

**The Power of the Spoken Word  
in Defining Religion and Thought: A Case Study**

**By**

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**Abstract**

This essay explores the relationship between religion and language through a literature review of animist scholarship and, in particular, a case study of the animist worldview of Hmong immigrants to the United States. An analysis of the existing literature reveals how the Hmong worldview (which has remained remarkably intact despite widely dispersed settlements) both informs and is informed by the Hmong language. Hmong is contrasted with English with regard to both languages' respective affinities to the scientific worldview and Christianity. I conclude that Hmong and other "pre-scientific" languages have fundamental incompatibilities with the Western worldview (which both informs and is informed by dualistic linguistic conventions of modern language, a modern notion of scientific causality, and Judeo-Christian notions of the body/soul dichotomy). This incompatibility proves to be a major stumbling block for Western scholars of animist religion, who bring their own linguistic and cultural biases to their scholarship.

In the West, the world is increasingly seen through the lens and language of the scientific worldview. This scientific worldview consists of the importance of material and linear causality, as well as the idea that reduction to categories or the smallest common entity is the most accurate way of understanding material things or concepts. Additionally, this worldview has linguistic conventions that are associated with its development and perpetuation. These conventions are primarily expressed in modern languages, ones that have developed alongside science, and often express dualism, dialectical oppositions, and causal relationships. In the scientific worldview, the phenomena of history, psychology, and physics (which in previous centuries were addressed as theological or philosophical issues), are increasingly seen as materially

causal, with this causality gaining exclusive rights over how we think about the world and how it functions.

The confrontation of religion and science would be inconsequential if the two had no pretensions in explaining one another, as they may if scientific causality seeks permanent dominance over religious thought. While science can constrain religious thought, it rarely has something constructive to offer regarding theology. However, the scientific worldview, and its linguistic conventions, can certainly influence what forms of religion are possible in a given society based on these linguistic conventions. Modern English, and other modern languages, have grown and evolved first with a Christian and later a scientific worldview, and as a result modern language both reflects and perpetuates them.

In rare cases, it is possible to see what happens when Western scientific causality encounters an otherwise “pre-modern” worldview. One particularly poignant example of such an encounter is the Hmong immigration to the United States, a people who have throughout their entire history been animists. The Hmong immigrated to the U.S. from the late 1960s onward, following their engagement alongside the U.S. in the Vietnam War. The study of the Hmong in the United States allows us to explain: 1) what relationship the scientific worldview, and perhaps worldview more generally, has with religion; and 2) what relationship language, i.e. English, has to animism<sup>1</sup>, and whether a language’s conceptual framework has a direct relationship to both the development and maintenance of particular religions.

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<sup>1</sup> Though the term “animism” has in the past been associated with a more primitivist attitude towards animist cultures, in recent years the term has gained currency among scholars and animists themselves. It is now the preferred term among scholars of the Hmong and other animist cultures.

This essay, which is primarily a literature review and analysis, also asks a more general question: how does the conceptual framework of language interact with religion? How much does religion depend upon certain basic conceptual assumptions about the world that are particular to that people or religion? Do particular languages lend themselves to particular religions or worldviews? In the tradition of Durkheim's paradigmatic case study, this essay offers the Hmong not as *the* case study concerning various elements of religion, but perhaps a helpful one. The Hmong are particularly interesting in that they have been mostly isolated and doggedly anti-state for the majority of their existence<sup>2</sup>. They are migratory, but also are quite happy to settle (much like many agricultural tribes). They were forcefully displaced from their native land and scattered in resettlements throughout the United States, but their culture has remained remarkably intact. This essay will explore the ways in which language, culture, and worldview are intertwined with religious beliefs, and how well a religion can survive in the face of significant challenge to any one of these particular elements.

*The History of Animist Theory:  
Moderns Making Sense, and Non-sense, of the Pre-modern*

Numerous theories of animism have been presented over the years, with a particular fascination held on the part of early anthropologist missionaries, sociologists, and modern religious scholars. The following is a critical summary of the main theoretical propositions of the colonial and post-colonial scholars of religion with regards to animism. Each of these theorists contributed to what is now a vast body of work concerning animist beliefs, with much of the work being composed in the earliest stages

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), 13. This non-fiction account of a young Hmong girl with epilepsy is meticulously researched, and provides extensive cultural, religious, and historical background for anyone interested in studying the Hmong. It is as much the story of an ethnic group in transition as it is the story of one girl.

of modern religious scholarship. However, these theorists did not systematically address two primary challenges to animism. As a result, the modern scholarship regarding animism has suffered from two main errors: errors in conceptual framework related to the use of modern language as the descriptive vehicle, and errors concerning the views of animists with regards to causality, when animism does not use Western, linear causality in its symbolic framework.

