# Chapter 9

# Conversion and Community among Iu Mien Refugee Immigrants in the United States

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The Iu Mien (Mien, Yao) have a long history in southern China, though anthropological work on their social forms, religious practices, and the like has primarily drawn on research conducted in Thailand and Laos, and then among refugee immigrants in the United States (Habarad 1987; MacDonald 1997). Among the Iu Mien in Thailand and in the United States, there are some deep divides between Christian and non-Christian communities. But the issue of internal factions is more complex, where, for instance, Mien Christians in Thailand are divided by script, with one faction using the Thai alphabet and the other Romanization. It is equally important to insist that religious difference does not inevitably preclude shared interest or collaboration. There are, for instance, some families where one of the members maintains links to ancestor spirits while the other is Christian.

My chapter attempts to situate Christian conversions among US Iu Mien within a longer history of religious dynamics and shifts, and as one of several means through which people have arrived at forms of community. The historical part of my case emphasizes diversity and specificity. One aspect of this is the difference between chiefs and commoners prior to the 1950s, and the multiple impact of the war in Laos during 1958–1975. Religious orientations and shifts are shaped in specific contexts, as unevenly situated people respond to the conditions of their lives—cultural practices and patterns are not transmitted in any stable way but are instead continually being constructed and reconstructed (Sperber 2005). I draw attention to some of the contexts where differentially situated Iu Mien have arrived

at particular configurations of religion, community, and identity. My aim is in part to counter the expectation of religious or cultural uniformity or stability prior to the Iu Mien becoming refugees or Christians.

The range of Iu Mien religious orientations over the last century and a half suggests various gradations of conversion. Exploring this diversity, I suggest that Mien religious practice has never been singular. Christianity currently offers one of many strategies of building community, maintaining transnational relations, and expressing collective identity. Suspending the expectation of a singular Mien religion undoes the antagonistic binary of tradition/ancestor worship and modernity/Christianity. With that, the questions shift to social and personal orientations and expectations in their particular historical settings. The focus on diversity, specificity, and issues of community-formation and leadership brings out parallels among divergent religious orientations that the expectation of contrast and antagonism makes unthinkable.

My concern is with religious dynamics among the Iu Mien from the late nineteenth century and until 2011, which spatially pertains to southern China, the northern parts of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, and to the West Coast of the United States, where Iu Mien people settled as refugee immigrants after 1975. The social framework for Iu Mien religious activity has ranged from farming to migration, warfare, refugee camps, and finally urban areas of the United States. At all times, Iu Mien peoples have engaged with religious ideas in multicultural and translocal (including international) settings. Religion has always been an engagement across difference: social, spiritual, political, and linguistic. Recent conversions to Christianity are a manifestation of how people's identities and practices have taken shape in particular circumstances that are of a historical moment and at the same time lend shape to people's historical being.

Iu Mien have often crossed ethnic and religious lines for particular purposes, and their religious practices have been formed in historical context. War, farming, and migration are three different modes of being, and each privileges particular religious foci. Since 2005, I have come to know Iu Mien people as refugee immigrants from Laos in the United States. While their religious practices had been similar to what I knew from Thailand (intermittently since 1990), it was clear that the context of the Second Indochina War in Laos (1962–1975) had a significant influence on how people engaged with the world of spirits. For one, the war played up a focus on invulnerability and military

prowess that were for the most part beyond the reach of ancestor spirits. People relied on links to soldier spirits (*m'geh mienv, m'geh paeng, mborqv-jaax mienv*) and took increasingly to wearing Buddhist amulets, and they learned many ideas from lowland Tai (Lao, Tai Dam, Tai Lue, and so on) Buddhists.

