls a story about a man who wanted to find a bride to improve his life and subsequently his status.

“In order to find the perfect wife, he hosted this feast and invited all the women around to come to it. At the end of each feast, he said—go to the restroom now, if you go later in the night, whoever goes to the restroom, will be my wife. He located the prettiest and most cultured woman and pooped on her skirt. When Auntie Mae tells this story, she used to pick up my skirt and point, “right there, he pooped right there.” It used to make me so mad. So they get married and eventually she has a child with him. One day she was going to visit their relatives and the man told the child how he got his mom to marry him. The wife became very angry and decided to run away. She got lost in the forest and she makes a certain cry—she turned into a certain cricket/bird and makes a cry. Then the child went to look for this mother and he makes a certain cry. The father went to look for both of them and he makes a certain cry.”

Jou states that the overall moral of this story is for women to be a good dutiful wife no matter the situations or circumstances of how a woman becomes a wife. Even though the male protagonist tricked her, she still married him and had children. Jou also interprets this dab neeg as giving specific descriptions of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman; “first, a good daughter, then a good wife, and eventually to a good mother.” Though the wife leaves her husband, in the end, the female protagonist goes through a linear stage in becoming the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. This dab neeg story reflects patriarchy because the woman in this story acts or performs her expected gender role. For example, she is passive and submissive in that she keeps

---

10 In Discipline and Punish, Michel Foucault gives an interpretation on Bentham’s Panopticon tower and how the tower is used to discipline the mind and the body for power.
her anger and frustration to herself. Instead of taking her anger out on her husband, she runs away into the forest. Her action to run away is a symbol of her lack of agency and power, and thus portraying the passivity of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. She does not challenge her husband’s actions or his authority as the male figure of the household. Instead, the female protagonist exemplifies the ‘ideal’ woman in that she quietly leaves her family behind, with no complaints and sacrifices herself or her sense of personhood and womanhood.

In addition, the *dab neeg* that centers on a male protagonist portrays female characters as either the good or bad Hmong woman. Nthawm, age 27, born in Laos recalls the *dab neeg* of Txiv Nraug Ntsuag and Nkauj Zuag Paj.

> “Txiv Nraug Ntsuag married Nkauj Zuag Paj. But instead of being faithful to her, he cheated on her with Nkauj Kub Kaws. So, once he left Nkauj Zuag Paj for Nkauj Kub Kaws, Nkauj Kub Kaws came into his life and ruined it. She did not provide for him as a wife should, thus ruining his life, and at the end, Txiv Nraug Ntsuag returned to Niam Nkauj Zuag Paj.”

Nkauj Kub Kaws represents the evil, cunning sorcerous and the protagonist of the story. In portraying the bad woman versus the good woman, the *dab neeg* provides a certain example to Hmong woman of what not to be like. In other words, committing adultery, no matter the circumstances, always labels you as the ‘bad’ Hmong woman.

In this *dab neeg*, Nkauj Kub Kaws represents the bad Hmong women because she uses trickery to ruin the life of Txiv Nraug Ntsuag. Nkauj Kub Kaws convinces Txiv Nraug Ntsuag to leave his ‘ideal’ Hmong woman and marry her instead. Once

---

they are married, Nkauj Kub Kaws becomes the bad housewife. She does not provide for him or care for him like a good wife should. Nkauj Kub Kaws is a bad example of the ideal Hmong women whereas Nkauj Zuag Paj represents the good ‘ideal’ Hmong woman because she performs the expectations what constitutes the good ‘ideal’ Hmong woman.

Although Txiv Nraug Ntsuag leaves Nkauj Zuag Paj, she still has an open heart and mind to accept him when he returns. Nkauj Zuag Paj represents the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman because she is willingly submissive towards Txiv Nraug Ntsuag. She accepts him with no questions asked, nor does she show any anger towards him. She also represents the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman in that she needs Txiv Nraug Ntsuag to complete her identity as a woman. Being a good daughter will lead Nkauj Zuag Paj to being a good wife and mother. In addition, she falls back into her gender roles in that she does not complain about his actions of leaving her. She appreciates him coming back into her life. Nkauj Zuag Paj once again as the female protagonist lacks agency and power when it comes to being the ‘ideal’ woman for the man she loves. Female protagonists in dab neeg that portray the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman, perpetuate the set identity and gender roles imposed by a patriarchal culture.

In addition, Nthawm also suggests that Nkauj Zuag Paj, as a housewife, follows an ‘unspoken expectation’ as a woman. She states that this particular dab neeg story implies the silent expectation of women being a housewife like Nkauj Zuag Paj to “clean the house, cook, [bear] children, and take care of the children.”

---

While Nkauj Zuag Paj can follow this silent gender expectation as a woman, Nkauj Kub Kaws does the opposite and is therefore shunned as the bad Hmong woman. Thus, perpetuating the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman along the dichotomy of good versus bad does not allow for women to have a sense of agency in contesting patriarchy. Nkauj Kub Kaws, however, asserts agency and power over her identity and gender role allowing her to challenge patriarchy. Hence, Nkauj Kub Kaws is seen as a threat to male dominance, the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman, and patriarchy.

Other dab neeg stories focus on female protagonists and the testing of their capabilities. These stories also portray a binary; the good Hmong daughter versus the bad Hmong daughter that eventually succumbs to the expectations of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. Tswb, age 55, born in Laos remembers her mother telling stories of love relationships, scary stories, and tales that were intended to teach a lesson. A particular story she remembers while growing up was the dab neeg of Nthawm laus (old) and Nthawm hluas (young).