First is the problem of language: Tylor, Durkheim, and Eliade (the major post-colonial and modern scholars concerned with animism) are all guilty of relatively simple, but very consequential, errors in translation and linguistic attributions, which makes their theories incomplete, somewhat simplistic, and full of the errors which many scholars now ascribe to primitivists more generally. Second, these scholars could not fully appreciate the all-encompassing nature of the scientific worldview, and how this would influence Western academia's views concerning causality, notably theological causality. This particularly Western worldview colored much of the early work on animism. More recent scholars, such as Harvey, Bird-David, and Hallowell, have been able to address some of these errors, using a more post-modern approach to address the problem.

*The Problem of Language: Does Anyone Know What "Spirit" Means?*

Religious scholars, until very recently, shunned the word "animism" as a product of colonial and post-colonial primitivism, and the early anthropologists' fascination with all things "native". This fear certainly seems grounded when one considers the work of one of the more prolific early religious anthropologists, E.B. Tylor. Tylor's most famous two-volume work, *Primitive Culture*, was published in 1871, and reflects a certain cultural evolutionist tendency that is a hallmark of the period. The first line of Tylor's

chapter on Animism is, from a modern perspective, a temptation to dismiss Tylor altogether: “Are there, or have there been, tribes of men so low in culture as to have no religious conceptions whatsoever?”<sup>3</sup> However, much of Tylor’s work informed the study of animism for many years to come, and given that Tylor was the first scholar of religion to study what he officially coined (though there are earlier uses of the word) “animism,” his early writing is worth analysis.

Tylor asserts that “Animism characterizes tribes very low in the scale of humanity, and thence ascends, deeply modified in its transmission, but from first to last preserving an unbroken continuity, into the midst of high modern [late nineteenth century] culture.”<sup>4</sup> Tylor seems to believe that all religion, as a result, is a pervasive error of human misattribution, and that modern religion is somehow a downstream product of an early human intellectual failure. Tylor, in addition to using language that endlessly offends modern sensibilities (“savages”, “lower races”, etc.<sup>5</sup>), describes the “soul” (according to the animists he studies) as:

the cause of life and thought in the individual it animates; independently possessing the personal consciousness and volition of its corporeal owner, past and present; capable of leaving the body far behind, to flash swiftly from place to place; mostly impalpable and invisible, yet also manifesting physical power, and especially appearing to men waking or asleep as a phantasm separate from the body of which it bears the likeness.<sup>6</sup>

Although many scholars have dismissed Tylor’s formulation as substantively incorrect (Tylor’s theory is overly dependant on the emergence of the soul through dreaming, for

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<sup>3</sup> Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (New York: Brentano Publishers, 1871), 417.

<sup>4</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 426.

<sup>5</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 427.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

example<sup>7</sup>), few have pointed out Tylor's particular linguistic constructions regarding the soul. Tylor uses language of duality and contrast to demonstrate the *difference* between the soul and the "corporeal" man. The language of duality is quite particular to the modern linguistic conceptual framework, and creates an imposition of concepts when explaining animism. "It", the soul, is something separate from the being that it animates, and hence it leaves the body far behind as it wanders in the realm of the dream. It is the "cause of life," a particularly Western conception of material causality that is completely foreign to most animists. The soul animates a man; i.e., the soul causes the man to be animate and human. Causality as a linear entity, as Tolstoy points out in his second epilogue to *War and Peace*, is primarily a product of Western historicism,<sup>8</sup> and does not necessarily have explanatory power to persons not educated in Western causality. In other words, Tylor's conception of the soul, or spirit, which has been passed down and used by the major scholars who have addressed animism since Tylor, is couched in terms of Western notions of causation.

Additionally, indigenous languages are often mistranslated into English, which creates further problems that add to the more complex conceptual issues. Tylor talks about the use of the same word in numerous "primitive" languages to mean *breath*, *life*, *soul*, and *spirit*. In the original Sanskrit, Tylor's example of *prana* certainly does not mean all of these things; its meaning is more subtle and nuanced than just a combination of any these words.<sup>9</sup> *Prana* is more accurately translated as an energetic quality or entity, but again, the English translation seems to lack the intended meaning. Unfortunately, just

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<sup>7</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1268.

