

CONDUCTING BUSINESS WITH THE HMONG

Greetings



Traditional Hmong usually do not shake hands with women and Many Hmong women are embarrassed shaking the hands of a male. A smile shows a warm welcome and friendship. "Hello" or "Hi" is "Nyob zoo," pronounced "Nyah zhong." "What's your name?" is "Koj lub npe hu li cas?" pronounced "Gaw loo bay hoo lee jah?"

Conversation



When talking to a Hmong family, speak to the head of the household, usually the father. Always use simple terminology because many Hmong have a limited English vocabulary. Repeat questions and allow time to think about responses. Hmong may say: "maybe" or "I will try" instead of a definite yes or no. "Okay" or "yes" and affirmative nodding may mean they are listening, not that they understand and it may mean "no" if they feel pressured. Confidentiality is valued. Hmong use title such as Honored Uncle, Younger Brother and Esteemed Mother so age plays an important role in the respect shown in conversations.

Gestures



It is rude to point your fingers at anyone or cross your legs so that your feet point at anyone else.

Attire



Hmong may wear unusual accessories such as red necklaces, white cloths around the wrists, and red or white strings on wrists, necks, or ankles to keep *khwan* in place or for other health and religious purposes. The Hmong wear clothing that is decorated with fine embroidered adornments done by Hmong women. Hmong groups are usually identified by characteristics of women's clothing. For example, the White Hmong women wear skirts of unbleached linen, while the skirts of the Black Hmong and Green Hmong are dyed indigo.

Hierarchy/Family



Hmong have close family and clan relationships. Traditional Hmong are divided into clans or tribes that share the same paternal ancestry. Each clan has a leader and a shaman who acts as minister, doctor and psychologist and tends to spiritual and health issues. The shaman's respect is valuable. Reverence for ancestors and the elderly is important. Marriage is an important goal for Hmong families. Women marry young, must marry outside of their clan and live with the husband's family. Traditional Hmong men take on an adult name as a sign of maturity after they have married and had their first child. Hmong men and women may have the same names. It is embarrassing and rude to incorrectly label the relationships between the members of a Hmong family so ask first. Traditional Hmong families do not want to hear comments about their children (e.g. "your child is cute") because if a bad spirit hears it might take the child's soul away.

Manners



Generally Hmong are happy and hospitable. Looking directly into the face or direct eye contact is considered rude to traditional Hmong so don't be surprised if the person you are talking to looks down or away. Laughing or making rough comments is rude and shows insincerity. Sitting too close to the opposite gender while talking is inappropriate. When entering a Hmong home, take off your shoes and don't step on the doorsill. It is an insult to refuse an offered seat, drink, meal or gift. Traditional Hmong elders do not want strangers to touch their or their children's heads.

Cognitive Styles



Decision-making may take time – the head of the household may confer with relatives or clan leaders for important decisions. Hmong elders may want a second opinion so they will not be solely accountable if the decision is wrong. Hmong may be reluctant to ask questions because it shows disrespect and might make the speaker angry.

Currency



Ethnic Make-Up



8 million Hmong live in China and another 4 million live in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma, the US, France, Canada and Australia. It is estimated that 45,000-50,000 live in Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wausau, Sheboygan, LaCrosse, Green Bay and other cities. Hmong in the United States have undergone tremendous cultural change. Most Hmong in Laos were rice farmers. Hmong refugees fled to Thailand after the Vietnam War to escape communist retaliation for their support of the American war effort and from there to the United States and other countries.

Language



"Hmong" means "blooming fertile." The Hmong language is tonal. The various dialects are Stripe Hmong, Green or Blue Hmong and White Hmong.

Hmong education traditionally is only verbal. Hmong language and traditions were passed to each generation by word of mouth. The Hmong language was not written down until the early 1950s when Catholic and Protestant missionaries designed a Hmong alphabet. Only Hmong Catholics and a few of the young Hmong read and write Hmong.

Religion



Most traditional Hmong follow an animist religion and believe in ancestral, house, natural and evil spirits (*phi*), and in reincarnation. Traditional homes have altars where ancestral spirits visit, bringing protection from illness and natural disaster if pleased. Traditional shaman rituals may involve animal sacrifice. Some Hmong believe that they are protected by thirty-two spirits or *khwan*, which bring health and prosperity. Some believe that the *khwan* of people who die by accident, violence or in childbirth are not reincarnated and become evil spirits. Surgery and autopsy interfere reincarnation and allow evil spirits to enter. Hmong funerals last 3 days: proper burial and worship of ancestors is crucial to the health, safety and prosperity of the family. Some Hmong in the US have converted to Christianity.