“Theyir mother is pregnant [and] she told them both to go and get their grandma. There is only one road to get to her. Nthawm young asked her mom how to get to her grandma’s house. Her mom told them both to go to the black road to get to their lovely grandmother but taking the other road will take them to the witch. They both then went and got to the two roads and Nthawm young remembers her mother’s words, but Nthawm old didn’t remember what their mother told them. Nthawm young said to go to the black road (txoj kev dub) whereas Nthawm old said to go to the other road. They both argued and since Nthawm young is the youngest sister, she listened to Nthawm old who is the older sister, and so they went to the other road. They went to the other road and got to the witch’s house, and then the witch said, “Oh hey, two young girls. What are you girls doing here?” Nthawm old said, “My mom is pregnant and she wants us to call you to go and help her.” The witch then said, “Okay, I’m still busy feeding my pigs, wait until I feed my pigs first.” The two looked at each other and Nthawm young said, “I don’t think that you are our grandma, because our grandma has a black mole on her face”. The witch then picks up a little piece of mud and put it on her face to make it look like a mole. She then said, “Hey look I have a mole right
here. Come inside and eat before you girls go back home”. The two girls then went inside of her house. They ate and then Nthawm young said, “I don’t think that you are our grandma, because when we get to our grandma’s house she loves us very much and she feeds us eggs”. The witch then said, “If that’s it then what kind of eggs do you want to eat?” Nthawm young said that she wants to eat scrambled eggs. And Nthawm old wants to eat boiled eggs. After the lunch, the witch said that she is still busy and she will come by later. She said that she doesn’t know the way to their house so she gave the two girls ashes and she wants them to leave her a trail of ashes to their house. Nthawm young said, “But you come to our house all the time”. The witch said that she forgot where the house is. So then they went home and Nthawm young didn’t believe the witch so she threw away all of the ashes but Nthawm old was leaving the trail of ashes to their house. When they got home, Nthawm young said to her mom that they went to the other road instead of the black road. Her mom got angry with her daughters and she ran away and left her two daughters. The witch was carrying a basket and a sickle. And when the witch got to the house, Nthawm young said, “Grandma, why do you have a sickle in your hand and why are you carrying a basket?” The witch said, “I got them to cut off some necks, I got them to get some brains, and I’m carrying a basket to carry some meat”. Nthawm young was so scared. The witch then asked where the two girls were going to sleep. Nthawm old was dumb and she told the witch that she is sleeping on her bed. Nthawm young said that she is sleeping somewhere else. Later that night, the witch got Nthawm old and ate her up. The witch was looking for Nthawm young but didn’t find her anywhere. In the morning Nthawm young was up near the roof and told the witch not to eat her. She told the witch not to eat her and she’ll feed the witch some food and help her plant seeds so it can grow high into the sky so they can reach her parents so the witch can get more meat. The witch said, “Okay okay”. Nthawm young then fed her some food and she planted some seeds and watered them everyday. Nthawm young told the witch to say, “grow, grow big and bigger to the seed so that it can grow faster.” The witch then said that line. But Nthawm said, “grow, grow tall and taller.” Later then, the witch’s seed grew out to be just a short and wide tree while Nthawm young’s seed grew out to be a very tall tree. She told them to go and climb their own tree, and the witch said, “Okay”. The witch climbed her tree and it was not as tall. Nthawm young climbed her tall tree and said asked her mother to come back and pick her up. Nthawm young tricked the witch and then the witch got pissed and then climbed Nthawm young’s tree after her. Nthawm young told the witch that she wouldn’t be able to climb it unless the witch puts oil on the tree. The witch then puts oil on the tree and then she couldn’t climb it and then got an axe to chop the tree. And then Nthawm young told the witch that she wouldn’t be able to chop it down. To do it she needs to use her axe on stones first for the axe to be able to be sharp. By then the axe was all chipped up and the witch wasn’t able to chop down the tree. And Nthawm young asked her mother to come back and pick her up again. And then Nthawm young’s mother came and
picked her up. Her mother dropped down a human sized bag and Nthawm jumped into it and the witch jumped into the other bag and the other bag ripped and the witch fell all the way down from the sky to the ground. The witch’s head exploded into pieces and her bones became rocks and stones, and her blood became red rocks, her meat became vegetable, her brains became the plants on the side of the roads. And that is it.”

Tswb interprets this particular childhood story as a lesson for girls to be obedient. Tswb states that a young girl should listen to her parents and behave in a proper manner in order not to be like Nthawm old. Growing up, Tswb indicates that this story served as an example of what it meant to be a good daughter. One important lesson involved having good listening skills or being attentive like Nthawm young. The moral of this dab neeg is to listen and obey a parent’s order for the greater good of a person. To not listen and disobey, a daughter will face similar consequences like Nthawm old. This particular dab neeg also illustrates the binary of what constructs the ‘ideal’ Hmong ‘good’ daughter in that Nthawm young represents the good daughter and Nthawm old represents the bad daughter.

This story also directly implies the younger daughter embodying the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman rather than the older daughter because Nthawm young is obedient, listens and is thus a good daughter. Throughout the story, Nthawm old gets the wrong information and thus is represented as a bad leader. Not only does she lead her sister to the path that leads to the witch, but also she does not even recognize her own grandmother and falls for the witch’s traps. Therefore, her death and being eaten by the witch represents the consequences of a bad daughter that does not obey and listen. On the other hand, Nthawm young is portrayed as the “‘ideal’ good”

Hmong daughter because not only does she listen to her older sibling even though her sibling is wrong, she’s clever enough to think of tactics against the witch and have power over her. Toward the end of the story when Nthawm young’s mother assists and pulls her up to heaven, Nthawm young represents that being a good daughter leads to good things in life and being supported by one’s mother to the very end.