<sup>9</sup> Tyler, *Primitive Culture*, 433.

one interesting mistranslation can perpetuate itself throughout a discipline's literature, especially if it offers explanatory power. Translators sometimes use three or more words to explain what one word in another language means, and often there is still no accurate description of meaning. In this way, many scholars of animist religions continued, and still continue, to make connections that may not be altogether correct. Though the translated word may be related to the original word, the translation is *not* in fact one perfect synthesis of the three meanings in another language; the word in the original language has a qualitatively different meaning. J.Z. Smith makes a point of this in his essay "Manna, Manna Everywhere"<sup>10</sup>, rightly recognizing this problem in modern religious scholarly work. With regards to animism, this problem often manifests in the translation of "souls" and "spirits" of animals, and places that are endowed with "spirits", when in fact, "soul" or "spirit" in the English sense are not the right words to use at all.

Taylor has rightly been accused of misunderstanding animism on a substantive level, and often these errors of substance are errors of language. However, many critics of Taylor did not criticize the errors in his linguistic conception of animism; hence, scholars continually made, and sometimes continue to make, the same mistakes. Interestingly, Taylor acknowledges the linguistic troubles that he encounters, commenting that "Terms corresponding with those of life, mind, soul, spirit, ghost, and so forth, are not thought of as describing really separate entities, so much as the several forms and functions of one individual being."<sup>11</sup> He still doesn't have it quite right, but he's getting closer. However, he negates all of this when he says that "Such ambiguity of language . . . will be found to

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004), 134.

<sup>11</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 435.

interfere little with the present inquiry.”<sup>12</sup> It is interesting, and unfortunate, that Tylor does not find to a way to engage this problem more thoughtfully, and instead brushes it aside. Post-modernism has brought about a more careful investigation of presumed conceptual constancy (including the constancy of the meanings of words), but more classically oriented scholars of religion tend to make the same errors, even in the post-modern era.

*Category and Causality: The Modern Explanatory Enterprise*

Durkheim takes up the criticism of Tylor in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Although this work is characterized as primitivist, I would argue that is a significantly more sensitive and thoughtful treatment of animism than other colonialists. Durkheim engages with the aboriginal religion in a systematic way, in contrast to Tylor, who brings a more obvious bias to the project. However, Durkheim persists in using the linguistic and causal errors perpetuated by Tylor.

Durkheim immediately makes a very unfortunate classification mistake when he defines all religion as “two religions [naturism and animism] bound together and interpenetrating but nonetheless quite distinct.”<sup>13</sup> He defines naturism as being concerned with “natural things . . . winds, rivers, stars, the sky.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast, he defines animism as a system that “addresses spiritual beings—spirits, souls, genies, divinities proper.”<sup>15</sup> But for the people who practice animism and naturism as Durkheim would define them, this distinction between the two is both false and arbitrary. Again, it seems as though the Western sense of “category” has imposed itself on a more amorphous, anti-dialectical

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 436.

<sup>13</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 47.



form. Durkheim then proceeds to analyze the various scholars who argue that naturism came first and animism second as a special case, and vice versa. The whole argument, however, becomes moot if the linguistic and conceptual division of “naturism” and “animism” as two separate entities does not reflect reality. As clearly shown by the Hmong, animists do not seem to distinguish spirits of places from spirits of animals or humans. The spirits who reside in a river in the Hmong tradition do not seem to differ in quality from the spirits of the cow, or the human person. They are all pieces of a spiritual realm that exists in an entirely non-transcendent, almost ordinary (though separate) realm from human beings.

Additionally, Durkheim is engaged in an essentially causal enterprise, first dismantling the theories of Tylor and Spencer, then moving to establish his own causal system for religion. He accepts the notion perpetuated by monotheistic religions, later clarified theoretically by Eliade, that there is a wide “abyss”<sup>16</sup> that separates the sacred and the profane. It is not clear from any scholarly work on animist religions that there is a wide abyss between the sacred and the profane. Animists clearly need help negotiating with the spirit world, and engage the help of shamans for this reason, but not because there is something especially “sacred” (in the Judeo-Christian sense) about the spirits. Western philosophers, historians, and scientists are especially fond of strong dialectics. Duality has enjoyed a privileged existence in scholarly formations since at least the classical Greek philosophers. When considering “pre-modern” animist religions, however, this paradigm loses its explanatory power.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 47.