During an episode of witchcraft fears, Iu Mien people asked for advice across ethnic and linguistic boundaries regarding the appropriate reaction. Whatever structure or pattern there has been to religious activity should be viewed as particular outcomes of actions and interactions in particular contexts, which need to be situated (Latour 2005). Over time, interactions can produce similarities and correspondences that are obscured if the descriptive and analytical premise insists on the ethnic group as the unit of ideas and action. My resistance to the ethnicist framework echoes recent areal ("regional") approaches to Southeast Asia, particularly those of anthropologist Richard O'Connor (1995, 2000) and linguist N. J. Enfield (2003, 2005); "seeing states and peoples as regional constructions is necessary to escaping nationalist histories and their tautologies of race, culture, and ethnicity" (O'Connor 2000: 431).

Currently, all forms of Iu Mien religious practice have an international dimension. A translation of the Bible involved westerners as well as Mien people in Thailand, France, and the United States. A recent temple to King Pan, the ultimate Mien ancestor, involves various exchanges with China. Ancestor worship also serves to create transnational networks. The most accomplished spirit medium among the Mien in the United States has made annual visits to the Mien who settled in France after the war, where he takes care of various rituals and maintains kinship connections.

These networks are not just religious; they involve languages, various forms of media, international travel, economic transactions, and many forms of communication (telephones, internet, print, video, audio cassettes, and different writing systems). And the Mien language itself is not a singular reference: historically the Iu Mien have a distinct vernacular language, a separate prose language, and also a ritual language (see Purnell 1991, 2012). Christian missionaries used the everyday language for their work and wrote hymns in that language. Tracing the associations and networks that involve recent religious dynamics among the Iu Mien does not indicate that religion is a distinct or bounded field; it intersects in innumerable ways with other dimensions of social life, worldview, exchanges, and interactions across difference and different domains.

## Historical Background on Religious Orientation and Social Frameworks

Anthropologists who studied Thailand's Iu Mien in the 1960s and 1970s vary in their characterizations; Douglas Miles (1974) stresses ancestor worship and Jacques Lemoine (1982, 1983) Daoism, while Peter Kandre (1967) and Yoshiro Shiratori (1978) insist that the two are usually combined. I emphasize situating religious practice in social life. People must establish and maintain contracts with particular spirits. A couple would usually initiate a contract with patrilineal ancestors on forming a household, and the subsequent offerings were meant to ensure the flow of soul-stuff that made them prosper in farming and in other aspects of life. At feasts that follow rituals, people exchange blessings, and only those with their own relations with ancestors can channel blessings. People who could not afford a proper wedding (bride price, pigs, and so on) might elope. Without a household and sufficient means, people cannot establish and maintain the relations with ancestor spirits that give access to soul-stuff and blessings.

A village founder or leader establishes a relationship with a village owner spirit, for the collective well-being of his constituents. In the cases I know of, this was usually the spirit of the best-known or most powerful lowland leader of a nearby polity. Multi-village leaders might cement their position with ritual contracts to royal spirits, which were usually matched with a relationship to a valley lord who would confer a title (*phaya*) and establish trade relations.

I know of this reality from the history of the Mien who settled in the kingdom of Nan (later a province of Thailand), and what I later learned from the Iu Mien who settled in northern Laos is quite similar (Jonsson 2005, 2009). The two groups are derived from the same mass migration from Guangdong and Guangxi in southern China, initially to northern Vietnam (Muang Lai), then Yunnan (Muang La), and later to Laos (Muang Sing, Nam Tha) and Thailand (Muang Nan)—it spans roughly the 1860s to 1880s. The migration was in part a field for establishing leadership among the Mien, and many men came into royal titles as they settled near any one of the many kingdoms that lasted until about 1900.

Subsequent colonial and national governments were generally at much greater remove from highland settlements and did not see the benefit of exchange relations—in part also because trade had shifted to bulk items such as rice and teak, from a previous focus on a range of forest products. This historical shift undid previously common

upland-lowland relations, and one general consequence was that hinterland religious frameworks became more inward-focused on farming, households, and villages. There is considerable similarity in how Mien peoples engage with religion and politics; in each case people have to make and maintain relations, and at a cost—but the units and their relations vary among households, villages, and multi-village assemblies. This is one reason the ethnic label can obfuscate what people do and why.