Being the ‘ideal’ good daughter is an indication that the good daughter will also become the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman in the future. Tswb suggests that a good daughter is easier to raise, and therefore her upbringing is more disciplined, which can lead to being a good Hmong woman one day. Tswb states that being obedient leads a woman into,

“[being] a good person, a good daughter who [can] cook and clean. [These are the] qualities of a Hmong woman. It is very hard to be a mother, because if your daughter doesn’t listen, it is very hard to tame her. There are some that you yell at them (daughters) and lecture them and they understand you and they do it. And there are some of those (daughters) if you do that (yell), they get even worst and you have to tell them nicely.” 16

Tswb primarily mentions how motherhood plays a large part in the making of an "ideal good" Hmong daughter. To raise a daughter that listens and obeys results in an easier process of discipline and a better relationship between a mother and a daughter. Tswb also stated in her interview that a mother’s reputation is highly interconnected with a mother’s upbringing of her daughter. To have a good daughter not only represents a good status for the mother, but for the family and the community as well. Tswb, for example, has been able to ‘pass’ through the stages of

being a good Hmong daughter, and now as a mother as she has demonstrated she can raise another generation of good Hmong daughters as they listen and obey. To Tswb, this *dab neeg* taught her to be more like Nthawm young and one day control the upbringing of her daughters to be similar to that of Nthawm young. In doing this, she is imposing the ‘ideal’ good Hmong daughter ideology. This story for Tswb represents a good example of what the ideal Hmong woman is like because it implies that you have to be a good daughter first to become of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman.

In general, the different *dab neeg* stories that were told and recalled upon by the women all focused or centered on the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman and the good Hmong daughter. These *dab neeg* described a linear transformation to becoming the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. These stories were provided and thus acted as cultural practice in passing on knowledge about women’s identity and gender performance. However, these stories also act as a form of policing women’s identity and gender roles so that they follow the expectations of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. Storytellers and *dab neeg* police the linear process of shaping Hmong women’s identity and gender roles.

Drawing from interpretation of Bentham’s Panopticon tower, Michel Foucault states that the tower was used as a tool to police and discipline people’s mind and body in order to obtain and maintain power. ¹⁷ Utilizing Foucault’s interpretation, the practice of *dab neeg* resembles the ideology of the Panopticon tower. As little girls, these women grew up listening to various forms of *dab neeg*.

---

(stories) that have influenced their identities and gender roles. Dab neeg implement certain messages about the ideal Hmong women, which metaphorically acts as the policing ideologies of making Hmong women at a young age to discipline themselves in following expectations of the ideal Hmong woman. The storytellers themselves are also policing the women because they observe the upbringing of these women. Certain dab neeg were particularly told to these women as little girls when they misbehaved. Thus, certain dab neeg served as reminders of what it meant to be a good daughter, wife and mother. These constant reminders of being the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman resulted in reinforcing gender identity and performance. In addition, Foucault’s interpretation of the Panopticon Tower resembles how these women as little girls, were policed to follow the examples of the female characters in the dab neeg they grew up hearing. For some women to recall dab neeg stories, and recognize the resemblance of their identities and gender role interpretations embodying the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman, they have thus policed and disciplined themselves to be like the female protagonist in the stories. This again reflects the influence dab neeg enforces on women’s identity and gender roles.

Paj Ntaub, Identity and Gender Performance

Women’s identity and gender roles are also influenced by the cultural practice of paj ntaub or embroidering. Six of the ten women interviewed indicated they learned to sew paj ntaub at a young age ranging from three to eight years old. The other four women who were born in the US indicated that they did not grow up learning to do paj ntaub at a young age. Kee indicates, “people are just so stuck with school, work, raising a family, paj ntaub is such a time consuming activity, people
don’t really do it anymore.” 18 Kee, not learning to sew at a young age, argues that *paj ntaub* is less practiced because it takes a long time to learn and master. Though she does not dismiss the role of *paj ntaub* in Hmong culture, she acknowledges a balance Hmong women negotiate around values and beliefs from a US-Western society and Hmong culture. Kee further states ‘people’ do not engage in sewing *paj ntaub* as much anymore. She claims the decreasing practice of traditional embroidery among Hmong women in the U.S. maybe due to some assimilation of U.S.-Western society. Johnson and Yang also note that younger children are engaging in this cultural practice less and less. Johnson and Yang state that the use of television and Internet are being more utilized for entertainment than listening to oral storytelling (1992). Similarly, access to technology may be contributing factors that explain Hmong woman taking less interest in learning to sew *paj ntaub* at a young age.

The women who grew up learning to sew *paj ntaub* at a young age had similar experiences. They recall sitting along with their older sisters, mother, and grandmothers for hours during the day trying to master the skill of embroidering. The first step in learning to sew *paj ntaub* was keen observation of what their mothers and grandmothers were doing and then slowly learning to make Xs that eventually turned into beautiful and colorful designs. The practice of observation and then imitating what mothers were doing was key to understanding the ways of how to start the process of sewing *paj ntaub*.

---

As discussed in the literature review, these *paj ntaub* included many different symbolic representations. The women in the study generally viewed *paj ntaub* as a women’s task and a gender expectation for Hmong females. Mary-Louise Buley-Meisser states that Hmong women are responsible for upholding cultural practices within the Hmong culture (2012). *Paj ntaub*, as a gender expectation, was a role held by Hmong women to continue Hmong identity and to pass on gendered roles to their daughters.