*The Pre-Modern Becomes Post-Modern*

Graham Harvey, a specialist in contemporary paganism, offers some solutions to the problems posed by early scholarly constructions of animism. By developing an understanding that is more true to animism as understood by animists, Harvey goes some distance in getting us beyond the linguistic and causal errors that began with Tylor. Harvey criticizes the early efforts to explain animism both substantively and linguistically. He credits a number of contemporary scholars who have spent significant periods living among people who practice animism with having begun to break down the preconceptions of the early work set down by Tylor, Eliade, Durkheim, and the like. Harvey credits Hallowell, a scholar who lived with the Ojibwe tribe in Canada, with the notion that animists are not convinced that all things are humans (as previous scholars postulated), but that all things are “persons.”<sup>17</sup> Person in this sense also defies the modern language’s definition of “person”; that is, that all persons are humans. Hallowell refers to these persons as “other-than-human persons”, rather than the more frequently used “spirits”. Hallowell insists that this attribution of personhood to non-human things is not a failure of infantile human logic, as Tylor argued. In fact, in the groups that Hallowell studied, he found that the clan elders have a tremendously nuanced understanding of the “other-than-persons” that surround and interact with them<sup>18</sup>. This “other-than-person” title is an important distinction from the term “soul” or “spirit”, which implies a disembodiment so inherent in modern Western languages’ conceptions of spiritual matters. One scholar refers to this as the “spirit/body dualism of the modernist person-

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<sup>17</sup> Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 18.

<sup>18</sup> Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, 18.

concept.”<sup>19</sup> It is reasonable to argue that the “modernist person-concept” is more specifically a modern language person-concept, in that the way in which we speak about body and spirit, mind and body, etc. in English contributes to and perpetuates these dualities.

Harvey addresses this problem quite specifically when he comments that English (or “other languages inflected . . . by modernity”) simply lacks the language to talk about places as “persons” or “agents” without it sounding odd, as if it is a misuse of the words<sup>20</sup>. This is particularly salient when talking about the Hmong, who both believe in the personhood or spirituality of particular places, but because of their re-location to the U.S., must establish relationships with new places. In the United States, we simply do not think of places as being “persons,” though we do have some vague sense that particular places are endowed with an inexplicable spiritual aura. However, to say that that *place* has agency, or being-ness, would certainly not make sense in modernist terms (neither linguistically nor conceptually). Spirits for the Hmong are, as Harvey says, “material realities,” not “disembodied” spirits in the English sense, but “transformed agency.”<sup>21</sup> With these more nuanced translations, if one can call them that, one can begin to understand what the animists are really getting at, and how the modern scientific conceptual apparatus would have some real problems addressing these beliefs.

Harvey also addresses the issue of causality in animist belief systems. Causality becomes particularly relevant when discussing maintenance of the Hmong religion, a system that sees causality in entirely different terms from Western thought. For example, animists believe that conception happens when “a life essence” enters the womb at

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>21</sup> Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, 127.

quickenings<sup>22</sup>. However, it is not that they do not understand that intercourse results in pregnancy. Instead, they focus on a different kind of causal construction, one that privileges different factors than physical relationships.

Most interestingly, though perhaps unintentionally, Harvey describes animism in ways that to a large degree mimic Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Harvey asserts that in animism, persons (both human and otherwise) are always in the midst of “becoming persons.” Animists believe that “the world and its various powers are neither good nor bad (and perhaps neither sacred nor profane) in and of themselves, but open, efficacious and, above all, relational.” Additionally, he sees a more valid understanding of the body and soul duality as a process of “concentric circles becoming spirals.”<sup>23</sup> The similarities between Harvey’s constructions of animism and Deleuze and Guattari’s construction of the world are quite clear;<sup>24</sup> Harvey may not realize it, but he has embarked on a truly post-modernist enterprise.

#### *The Hmong: A Case Study*

It is surely fortuitous to have a post-modern conception of animism at hand to work with; colonial theoretical models are at a complete loss to explain the Hmong. Though it may seem odd to use this small group as an example to clarify larger theoretical issues, the example of Hmong immigration and assimilation is quite useful conceptually; their difficulty in acculturating is affected by the linguistic and conceptual discrepancies between Western language and culture and animist language and culture. The animist and “primitive” Hmong have recently relocated to large cities in the U.S.,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>24</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 9.

with little training or knowledge to guide their transition. Their story has become a particularly poignant example of what can happen to culture and religion when two utterly different worldviews come into contact with one another.

The Hmong, until the Vietnamese War, lived in the mountainous region of Laos, primarily above 3,000 feet where the opium that they sold to traders grew best. The Hmong originally came from China, where the first reference to their existence was in approximately 2200 B.C., when they were banished from the Yangtze plain<sup>25</sup>. This first reference is quite fitting; the Hmong were banished from multiple locations in China, settling finally in mountainous Southeast Asia where they have lived for centuries, virtually untouched.<sup>26</sup> The Hmong have, as a result of their removal from mainstream Chinese society, maintained a high level of intra-cultural consistency among their various tribal divisions.