What scholars call Daoism among the Mien is in the form of ritual ordinations that establish a contract with the spirit government. With this, a man and his household gains access to soldier spirits and the relationship lasts for several generations. People can call on the assistance of spirits that are considered much more powerful than ancestors. But this also comes at a higher cost: the rituals require the use of spirit paintings (that were expensive to acquire); the service of several spirit mediums who need to write petitions, with Chinese characters, to the spirit government; and the ordinations are quite taxing on time and resources. Further, once people have such a relationship they are obliged to take care of a much more demanding set of spirits. If not fed sufficiently, the soldier spirits can fend for themselves in the household's fields and thus cause crop failure. People whose households maintain relations only with ancestors are not at any such risk, while their expectations are also lower regarding good things procured with spirits' help.

One of the consequences of the migration that brought Mien peoples to Laos and Thailand was competition among the contenders for leadership. In some ways it was settled as they entered political contracts with lowland kings. But the rivalry also led to an unprecedented inflation in household size, with each of the men trying to outshine the others with a household of a hundred members. I first had an inkling of this from missionary accounts of Thailand's Mien in the early years of the twentieth century, and learned of that one household from the recollections of its descendants (Jonsson 2001). Conversations with the Iu Mien from Laos suggest that this was widespread in the period from the 1880s to perhaps the 1930s, ranging from northern Thailand, across northern Laos, and into southern China.

This quest for an enormous household went along with inflated expectations of ancestral and other spiritual blessings. It led to frequent ritual offerings, way out of proportion to what the general population engaged in. Household heads wanted to attract new members with signs of their spiritual blessing; they acquired new members

through inmarriages and purchase adoptions of children from other ethnic groups. The large households claimed large tracts of land that their members cultivated, and they often hired labor from various impoverished non-Mien peoples. These settlements were sedentary, in contrast to smaller households that migrated frequently as soil fertility in their much-smaller fields was depleted. The smaller households did not have the inflated expectations of spiritual blessing, and few, if any, had ritual relations beyond ancestor spirits.

During the migration there were some armed confrontations, and some of the leaders were renowned for military prowess. At least one was considered invulnerable as a result of his relationship with a king's spirit. Circumstantial information suggests that the emphasis on military prowess was pervasive, including that people might raid other settlements for children who they then adopted. Among Thailand's Mien, their ritual focus shifted more generally toward farming and village life, and wealthier households had the means to purchase children for adoption—similar to what happened among the Iu Mien in Laos. The focus on military prowess had political, social, and religious implications.

In about 1907, American missionaries in Thailand had worked with the lowland peasant in northern Thai with limited success and were looking for ways to branch out. They learned of the Mien chief in Nan as enormously wealthy—this, they suggested to their supporters in the West, would make a Mien church instantly self-supporting. The missionaries made their way to his mountain village and showed Bible pictures with a sciopticon projector. The villagers were very keen on the missionaries as they brought literature in Chinese (the script that Mien at the time used), and wanted them to give language classes.

Becoming Chinese language teachers was not of interest to the missionaries, and they insisted on their hope to convert the Mien. The villagers evaded the issue and said it depended on what their chief decided, while he deferred to the general will in the village. Then the missionaries laid out what was implied in conversion, that people would have to burn the altars to the ancestors. With that, the negotiations came to an end. People said that they had promised the ancestors that if they got to a new land successfully then they would continue to make them offerings.