In learning how to do *paj ntaub*, the representation of Hmong identity is reflected in the completed cloth pieces. Thus, this is a culturally significant practice that continues the representation of Hmong identity. Different women in the study expressed that *paj ntaub* served a different purpose and represented different meanings in Hmong culture. There are *dab neeg* that indicate that in the days before the written Hmong language became lost, the lost written language itself were the *paj ntaub* designs themselves. Some women indicated that *paj ntaub* acts as a documentation of our cultural identity. Nthawm states *paj ntaub* as,

“our [Hmong] encyclopedia, it’s the documentation system for the Hmong culture, because we don’t have any history about us. It’s what we use to document our history, our culture, our ways of life, values, and everything about us.”

Nthawm considers *paj ntaub* as a key cultural practice that upholds the identity of Hmong people. She regards the embroidery designs as markers toward the construction of Hmong identity. *Paj ntaub* is a cultural practice that transmits

---


cultural knowledge about the Hmong attire. It has also been historically passed down as a cultural practice that is a gendered role for women only. Other women suggested that though paj ntaub perpetuated gender expectations for Hmong women, it was also a space where women connected to one another. Jou states that paj ntaub was a,

“skill to just have, a way to connect to generations. I remember working on paj ntaub with my mom and grandma and I. That was three generations together. We would sit by the window when it was sunny and do paj ntaub. That’s when most of the stories would be told. They would tell me about their own history, their live journeys. Grandma told more stories about her life, how it was to be a teenager when she was in Laos and things like that. When we talk, it was things I was suppose to do already. When we cook and did paj ntaub; these are things we were supposed to do as females.”

In this space and time, Jou’s mother and grandmother perpetuate a gender performance but also act as cultural transmitters. As cultural teachers, Jou’s grandmother and mother are masters of producing various paj ntaub styles and designs. As mothers, they are reinforcing Jou to acquire the skills of paj ntaub and one day be able to make elaborative clothing for her husband and children. Paj ntaub has traditionally been an expected gendered space for Hmong women. In particular places where Hmong women gather together to sew paj ntaub, it provides a safe space for woman to speak, listen, and share stories with one another. Jou refers paj ntaub as an expected gender role but it also led for a space of gender resistance and construction. She indicates that paj ntaub is something that she is supposed to know how to do because she is a Hmong daughter. Her grandmother and mother further assist in gender formation by disciplining Jou’s gender performance and role. Thus, I argue that paj ntaub, aid in the making of an ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. Though paj ntaub enforces gender performances for Hmong
women, it is also a cultural practice that serves as a means of cultural survival and the Hmong identity.

Jou’s also thinks that *paj ntaub* is a practice that creates relations intergenerational relationships about Hmong women. The practice of doing *paj ntaub* lead women to interact at different levels as women from different generations. At the same time, these spaces of empowerment are also spaces that reinforce traditional gender role expectations. These sites also perpetuate patriarchal beliefs and values. Spaces or sites such as Jou mentions serve as bridges to other women in the family. However, they are also spaces where elder women police the upbringing and teaching of *paj ntaub* to younger women. More specifically, this policing intends to control the development and definition of a young woman’s womanhood through the practice of *paj ntaub*.

Xia also indicates that *paj ntaub* is a gender role that represents a female’s womanhood. She states,

“*paj ntaub* is like a marker of femininity, it’s like made by females, sewn by females but females are the sole producer of *paj ntaub*, in a way they produce that part of identity. The females are the producer of identity and only females are more appropriated to do it. It’s unmanly for men to do *paj ntaub*, it’s considered womanist. *Paj ntaub* since the Vietnam War has been used to as a way to record our history, so I guess it’s been used as a way to record *dab neeg*, but this is a recent usage of *paj ntaub*. *Paj ntaub* is an archive, it records a history. These *paj ntaub* not only does it on *dab neeg* but on our ways of lives, which we were.”

---

21 Xia Xiong (Personal interview), interview by Veronica Vang, Xia’s condo "women identity and gender role," *Tools of Perpetuation and Empowerment: The Influences of Dab Neeg and Paj Ntaub on the Construction of Identity and Gender Roles among Hmong/Hmong American women*, Podcast Audio, Jan 8, 2013.
The practice of paj ntaub as a gender role contributes to a Hmong woman’s identity. Vang indicates that traditional gender roles constitute a significant factor in the identification of a Hmong woman (2009). For example, a woman’s gendered duties can influence how people identify her within the Hmong family and larger community. The skill and role of paj ntaub takes years to master because this process involves many different techniques such as applique, reverse applique, cross stiches, etc. (See Appendix 1, 2 and 3 for different paj ntaub techniques).

Paj ntaub not only speaks to a Hmong woman’s identity but also to the type of woman she will become, and her subsequent importance in the family. Her capability to produce paj ntaub is assumed to result in her being a good housewife, mother to her family and especially devoted to the well being of her husband. Xia states,

“My earliest memory of paj ntaub is when my mom and I were sitting outside in a kwv teeg and she was trying to teach me to paj ntaub, and get the hang of it. And a couple doors down, another Hmong family was eating and people were passing by. A stuck a needle through the cloth and I was pulling it out, a lady walked by and said how good of a daughter I was, and how my mom must have been so proud. I remember feeling really pleased; I was embarrassed but happy because she praised me. My mom also taught all my older sisters to do paj ntaub; paj ntaub is a skill and source of pride. It’s a skill that’s highly valued in girls in our culture. It’s a reflection of a daughter, especially of a mother. If I didn’t do it right, it meant that she was a bad mother that she didn’t teach me right. It’s used as a measuring tool of how good of a Hmong daughter I am, and how good of a Hmong mother, my mom was. It reflects how “Hmong” I am and my potentially of becoming a wife.”