Perhaps related to their repeated banishments, the Hmong have always maintained a certain degree of self-imposed “otherness”. As Anne Fadiman puts it: “Over and over again, the Hmong have responded to persecution and to pressures to assimilate by either fighting or migrating—a pattern that has been repeated so many times, in so many different eras and places, that it begins to seem almost a genetic trait.”<sup>27</sup> As a result of this isolation, both externally imposed and self-imposed, the Hmong have a religion that is entirely their own. Though it bears a striking resemblance to other animist religions around the world, to the Westerner, their rituals and beliefs seem entirely foreign and outside the realm of any sort of Western conception of reality.

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<sup>25</sup> Nusi Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1976), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 13.

### *Hmong Religion*

Summarizing Hmong religion would take an entire book, and as such is remarkably difficult to summarize in the pages of one short essay. To say that the Hmong ritual system is complicated would be a vast understatement. Here we will conduct a cursory survey of the most essential Hmong beliefs, before turning to examine how those beliefs are intertwined with language and worldview. From these relationships, which become even clearer when one examines the Hmong immigrants in the U.S., it may be possible to elucidate more general relationships between language, worldview, and religion.

To my knowledge there is only one English language book written about the Hmong religion. The book is written by a Thai anthropologist who lived with the Green Hmong<sup>28</sup> (tribes<sup>29</sup> are primarily distinguished by the color of clothes they choose to wear; there are Green Hmong, Black Hmong, Flower Hmong, etc.) for at least two years in a mountainous village in Thailand.<sup>30</sup> This scholar lived with one particular clan (there are usually a dozen or so clans in each tribe), but the rituals of particular clans are usually very similar due to mandated intermarriage between clans.

The most important characteristic of the Hmong religion, if it can be simplified thus, is the presence of souls in other non-human things and places. The Hmong have an intricate and well-developed system to negotiate with “spirits” (English translation). A

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<sup>28</sup> Chindarsi, in *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, translates the group that he spent time with as “Blue Hmong,” but they are more commonly known by the name “Green Hmong.”

<sup>29</sup> Some scholars are more comfortable with the term “cultural division”; “tribe” now carries the stigma of early western scholarship that characterized divisions within a group of people with an admittedly Western lens. However, I would argue that “cultural division” implies a difference in culture as the cause of the division, but in the case of the Hmong divisions among them are caused by geography, and differences in culture follow from those physical separations. Though “tribe” may not be a perfect English translation, “cultural division” carries perhaps unintended meaning.

<sup>30</sup> Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, 1.

Hmong shaman is the chief mediator between the human world and the “spirit” world, and as such is consulted on a nearly daily basis about a wide range of topics. The shaman is the most sought after advisor in a Hmong village, and, if the village leader is not a shaman himself, he will likely have decreased authority when compared to the village’s spiritual mediator.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, shamans are common to many animist cultures, and perform similar tasks in almost all cases.<sup>32</sup>

All aspects of Hmong life—from farming and house building to illness, marriage, and death—involve other-than-human persons. Ancestral spirits need continual attention and sustenance, or they may become hungry or irritated and can make their human relatives sick.<sup>33</sup> Spirits of particular places can be disturbed or offended, and hence must be negotiated with. As a result, shamanic rituals are necessary to determine who the offended party is, and what they require to be placated. To communicate with the spirits, the shaman enters a particular level of consciousness indicated by the lowering of a black veil over his face. During the “divination ceremonies” (Western translation), the shaman will begin to “shake” (which can look like a rhythmic tapping of the hands and feet, though the Hmong word is translated as “shaking”).<sup>34</sup> This shaking indicates that the shaman has entered the realm of consciousness appropriate to talking with spirits. This is sometimes translated as a literal trip to another physical plane. The shaman sits, and alternately leaps up, as he speaks with the spirits. He (or she) is assisted by another person, who ensures that he will not fall as he speaks with the spirits. The Hmong believe that if the shaman does fall during the ceremony, he will die. The shaman negotiates with

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>32</sup> Taggart Siegel, director, *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America*, Filmmakers Library, 1985, DVD.

<sup>33</sup> Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, 99.

<sup>34</sup> Siegel, *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America*, DVD.

the various souls involved with the illness or problem at hand, and determines what must be done to solve the problem.