## War, Exile, and Religious Dynamics

Prior to 1949, the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (then the China Inland Mission) had been active with many of the minorities in southern China, and then they were told to leave. Many came to Southeast

Asia and they had headquarters in Singapore. By 1955, they had converted the first Mien man in northern Thailand, and he accompanied the missionaries in 1963 to Nam Keung, a major concentration of Iu Mien on the Laos side, near the Mekong River. The Iu Mien concentration was a massive resettlement of perhaps five thousand people who had left Muang Sing and Nam Tha (near the borders with Vietnam and China) when communist nationalist forces started to make inroads and US agents organized resistance armies. Hmong leaders promised up to ten thousand soldiers, so they were settled close to the Vietnam border and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Iu Mien, also trained, equipped, and paid by the US CIA, were settled near the Thai border because they could not make as big a fighting force.

While their location was safer and more amenable to farming than was the case among the Hmong, Mien social and ritual life in the context of war was to a large extent dominated by the concerns of militia leaders. The leaders could draft any young man they chose; refusals were met with violence. When people had to go to battle, their concerns with invulnerability increased. As Laos became swept up in war in the 1960s and early 1970s, Iu Mien ritual attentions again came to center on soldier spirits, which people called on for protection and invulnerability. This increased people's engagement with Taoist ritual ordinations (*guaax dang, doqv sai, jaa zeqv*) because those gave the ordinands access to soldier spirits who were considered *henv haic*, very powerful. They might make soldiers invisible to the enemy or intimidate and scare them into fleeing. Ancestors cannot defeat armies.

For some people now in the United States, there are continuities with the wartime in Laos as young people sign up for the US military:

> There are *m'geh hongh*, red cavalry spirits, they need offerings of blood and are very strong. You have to offer a chicken first, but later the spirits ask for a pig or a cow. They're very mean, very strong. During the war in Laos, everybody worried about those serving as soldiers, and people called on *m'geh baeng* to cover them. When the soldier returns they have to offer a pig or a cow [for the protection]. Here in Sacramento, California, they do it; their children are off as soldiers [in Iraq and Afghanistan]. They throw the rice in the direction that the soldiers are going.

There are, in Iu Mien terms, two ways to gain invulnerability: one is *buv*, objects that confer invulnerability; and the other is *faatv*, verbal formulas. People say that they learned many *faatv* from the

neighboring lowlanders: Lao, Shan, Black Tai, and the like. As the war went on, more and more Mien soldiers took to wearing Buddhist amulets for protection.

In the large Iu Mien resettlement around Nam Keung, which was ruled over by the militia leader Chao La, there were people of many ethnicities. Because of the ethnic militia, the area became something of an Iu Mien space. There was for some time a scare of *Lauv huv gueiv*, Old Tiger Spirit (a form of witchcraft), causing illness and death. In a context of considerable anxiety about ethnic and other social boundaries (there were spies from the war's other side, and no one could necessarily tell the identity of any stranger), the witchcraft episode focused on fear about people who had been adopted as children into Iu Mien households.

Only non-Iu-Mien could harbor the witchcraft spirit, and the Iu Mien were the only peoples that the militia had jurisdiction over. Nothing could be done about the Tai Lue noodle vendor who came under suspicion at one point. Chao La's henchmen went after the internally marginal suspects, threatening them with arrest or execution. Of the two cases that I learned of, one woman killed herself rather than face exile (and separation from her husband and children) while another left in the dark of night (she had no children and was unmarried).

This episode of a witchcraft scare gives some indication of the religious dynamics in times of war, where the ethnic boundary was seen as vulnerable, but the only thing that was done about it was to threaten marginal insider women. Nothing of the sort happened in the refugee camp later, when many children also died for no apparent reason. There, people responded commonly by converting to Christianity. In the cases where I know some details, it was the women who decided to convert; they gave up on the ancestors after facing overwhelming grief. Women have in general married into the lineage of their husbands, and may have been less forgiving of ancestor spirits, but they also seem to have felt the loss of a child more personally and with more intensity than did many of the men. While households are in most cases ritual units, some men continued their ritual relations with ancestors while their wives had become Christian.