Xia’s mother’s actions reflect the policing of Xia in that she is able to control her daughter in producing paj ntaub and thus becoming a ‘good’ daughter. Xia’s

---

mother herself represents the ideal Hmong woman in this narrative because she’s mastered different techniques and designs of paj ntaub and polices her daughter’s cultural upbringing.

As previously noted in the discussion of dab neeg, the Hmong daughter that does not learn how to do paj ntaub is considered to be the ‘bad daughter’. Nthxhais states, “She’s no good, she’s not wife material, and she doesn’t care enough for the family to learn. I know my mom and my grandma did paj ntaub during their free time.”

Not being able to create or produce paj ntaub signifies failure as a Hmong woman, shame to the family, and a bad reputation for the mother. Women policing one another involves training our bodies to sit for long periods of time when learning to embroider or sew paj ntaub.

As mentioned in the literature review, during the 1970s, men and women in refugee camps started to collectively strategize a new form of visually recording their migration experiences, war and life before the war. They took narratives, life stories, dab neeg and traditional paj ntaub techniques to create pictorial images.

These pictorial images became known as a new form of paj ntaub—story cloths. Many of the younger women who grew up in the U.S. had some knowledge about the relationship between paj ntaub and story cloths. These story cloths also comprise specific messages about what it means to be a woman. Npaum Npais states that story cloths tell stories too. In particular, she comments that,

“The paj ntaub, I’ve seen, the woman was carrying a baby with a basket on her back with corn and veggies

---

and the men were doing farm work, the boys stayed with the dads and followed the dad’s way.”

These story cloths are also cultural mechanisms that provide stories and/or information about identity among Hmong people. Like paj ntaub, there are very strong messages about traditional gender roles for Hmong women. More specifically, Npaum Npais thinks these story cloths portray Hmong women as the nurturer of children, and the male doing physical chores to prove that he can provide for his wife. In this sense, the story cloth symbolically acts as the Panopticon Tower because they are hung on walls throughout a home, and examined for view by different family and community members. The visual presence of the story cloth is a constant reminder about a women’s identity and gender roles. Women may not be critically aware of the story cloths’ intention as all women regardless of age are equally exposed to the story cloths. The practice of dab neeg and techniques of traditional paj ntaub to produce story cloths are the cultural practices in defining and subsequently socializing the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. Dab neeg defines female characteristics that Hmong women respect and develop throughout their lives. Paj ntaub represents the gender roles of the ‘ideal’ Hmong women, and story cloths demonstrate the visual presentation of Hmong women in action. You hear it through dab neeg, you perform it with paj ntaub and you act upon it as story cloths put these identities and gender roles into play.

In general, the women in my study considered paj ntaub as a skill that has been historically praised for defining a women’s identity through this expected

---

gender performance. Having the skill to embroider not only defines a woman’sworth but also serves as an indication of the type of Hmong woman she will become. Being able to sew paj ntaub, Hmong women are more respected. They are able to master different techniques of paj ntaub, pass on cultural identity to future generations, and are considered as good mothers and the ‘ideal’ woman for policing and disciplining their ‘good’ daughters. Learning paj ntaub typically began at a young age in order to start policing and disciplining a woman to become a good daughter. Buley-Meissner indicates that girls as young as three years old learned to sew paj ntaub with other women (2012). As cultural teachers of paj ntaub, Hmong women reinforced a repeating cycle of expected gender identities and roles. Ava McCall discusses how older sisters, mothers and grandmothers teaching younger women different techniques of sewing (1999).

Though some of the younger women in my study did not grow up learning to sew paj ntaub, they still respect paj ntaub for its historically value. The outcomes of beautiful paj ntaub designs result in a woman having been a good Hmong daughter. Raising a good Hmong daughter indicates she was well disciplined and socialized to be a daughter-in-law, wife, and mother. However, a Hmong woman’s continuous practice and knowledge about paj ntaub also allows her to “police” women from younger generations. Mothers and sister/daughter-in-laws act as cultural transmitters that strictly discipline younger women’s upbringing. They represent ‘ideal’ Hmong women who have been good Hmong daughters, daughters-in-laws, wives and some mothers to two or more children. They likely navigate within
Hmong values and beliefs that enforce patriarchy through their cultural teachings.

In Nthawm’s narrative she states,

“with me specifically, even now a days, as educated and modern as I may be in some areas, I'm still very traditional, as the oldest daughter you have to take care of your in-laws, your household, you know that you are the eldest, you have to provide the best still for those who are younger than you are. You have to clean and maintain your kids, prep food for the family, you have to work hard to make money. It’s definitely something that has not just passed on through dab neeg, it’s something I grew up hearing a lot from my parents as well. That as a daughter, to be a good daughter, you have to do this and that. This is something that I pass down to my kids and to my sister-in-laws so that they can have good lives and be in peace with the husband’s family and to not bring bad reputation upon their natal family.”  

Nthawm’s participation in the policing and reinforcement of the ideal Hmong daughter speaks not only to unintentionally perpetuating patriarchy but also highlighting her respect and idealization for the continuous practice of traditional practices in Hmong culture.