The Hmong believe that a soul, or a person's multiple souls (the exact number of souls is not a dogmatic assertion as it would likely be in a more Westernized religion), has a tendency to wander or become lost.<sup>35</sup> A person's spirit is by no means affixed to its corporeal "owner"; it can leave the body for any number of reasons, and if the soul does tend to wander, a person will become ill. For this reason, when a baby is born, the Hmong tie many white strings to its wrists to bind the soul to the body.<sup>36</sup> Soul loss is one of the most common forms of illness, and the Hmong expend much effort to prevent and cure this problem.<sup>37</sup> This particular conception, that a soul detached from its owner creates illness, testifies to a complicated dualistic/non-dualistic notion of body and soul in Hmong religion. Though the Hmong have a conceptualization of the separation of body and soul, it is clearly not a healthy or normal occurrence when it does happen.

All of the most common Hmong curing ceremonies involve sacrifice to spirits in other worlds, both to placate unhappy spirits and to support ancestral spirits.<sup>38</sup> Hmong ceremonies and beliefs are, to the Western mind, quite exotic and almost nonsensical. In one of the most common shaman diagnoses, "spirits" in another realm are cutting down a tree that a human soul has wandered into. As a result, a human person has become ill. The family of the ill person must then sacrifice an animal so that the spirits will not cut down the tree or allow insects to eat it. If the sacrifice is successful, the person will then recover. All animal sacrifice is quite systematic and particular; legs, heads, jaws, etc. are

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<sup>35</sup> Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> Siegel, *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America*, DVD.

<sup>37</sup> Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, 102.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.



removed and cooked in a particular order, with particular parts being offered to certain spirits before all others.<sup>39</sup> All of these various factors and considerations contribute to the success or failure of a particular ritual, and hence, the healing of an ill person.

### *Pre-Moderns on the Move*

Keeping all of these factors in mind, we now must consider what happens to the Hmong when they arrive in the United States. The Hmong initially came into contact with Americans during the Vietnam War, when they were enlisted by the CIA to fight against the North Vietnamese along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Hmong soldiers died at a rate ten times that of Americans fighting in Vietnam, and it is estimated that between 30,000 and 200,000 Hmong died as a direct result of the war, approximately ten to fifty percent of their population.<sup>40</sup> After the Americans withdrew and the pro-communist government in Laos came to power, the Hmong were systemically attacked by the government and embarked on a frantic escape to Thailand. Many died along the way. Upon arrival in the United States, the Hmong were scattered across the country in an attempt to evenly distribute their load on any given state's welfare system.<sup>41</sup> Many Hmong are supported by government assistance, or work multiple minimum wage jobs.<sup>42</sup> There is often a certain amount of resentment towards them in their communities; they are seen as "sponges" on the American system.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 113-129.

<sup>40</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 133.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>42</sup> Shur Vang Vangyi, "Hmong Employment and Welfare Dependency," in *The Hmong in Transition*, ed. Glenn L. Hendricks, Bruce T. Downing, and Amos S. Deinard (New York: The Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1986), 195.

<sup>43</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 191.

For the older generation of Hmong immigrants, many of whom have never learned English, living in the U.S. is completely disorienting and confusing, many years after immigrating.<sup>44</sup> Most adult Hmong immigrants had never seen a house with electricity or indoor plumbing. As a result, immediate assimilation was simply not an option, as it might be for immigrants from other more modern countries. The shift between environments was drastic, and hence completely incomprehensible. As a result, many of the older Hmong immigrants maintain their culture and religion in the face of Western influence which they simply ignore.<sup>45</sup>

*Does Modern Christianity Function in Pre-Modern Language?*

In contrast to those Hmong who fiercely maintain their ethnic cultural and religious identities, there are immigrants who have made varying degrees of effort to acculturate. Refugee camps in Thailand were a major target for Christian missionaries, and many Hmong converted during their stay in the camps.<sup>46</sup> The opportunity to learn English was a major incentive to become involved with missionaries; many Hmong knew that they would eventually be relocated to the United States, and they had no other way to learn the language of their new country. Hmong stories provide anecdotal evidence that learning English plays a primary role in religious conversion:

Back in Laos, I was not a Christian, but somehow I was attracted to Christianity. So when it was translated into Lao, and I listened to it, and I loved it so much, but I was opposed to Christianity. Because we always stuck to our (Hmong) religion. But the first thing that hooked me to the Christian program was that I liked to learn English a lot.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Cathleen Jo Faruque, *Migration of the Hmong to the Midwestern United States* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2002), 92.

<sup>45</sup> Faruque, *Migration of the Hmong to the Midwestern United States*, 145.

<sup>46</sup> Donald F. Hones, "The Word: Religion and Literacy in the Life of a Hmong American," *Religious Education* 96 (2001): 496.

<sup>47</sup> Hones, "The Word: Religion and Literacy in the Life of a Hmong American," 497.