The shift from the resettlement to the camp brings out a gender dimension to ritual life, but it also shows the shifting fortunes of militia command. In the resettlement during the war, the militia leadership could rule over people with a heavy hand, and benefitted in many ways from anxieties about ethnic boundaries. But when people settled in five or more different refugee camps the militia had no way of imposing its agendas at the cost of family concerns. People had

practically no resources, and the following fragment of a conversation is about the only indication I have of any ritual activity in the camps:

> In Nam Yao [refugee camp in Nan Province], the UN sent lots of food but it was the lowest class food [as the Thai caretakers creamed off the money allocated]. The refugees complained, and then all of a sudden there were cows, pigs, and chicken [to eat]. Then Hmong offered cows to the gods, the Mien offered pigs to the gods. The officials saw it and did not like it and there was no more [good meat]. That was in 1983.

Some missionaries visited the refugee camps, but I have no suggestion that such visits led to any waves of conversion. Conversion was more a family matter, and conditions were quite varied in the five camps. All the ordinary Iu Mien were treated harshly in the camp and fed much less than international agencies had budgeted for, but the militia leadership was never treated like refugees. Thai military and government authorities were anxious about the spread of communism from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and China, and they actively supported the militia leaders and gave them passes for freedom of travel within Thailand. Chao La, the Iu Mien militia leader, lived outside camp, in a rather nice two-storey house that contrasted sharply with the leaky and flimsy houses that refugees inhabited.

In some ways the militia still represented the interests of the ethnic group though the war was over. Refugee camps were organized hierarchically and "ethnic leaders" were in charge of the distribution of food to their people. Chao La and many other formerly CIA-supported leaders reestablished militias from camps and sent them back to Laos to fight. The Iu Mien unit initially had practically no supplies, and repeatedly demanded food, money, and other resources from Iu Mien households on the Lao side. After some time people came to refuse the requests—because supporting the militia would risk their security and lives under the postwar communist government. The Iu Mien militia responded with violence, holding up people at gunpoint and in several cases killing whole households of Iu Mien people who resisted their requests.

Word of this got back to refugee camp, and undermined whatever identification there had been between Chao La's soldiers and the members of the ethnic group. This could not be spoken of openly, but was whispered. One man, a relative of one killed family, made a song in the old song language that was a string of curses on the ethnic militia leadership for the atrocity. He sent the cassette to California where he by then had refugee immigrant relatives, and soon everybody knew.

During the war, the militia was seen as guarding the ethnic group against external threats, enemy forces, and the witchcraft spirit. But the postwar militia came to represent a blatant threat to the well-being of Iu Mien people on the Laos side, including killing some of the people whom they supposedly fought for. Subsequent religious and social orientations have offered various alternatives to the wartime identification with the militia. This is not explicit. If the dangers of the witchcraft spirit and the militia are comparable, this suggests that it has been easier to identify and organize publically against marginal women than against central (and armed) men.

While many Iu Mien were affiliated with the ethnic militia under Chao La, some were not. At least by the time people were in refugee camp, such diversity became codified in a tripartite division of Northern Mien, Southern Mien, and Central Mien (and these terms are always in the Lao language, as *Mien neua, Mien tai,* and *Mien kang*). The ones called northerners are from Nam Tha and Muang Sing and were under Chao La in the resettlement in Nam Keung. The southerners lived in Luang Prabang and Sayaburi Provinces. They were socially separate from Chao La's leadership and appear to have never placed themselves under his power. Instead, they say, they fought for Hmong leader Vang Pao. The Central Mien were also in Sayaburi Province and perhaps Luang Prabang, and they insist that they never were under the command of any of these militia leaders. In some ways the division is geographical and in others it is political. But the most influential factor in the naming of the three types of Iu Mien from Laos was the structuring of relief in refugee camps, where people were placed under ethnic leaders and provided for in such terms.