Western Cultural Influences and Education

Paj ntaub and dab neeg act as tools of empowering Hmong identity, but also reinforce and shape women’s identity and gender roles. However, with influences of western cultural values and beliefs and access to education, women are contesting and reconstructing ideas about the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. The construction of critical lenses and hybrid identities has offered women different interpretations and meanings on how they view their identities and gender roles within a patriarchal

culture. Thus, women navigating through values and beliefs from a US-Western and
Hmong culture construct a hybrid consciousness.26

All the women in this study have developed hybrid identities. However
others have formulated a hybrid, critical consciousness from U.S-Western feminist
values and beliefs. All of the women in the study spoke of their experiences and have
navigated identities and gender roles within a border culture.27 This border culture
constitutes values and beliefs from both Hmong and U.S-Western society. Access to
education has played a major role in influencing how these women have interpreted
cultural practices that perpetuate patriarchy. Secondly, education has also played a
major role in their identity construction.

Nthawm states that her hybrid identity is a formulation of living
simultaneously in two different cultures. She states, “I think I am a unique blend of
being both a traditional Hmong women and at some times being modern. But for the
most part I am more traditional. Yet when it comes to the more general society, I can
be like modern, I could blend in as well.” 28 Her ability to “blend in” and represent
herself as unique is her agency in acknowledging how she adopts and negotiates
certain values and beliefs from both cultures.

Related to the development of a hybrid identity is the construction of a
hybrid consciousness. This hybrid consciousness allows Hmong women to contest
the cultural expectation of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman and patriarchy. In this study, I

26 Anzaldúa refers that the Mestiza woman constructs a ‘new’ mestiza consciousness from hybrid identities in a
border culture. Similar to Hmong women, hybrid consciousness are also constructed when Hmong women
navigate a US-Western and Hmong culture.
27 Gloria Anzaldúa refers to a border culture in regards to her theory of borderlands. She indicates that a border
culture are spaces which permit individuals to navigate hybrid identities and construct consciousness.
28 Nthawm Yang, (Personal interview), interview by Veronica Vang, Veronica’s bedroom “women identity and
gender role,” Tools of Perpetuation and Empowerment: “The Influences of Dab Neeg and Paj Ntaub on the
learned that the creation of critical, hybrid consciousness results in developing critical lenses. Therefore, a critical lenses resulting from the development of a hybrid consciousness also provided Hmong women an opportunity to contest patriarchy in marital relationships. For example, Nthawm states,

“this silent practice we have were you know where the men walk in front of the women and the women can not walk in front of their husbands and my thing is whatever. My thing is that you either walk beside me, or next to me not in front of me. I mean not literally, with that implication that ‘I'm better than you, and you are lower than me so you have to be behind me. ‘ That, I completely disagree with.”

I suggest that in this space, Nthawm incorporates U.S.-Western feminist beliefs of fighting for equality among women and men in marital relationships. In addition, Nthawm’s reference to ‘silent practices’ reflects values and expectations associated with the ‘ideal’ woman. In Nthawm's narrative, the ‘ideal’ woman is submissive and does not contest her husband. She gives her husband full authority and respect by not walking in front of him. Nthawm’s hybrid critical consciousness, denies the expected gender roles of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. She reshapes her concept on gender performance and practices equal respect in her marriage.

In addition, Ntsuag offers a similar interpretation about gender equality reflecting Hmong and U.S.-Western values and beliefs. Ntsuag states,

“it is unfair but I have accepted the fact that that's how the culture is and that's how the grandparents have passed down the knowledge. And it's hard for us to, not many people who are willing to change that. In USA, we realize that there is more equal opportunities for men and women, we have to adapt to the society, as the world changes, our minds become more opened minded instead we expose, as Hmong people migrate to countries that more wealthy... We see that American women are equally leveled with the men

and it’s something that Hmong women look up doing in their relationships. But it’s hard for the guys to do that."  

Though Ntsuag disagrees and believes that expected gender roles are unfair, she also appreciates and acknowledges education as an influence to fight for gender equality. Ntsuag indicates that Hmong men find it difficult to cope with Hmong women demanding change and equality in Hmong culture. Men, thus, feel emasculated when women seek gender equality in marital relationships because it is men who benefit from patriarchy as expressed in Hmong culture.

Women are slowly beginning to make changes regarding gender identity and roles. In the personal experience of Ntsuag, she states that, “in certain occasion he will allow me to lead if I am right. But in certain occasions, he will let me rise and lead. When I know that he’s right, I will not argue and let him lead.”  

In Ntsuag’s narrative, she contests the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman as powerless. She refers her martial relationship with her husband as mutual and balanced when it comes to leadership. In this space, Ntsuag redefines expected gender identities and roles and takes charge on decisions. Her hybrid consciousness permits her to practice gender roles differently and establish a more equal relationship among her husband.

In addition, Hmong women with critical lenses are also challenging patriarchy thorough their status as mothers. Some of these women are contesting gender roles by encouraging and teaching their children, no matter the sex, about gender performances. Ntsuag Xiong states, “in my family, I teach the boys and girls

---

to be equal to one another, they learn to do the same chores because we live in a world that is really hard and we need to help one another.” 32 Ntsuag redefines gender performances and teaches her children to do equal work. Intermixing gender roles among her children not only change gender roles but contests patriarchy. In addition to challenging patriarchy, Ntsuag also contest the make-up of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman.