Besides the obvious attraction to learning English, this man expresses, perhaps unintentionally, the ways in which Christianity and animist belief systems are mapped onto a particular type of language. When taught in Lao, the man loved Christianity but was also opposed to it. In English, Christianity took on a new tone, one that made more sense, and was more appealing. The Christian church provides one of the few places for Hmong immigrants to learn English in many communities,<sup>48</sup> and the Bible is their first book. Other quantitative data show that Hmong who know English upon arrival in the United States are significantly more likely to attend church, and they do so significantly more often than their non-English speaking counterparts. This study included churches that serve mainly immigrant populations, and present their sermons in Hmong.<sup>49</sup> Presumably, this means that Hmong-speaking churches cannot attract Hmong converts in the same way that English speaking churches can.

As is often the case when translating a modern language to a pre-modern language and vice versa, there are often no English words to represent Hmong words and vice versa. One documentary explores a Hmong shaman's transition to the United States, and shows an incident of a missionary attempting to explain the concept of forgiveness of sins to the shaman.<sup>50</sup> The shaman has difficulty understanding what sin is, let alone that he has committed one. Hmong likely do not have a word for sin; there is no concept in Hmong for committing an action that offends God and necessitates forgiveness. Hmong interact with spirits just like they do any other persons, and often feeding and talking to these persons is the best way to make them understand why it is that a human has

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

<sup>49</sup> Robert E. Lewis, Mark W. Fraser, and Peter Pecora, "Religious Among Indochinese Refugees in Utah," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27 (1988): 280.

<sup>50</sup> Siegel, *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America*, DVD.

behaved in a particular way. In contrast, the Christian notion of sin necessitates an understanding of a particularly Western moral system, a system that the Hmong had never encountered prior to their arrival in the United States and that the framework of their language has no means to conceptualize.

The difficulties of expressing animist beliefs in a modern language make historical sense. American English, having developed alongside Christianity, simply cannot explain animist concepts that are based on pre-modern conceptions of a primarily non-dialectical worldview. Having to express “place” as something that is animate, intentioned, and not human simply does not work, and Hmong experience this as they try to express their religion in English terms. The framework developed by Western religions is supported (and influenced) by a language that supports dualism, as expressed by Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane*. In English, as in Christianity, the spirit and the physical body as examples of the sacred and the profane, are, as J.Z. Smith puts it, “binary, special, classificatory categories that must be kept apart . . . two separate circles.”<sup>51</sup> In animism, the sacred and the profane are indistinctly separated, making English a poor language for expressing animist beliefs. For some Hmong, it may simply be easier to pick up a new religion to go along with a new language.

*Can Western Science Express Itself in an Animist Conceptual Framework?*

For Hmong who maintain their animist beliefs, the scientific worldview and, in particular, Western medicine, challenge their entire means of understanding the world. Material causality in Western terms is not something instinctual or familiar to the Hmong, and as a result they do not quite grasp the underlying concepts of Western medicine. As a result, the medical community continually seeks solutions to the

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<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, 107.

challenges found in their interactions with the Hmong. There are many accounts of Hmong non-compliance with medical instructions, often to the great dismay of Western health care providers.<sup>52</sup> One particularly well documented case is the story of Lia Lee, a Hmong baby with severe (and ultimately fatal) epilepsy. Often, her treatment seemed sadistic to her parents, as it included securing her to her bed where she could not move and giving her medicines that caused terrible side effects. When one Hmong boy needed to have chemotherapy and promptly lost all of his hair and began vomiting, his parents refused to continue his treatment and subsequently had a run-in with Child Protective Services. This encounter eventually resulted in the police physically removing the child and the mother threatening to shoot herself with her husband's gun if they did not return her son.<sup>53</sup> In these cases, it is not just that the Hmong do not understand the words of the doctors. Their religion, and hence the way that they view their world, does not have the conceptual framework to understand Western science.

Additionally, Western physicians often have the impression that many of their Hmong clients are "suffering from delusions and/or a wandering mind," and will address their concerns accordingly, i.e. as though they are attending to a mentally ill person.<sup>54</sup> As a result, it is important to note that not only do Hmong not understand certain concepts even after they are translated into Hmong, but Westerners also do not understand Hmong constructions translated into English. One of the few Hmong with a graduate degree in the state of California had this response when a Western woman repeatedly asked him for causal efficacy explanations of certain rituals: "Anne, may I explain to you again. The

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<sup>52</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 262-4.

<sup>53</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 52.

<sup>54</sup> Bruce Thowpaou Bliatout, "Guidelines for Mental Health Professionals to Help Hmong Clients Seek Traditional Healing Treatment," in *The Hmong in Transition*, ed. Glenn L. Hendricks, Bruce T. Downing, and Amos S. Deinard (New York: The Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1986), 359.