The divisions clearly show how identities are continually being shaped and differentiated in particular circumstances at specific historical moments. The Northerners, identified closely with the militia that claimed to express the identity and interests of the ethnic group, are the only one of the three to insist that their experiences manifest what people went through as Iu Mien. The others, who never had the claim to an ethnic voice, always insist on their place relative to the dominant faction. Wartime political allegiances informed how people identified in the camps, because this defined one's community and access to provisions. As refugees resettled in the United States, religious orientation became the primary identifier and marker of community.

The Iu Mien whom I know in the United States are of various religious persuasions. Some of them indicate such a basic incompatibility and antagonism between Mien Christians and non-Christians that it would be impossible to attend a wedding or another event by a

member of the other side. Because such antagonism is not inevitable, I am led to suggest a historical contextualization. Internal divisions among American Iu Mien concerning the ethnic militia and refugee camp life are sensitive topics that are generally not aired. The occasionally antagonistic issues of religious identification indicate a displacement of matters that cannot be discussed: the multiple and lasting damage that war does. Some of the tension may also draw on the insistence by certain traditionalists that Christianity is contrary to Mien ways because it calls for the severing of ritual relations with ancestors, which may have contributed to the contentious anchoring of religious practice to ethnicity.

## Conversions and Community in the United States

When people settled in the United States, they generally moved into lower-income apartments in lower-income neighborhoods and received social support. People had no particular skills for this new life, but they were told that in cases of domestic violence and other troubles they should call the police. Many people have now, 30 years later, given me roughly the same impression: "the police come and they arrest someone. They are not trained to help. A week or two later the person is released and returns home and things are even worse than before. Only family and community can help."

This is the fundamental reason for both Christian conversions and Buddhist, Taoist, Kuan Yin, and Culture Association dynamics in the United States since 1976. People have come up with ways to enable coping and competency in otherwise alien surroundings. All these organizations have been involved in workshops on citizenship, language and culture matters, and emotions. One of the realizations was that their children have American needs; they need to be told by their parents: "I love you." This was not something that Iu Mien had a habit of saying.

Mien community leaders and social workers saw a crisis coming, in various intergenerational tensions and miscommunication, and tried to be proactive. Younger people had jobs, learned English, and organized activities and communities. Parents and grandparents expected that a new daughter-in-law was at their beck and call, while young people would go out dancing and otherwise embrace various post-refugee-camp freedoms in a land that they—and not the older people—had learned to navigate. Respect for elders was no longer a plain issue; issues of gender and generation brought new tensions, independent of religious orientation.

There were various immediate challenges. Unfamiliar neighbors might call the fire department when someone burned spirit money at the conclusion of a ritual. In other cases American people called the police and reported drug use when Iu Mien people smoked their tobacco from a bamboo water-pipe on their front porch ("we had to shift to the back yard"). The influx of Asian refugee immigrants met often-racist backlash and attacks on school playgrounds and along city streets. And when people came into salaries and apartments, sometimes drunkenness would lead to brawls and fights, followed by arrests by the police. There was, in short, a growing crisis that called for new forms of self-other help through community organizing.

When organizations were first formed among refugees from Laos, they were multiethnic, and there used to be soccer matches among the various Southeast Asian immigrants. But over time, many multiethnic organizations were replaced by ethnically focused groups. The case I know best is Portland, where rivalries among two Lao candidates for leadership led them to each form their own separate Lao association in 1978, and from then on the Mien and the Hmong and the others each formed their own groups.

The accounts that I learned of people's conversion to Christianity are varied. Some mentioned the difficulty of procuring live chickens in an American city, for the purpose of offerings to ancestors. In Portland, there was an open-air market open only one day during the weekend, and sometimes people had to stand in line for a long time in cold rain for this purpose. In addition, only very few people had cars, and one young man continually had to drive to fetch a spirit medium and then to return him home afterwards. One man converted for love, it was the only way that his future-wife's family would accept him. Some people talk of the healing power of the Lord, which I also heard in relation to conversions to Buddhism, Kuan Yin, and other Asian divinities. For the most part, other family members then join the convert.