Younger women like Kee Xiong are also using their critical lenses to pinpoint the implications and influences of paj ntaub and dab neeg. With their critical lenses they contest the make-up of ‘ideal’ make up of the Hmong woman by offering their analysis and the meanings of dab neeg. Kee states, “in terms of characters in the stories, there was sexism in them...if I have a child and told my child this story, I feel like instead of saying, “Oh this is what you’re supposed to be like, I would say, as a daughter you need to set an example, but make sure everyone knows their place as well.” 33 Kee’s comment about her teaching a future daughter is also an illustration of resisting patriarchy and the expectations of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. Though Kee will retell the dab neeg she chooses to retell, her critical lenses and hybrid and consciousness will play a role in interpreting the overall morality of the story. In other words, Kee does not intend to perpetuate moral sexuality; i.e. ‘ideal Hmong woman. Even though Kee intends to speak to her future daughter(s) about empowerment, she is perpetuating traditional gender identities. In other words, she

is encouraging her daughter to assert some type of agency, but within a traditional
gendered space. Their navigations in a border culture allow them to be a part of a
collective women’s movement in resisting patriarchy and reconstructing identity,
expectations and roles.

This project does not dismiss the critical cultural significance of dab neeg and
paj ntaub. My intent is to critically analyze these cultural practices and interpret
how they influence and shape women’s identities and gender roles. I hope to
provide a new dialogue or discourse about Hmong women’s identity and gender
roles. My primary goal is to contribute to a complex and dynamic understanding
about the construction of the ‘ideal Hmong woman.’ This study examines how dab
neeg and paj ntaub perpetuate a patriarchal heterosexist Hmong culture but also is
limiting to other fields of study that should be acknowledged in future studies.
**CONCLUSION**

The interpretations and stories that the women in this thesis project shared with me have been a tremendous help in comprehending how the cultural practices of *paj ntaub* and *dab neeg* influence women’s identity and gender roles. Women that practice more traditional customs of the Hmong culture are more likely to engage in the act of policing other women in order to uphold the cultural value of the ‘ideal’ woman, the good daughter. On the other hand, women who have had access to education and have been influenced by U.S.-Western feminist beliefs and values, appear to have created a hybrid consciousness. Thus, they construct critical lenses that challenge patriarchy and set gender identities and roles imposed upon Hmong women.

In general, all the women in this study have formulated hybrid identities. However, the experiences of how these women constructed their hybrid identities differ. For example, some of these women’s hybrid identities have been formulated through their experiences with migration and resettlement. For these women, they too, have had to navigate and negotiate values and beliefs from Hmong and U.S.-Western culture. Julian and Ganguly-Scarse discuss how migration and resettlement construct transnational identities (1998). These transnational identities are also hybrid identities because they involve other factors and experiences in creating a more complex female Hmong identity. Though these women may not be critical of how *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* reinforces expected women’s identities and gender roles, they are still aware of patriarchy and thus dispute, negotiate and contest patriarchy in other spaces.
My mother and father have been married for twenty-five years and never once divorced. During dinner one night, my father stated to my mother that he was not going to eat what she had cooked. He stated that he was not in the mood to eat the chicken-herb soup. Instead, he wanted my mother to make fried chicken. I heard my mother reply, “from now own, you do it. If you don’t like my cooking, make your own and stop complaining!” Her angry tone expresses not only her frustration towards my father’s picky eating but also denies his demand. In this space, my mother disputes my father’s authority and declares for equal gender performance. In addition, it is possible that these women do not dispute the critical perspectives of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* as a way to transmit Hmong culture, history and identity. In this space, I argue they perform as cultural transmitters thus contributing to the overall survival of Hmong identity.

In addition, younger women’s exposures to U.S.-Western education and feminist beliefs influenced the creation hybrid identities and consciousness. These Hmong women, utilize their hybrid critical consciousness to form different interpretations of their gender identity and role, which challenges the notion of the ‘ideal Hmong woman’ and contests patriarchy.

As cultural customs, *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* are practiced and imposed onto women at a young age. Thus, these practices perpetuate particular meanings about women’s identities and gender roles. *Dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* are used as tools that assist women to police and discipline other women in becoming good or expected gendered representations of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. In general, the female protagonists in the *dab neeg* set ‘good’ or expected gendered examples for Hmong
women to follow. For example, the female protagonists in the *dab neeg* are good housewives because they can cook, clean, sew *paj ntaub*, and nurture the children. They are also obedient and submissive to their partners. To provide an interpretation of an ‘ideal’ Hmong woman from *dab neeg*, the female protagonist in the stories are compared to bad Hmong women and bad daughters to showcase the qualities that are expected from the ‘ideal’ Hmong women. More specifically, they are good Hmong daughter first, then become a daughter-in-law/wife and eventually a successful mother. This linear transformation of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman perpetuates patriarchy and expected gender identities and roles. It is a cycle that continues the formation of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman.

*Paj ntaub* as a cultural practice takes much patience and concentration. It consists of many techniques and designs used to decorate Hmong attire. Specific designs and colors are used to represent certain Hmong clan identities and regions of where Hmong people originate. *Paj ntaub* acts as a practice that perpetuates Hmong identity and can unite women from different generations. Women from different ages gather together to sew for hours. They create spaces of empowerment and channels of cultural knowledge. From a critical feminist perspective, *paj ntaub* is utilized as a tool, which allows women to police one another in upholding the expectations of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman—being able to produce *paj ntaub* reflects her gender identity. As a gender performance, the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman has mastered different techniques and can produce different *paj ntaub* designs for Hmong attire. Older women police and discipline younger girls at a young age to use proper colors and construct specific designs to make the most beautiful Hmong
clothing. Younger women police older women by observing if older women uphold this expected gender role—if they do, they are considered the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman.