Hmong culture is *not Cartesian*.”<sup>55</sup> The fact that the Hmong worldview is *not Cartesian* makes it very difficult for the Hmong to understand a culture, and a religion, that has roots in Cartesian thought. It is a shift that can only be made by effort, a desire to accommodate and acculturate oneself, and an ability to learn English—all things that many Hmong cannot do or have no desire to.

*Conversion: “Doing the Same As American People”*

Issues of linguistics and worldview aside, many Hmong convert to Christianity for purely practical reasons. They do so because they feel pressure, and some guilt, about the aid provided to them by American churches. A common conversion story is one of a Hmong family which comes to the United States, is financially supported by a church, and hence becomes practically and emotionally involved with the church in a myriad of ways. Then, as other family members immigrate to the United States, the Hmong families feel pressure to join that church and abandon their animist beliefs.<sup>56</sup> A Hmong woman succinctly expresses these beliefs:

We are very fortunate. The Baptist Church found us this house. They got us this house, but no cooking pots, no furniture, no clothes. We had only a bare house, but we had a house! The old customs are lost in this country, they are better forgotten. It is best to become a Christian and a United States citizen.<sup>57</sup>

Although the question may not have been framed to produce a religiously motivated response, it is interesting to note that the Hmong woman does not express a rejection of Hmong animism as false. Perhaps the desire to “forget” old customs is rooted in the desire to forget the trauma of warfare, refugee camps, and relocation. Many Hmong

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<sup>55</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 245.

<sup>56</sup> Faruque, *Migration of the Hmong to the Midwestern United States*, 160-1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

immigrants have experienced one or all of these traumas, and conversion may be the simplest way to forget what was for many a very difficult set of experiences. Often times the language of conversion, especially among born-again Christians in the United States, expresses a strict adherence to Christian dogma and a strong rejection of all that the converted person may have believed previous to his enlightenment. Other comments from the Hmong convey this same sense of conversion as a way to be accepted in the community at large, as opposed to a rejection of previous beliefs as false.

A quantitative study about religious change among Cambodian and Hmong refugees in Utah also suggests that refugees often convert for purely practical purposes. Of the twenty-eight respondents who had converted from either Buddhism or animism to Christianity, three stated the need for additional religion in their lives, two said that they had found a better religion, and one person converted because “Mormons help people.” All of the other respondents converted for purely practical reasons (“change in living conditions,” “doing the same as American people,” etc.).<sup>58</sup> Hmong who are practicing Mormons, actively attending church and who claim to have abandoned animism, are still known to sacrifice animals.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps, then, conversion is not even complete, and these people still see the world in animist terms. The literature on the “veracity” of Hmong Christian belief is, predictably, scarce, so it is difficult to know if these conversions are truly spiritual or purely practical ones. The latter seems more likely in a majority of cases, as indicated by numerous sources.<sup>60,61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Lewis et al., “Religious Among Indochinese Refugees in Utah,” 277.

<sup>59</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 208.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>61</sup> Hones, “The Word: Religion and Literacy in the Life of a Hmong American,” 496.

The Hmong religion is inextricably linked to the Hmong language, as the difficulties of Hmong acculturation in the United States demonstrate. The conceptual framework of the Hmong language and Hmong religion both mirror and reinforce one another, making a switch to modern religion without modern language, and vice versa, untenable. This linkage demonstrates a more general relationship between language and religion or worldview; a language both defines a religion's conceptual possibilities, and reflects a religion's postulations about the world. This relationship has significant implications for the ways in which scholars study religion; one may only be able to understand the conceptual framework of a particular religion when one fluently speaks and understands the language in which the religion is predominantly practiced. Vice versa, one may only be able to understand the fine points of a language when one understands the worldview that it expresses. Perhaps the emerging postmodern paradigm will open a space for modern Westerners to understand animism in a more meaningful and genuine way.



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Religion, in the modern sense of the word, is a product of identity politics & apologetics: "One's own 'religion' may be piety & faith, obedience, worship & a vision of god. An alien 'religion' is a system of beliefs or rituals, an abstract & impersonal pattern of observables. A dialectic ensues, however.Â thought or in t This classic work is a study of the evolution of "religion" as a reified, essentialist concept in modern intellectual history.Â While the historical survey is very compelling, and the case Cantwell Smith makes in this portion of the book is persuasive, much of the rest of the work takes a decisively theological turn that reveals the author's largely uncritical mid-twentieth-century liberal-Protestant worldview.