In some cases, repeated illness or death within a family led people to give up on their ancestor spirits. While Iu Mien lived in farming villages in the Asian hinterlands, such occurrences might lead people to simply change ancestors by moving into a different household or by otherwise establishing relations with a different set of ancestor spirits. Livelihood and social identities do not play out in the same way in US cities, nor do they offer the same options in moments of crisis.

Community organization has depended on context, and there is considerable difference from one city to another: In Oakland, California, the police force is much more aggressive and overtly racist

than is the case in Portland, Oregon, so people in Oakland have networked more about legal advice, how to defend yourself in case of police brutality, and the like. Another reason for community organizing through religious or cultural frameworks is the sense that bureaucrats don't care: If you want advice or help that matters, people have to be self-reliant and then have some community they can approach in cases where family is insufficient or overstretched. In both Oakland and Portland, people are quite dispersed and this increases the value of community centers, including churches.

In contrast, the Iu Mien in Redding, California, brought about something resembling a village atmosphere by purchasing houses adjacent to one another on three city blocks. There the need for a community center has not come up. In yet another contrast, the largest settlement of Iu Mien in the United States is in Sacramento, California, where there is no community center. But there, in notable contrast to some other settings, Iu Mien Christians and non-Christians have collaborated actively and extensively on educational concerns and many other collective issues.

The Romanization of the Mien language was triggered by missionary concerns, but the development of the script later became nonsectarian (Purnell 1987, 2012). An American linguist with missionary connections worked with Iu Mien in the United States (non-Christians and Christians alike) on developing the current script, and they had made connections in China where the government's Ministry of Nationalities affairs must authorize the proper way of a written language. The effort to have a uniform written language thus involved Chinese and Yao from China, Iu Mien from the United States, France, and elsewhere, in collaboration that sidestepped factional concerns. Some of this work was continued when people went from the United States to an International Yao Studies Conference in Hong Kong in 1986 (MacDonald 1997: 255).

In the United States, one of the impacts of Christian conversions was the establishment of churches where people congregate every week or more often. Once established and running, they provided a paradigm that others could respond to or try to counter. The King Pan Buddha Light Palace is the most elaborate response, and it is a ritual center on the same lot as a very active Iu Mien community center serving the Oakland/San Francisco Bay area. The community is so spread out that they have divided it up into eight districts, each with two to three leaders who organize activities in that district. Kouichoy Saechao, one of the organizers, made a parallel between the current districts and the 12 lineages of the Iu Mien; they are united

and equal through King Pan as a founding ancestor and now as a focus of veneration: "According to our myth and history, whenever we settle down permanently then we have to build a permanent place of worship."

The King Pan temple has a parallel and precursor in an elaborate temple in Hunan Province, China, where the Chinese government is actively involved in promoting and influencing matters of minority identity for tourism and nation building (MacDonald 1997: 252). There is a third King Pan temple in Chiangrai Province of northern Thailand, in the village of Huai Chang Lod.

At roughly the same time in 1995, one or more Mien people each in China, Thailand, and California had been visited in a dream or a trance vision with the message that they had to establish a temple to King Pan, otherwise their culture and identity would fizzle away. Because people have made connections, through migration histories, kinship, and the Romanization project for the Mien script, word got around, through letters and phone conversations. The dream message and people's response have increased contact among Mien in the three countries, not just with visits but also with help: Because the Mien in Thailand did not know how to do the chant for King Pan, the most accomplished and involved spirit medium in the United States chanted for them and it was transmitted by cell phone live to Thailand where it was aided by loudspeakers. "We just bought calling cards and did it, that's all," commented one man in the United States.