Older women in this study were raised in more traditional, patriarchal households. Their values and beliefs from the Hmong culture still influence their ways of policing younger women. Three of the ten women in the study were born in villages located in the mountains of Laos and had more traditional upbringings. Regional location and age impact the forms of upbringing these women were exposed (Kaiser 2004) to therefore affecting women’s interpretation of identity and gender roles. Women who grew up in traditional households were trained to become good daughters and eventually good mothers. Older women monitor younger women to uphold similar identities and gender roles taught to them as a young girl in order to uphold the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman.

Though younger women police older women to uphold the expectations of an ‘ideal’ Hmong woman, they also contest the expectations of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman. Younger women influenced by western feminist values, beliefs and education construct fluid, hybrid identities and consciousness within a border culture. These younger women who have access to education, incorporate U.S.-Western cultural influences that create a hybrid, critical consciousness and lenses. They contest patriarchy, gender roles and identities within the Hmong culture. Their hybrid identities and consciousness allow these women to re-interpret gendered implications of dab neeg and paj ntaub. Their experiences with resisting patriarchy are illustrated in their examples of challenging gender roles in relationships with their husbands and children. With these hybrid identities and critical lenses, these
women are collectively working toward a Hmong feminist movement to fight for gender equality within a patriarchal culture.

Though the young Hmong women have more access to education and are more influenced by U.S.-Western values and beliefs, older women also have constructed and negotiated hybrid identities. Their experiences with war, migration and resettlement are factors that influence the formation of hybrid identities. Older women contest patriarchy outside of dab neeg and paj ntaub discourse and practice. In other words, they challenge male authority in different spaces and places. For example, my mother and I have had plenty of small talks about my mother wanting to leave my father and divorcing him for his wrong doings.

At one point, after a very serious argument, my mom left my father for a whole month. Not only did I witness my father cooking his own meals and washing his own clothes, he had asked me two or three times when my mother intended to return. In addition, older women, such as my mother, who perpetuate and represent an ‘ideal’ Hmong woman may not be as critical about the patriarchy and expected gender identity and roles reflected in dab neeg and paj ntaub. In these spaces, I argue older women consider these cultural practices as vital in the overall survival of Hmong identity and community. In this space, they are performing as cultural transmitters. They pass on cultural knowledge through dab neeg and paj ntaub as they consider these customs as essential to Hmong culture. Thus, through their hybrid identities, they contest patriarchy in different spaces and places. An example would the kitchen area. Like paj ntaub, women gather to cook but to also reconnect with other women where they ‘gossip’ about their husbands and family
relationships. Once in a while, I will hear married Hmong women make jokes about their husbands in the presence of other women.

What can generally be said from this study is that though all the women have formulated hybrid identities, younger women exposed to U.S.-Western feminist beliefs formulate a hybrid identity and consciousness that differs from older women. More specifically, younger women tend to contest the expectations of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman and patriarchy, *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* from critical lenses. They partake in a movement that challenges power and gender dynamics in Hmong patriarchal culture in different spaces and practices such as early marriage, obtaining an education, and failing to master the cultural practices of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub*. Hmong women’s cultural and critical feminist voices further complicate the analysis of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman, and how *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* influence women’s identities and gender. This study’s purpose is not to dismiss the practice of *dab neeg* or *paj ntaub* but to offer a critical analyses of how these practices influence and/or shape the construction of Hmong women’s identity and gender roles. More specifically, this thesis focuses specifically focuses on the construction of the ‘ideal’ Hmong woman.

Finally, it is important to mention the study’s limitations. For example, this research does not touch upon queer Hmong women and their interpretations of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub*. Nor does this thesis include the voices of men and their understanding of these cultural practices and the inherent messages of patriarchy. In addition, this study does not directly address or examine the topic of sexuality from a male’s perspective. Future studies may want to examine and focus
specifically on Hmong sexuality from males and females as another approach in analyzing the formations of an ‘ideal’ Hmong woman and man. These ‘ideal’ identities may further speak to the formation of a Hmong American identity.

Finally, for Hmong women in my family to fight for gender equality and understand how the cultural value of the ‘ideal’ Hmong women is perpetuated, there needs to be more conversations and dialogues among women from different generations. Women engaging in discourses with women of other generations can break barriers of generational misunderstandings and permit for further complex discussions of women’s identities and gender roles. These types of interactions could begin as informal talking circles amongst themselves in their own homes. Group meetings can eventually take places in Hmong community spaces. It is my hope that these discourses will engage Hmong women, not only in my family, but also in the larger Hmong community.
APPENDIX 1:

This *paj ntaub* design contains applique and chain stitch technique. Brown and blue colors are used for the frames to enhance the inside symbol.  

---

APPENDIX 2:

This story cloth represents the *dab neeb* of “Nuj Nplaib thiab Nthawm”. This story cloth portrays the mixture of *dab neeg* and *paj ntaub* being utilized to demonstrate a visual pictorial tale.  

---

APPENDIX 3:

This bag contains cross-stitched embroidery. It is a book bag that uses bright red and forest green colors to elaborate the *paj ntaub* design. 36

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Hmong Cultural Center, and Hmong Archives, St. Paul, MN, *HmongEmbroidery.org* (blog),
http://www.hmongembroidery.org/applique.html

Hmong Cultural Center, and Hmong Archives, St. Paul, MN, *HmongEmbroidery.org* (blog),
http://www.hmongembroidery.org/inspiredesigns.html

Hmong Cultural Center, and Hmong Archives, St. Paul, MN, *HmongEmbroidery.org* (blog),
http://www.hmongembroidery.org/applique.html


McCall, Ava. "Speaking through cloth: Teaching Hmong history and culture through textile art." (Heldref Publications) 90, no. 5 (September 1999): 1-12.