King Pan (Bienh Hungh) is a founding ancestor. He is too big a spirit to be called on by a household for everyday concerns. Only when the survival of the Mien people (as "the twelve lineages" or "King Pan's descendants") is at stake is it justifiable to call on him. The revival of Bienh Hungh as a focus of ritual veneration and community speaks in part to contemporary conditions of globalization and dispersion into newer surroundings where people must adjust. It also speaks to a structure of expectations and relations that was established a long time ago and was retained in stories. The establishment of the temple drew on the combination of dream messages, an existing community center and organization, and perhaps the wish among non-Christians to offer an alternative to Iu Mien Christian churches as the focus of community life, identity-work, and communication. There was also a need to come up with religious forms that did not result in the sacrifice of a chicken or a pig, as did ancestor worship, since most American Iu Mien youth wanted no part in such practices (Figure 9.1).

**Figure 9.1** High-level Iu Mien spirit mediums at the King Pan Buddha Light Palace festival in 2011, Oakland, California (photo by the author)

As Christianity connects Iu Mien across distances and to Western missionaries and churches, King Pan is enabling new connections among China, Thailand, and the United States, and various forms of media make this accessible to Mien people in Canada, France, and elsewhere. People pool their resources to establish and maintain their community centers and religious institutions. The organizing committee has requested funds from city authorities in Oakland for the King Pan Buddha Light Palace—in part because the temple contributes to upgrading a rather run-down area—but so far without success. Iu Mien people themselves have contributed practically the whole amount so far, with the rest on bank loans. The same holds for the Christian church that I went to most frequently in Portland; community members taxed themselves to pay for the land and the building.

For some years after people settled in the United States, certain Mien and Hmong supporters of postwar militias would annually collect money from the refugees, on the promise that the militias would defeat the communist government forces and people could return to Laos. Unverifiable accounts indicate that there was both a general

taxation and that for a higher fee people might purchase leadership posts over a town or even a district in the recaptured country. This is one context for the current internal taxation for collective projects: people lost faith in the postwar militia. "We stopped being political in 1984," said one man; Mien people shifted their orientations and contributions from continued fighting in Laos and toward making community and a future in the United States.

## Community and Leadership in a New Land

While people have converted as individuals or as families, their acts also make statements about ethnic belonging. Being Christian is a way to be Iu Mien, in much the same way as Thomas Pearson (2009) suggests for Dega-Montagnard in Vietnam and as refugee immigrants in the United States. This dynamic, of conversion as a way to become ethnic, may seem new because it combines Christianity and Asian refugees, but it has long been important in Southeast Asia. In his historical study of changes in ethnicity and agriculture, Richard O'Connor (1995: 986) maintains that for mainland Southeast Asia, people link ritual, livelihood, and ethnic identity in society-shaping paradigms. In twentieth-century Thailand and Laos, Iu Mien religious practice often varied by lineage and sub-lineage, as well as from one village to another. While religious practice was oriented around farming and householding, such diversity was never viewed as incongruous.

As Iu Mien people became urban wageworkers in the United States, their engagements with ritual and ethnicity necessarily took new forms. But for the Iu Mien, the orientation ranges among ancestors, Daoism, Christianity, Bienh Hungh, and Buddhism, with or without a Kuan Yin focus. People have come to divergent expressions of their identity, but not for the first time. Previously, difference was manifest in a ranked scheme of ritual contracts. The most exclusive were ordinations with expensive offerings, the ancestor focus was more generally attainable, while those of practically no means could not engage in exchanges in the spirit world and had no status in social life.

Seen from that angle, the new religious and social forms are more accommodating of economic difference, and do not divide people as poor, getting by, or rich as had ritual activity in Laos and Thailand previously. While competition and rivalry a century ago connected people as it differentiated them by household, village, and kin-group, the shared sense of minority identity in the urban United States may be separating people (by religious affiliation) as it unites them in the creative fashioning of ways to be Iu Mien in a new land.

Chiefly rivalries of the 1880s to 1930s offer a context for examining community dynamics among the refugees who settled in the United States. In the older setting, young aspiring leaders came to place themselves in relations with lowland kings and to focus on farming that enabled their contest regarding who could assemble a household that would outdo their rivals. In the United States, the men who shape new forms of community and identity acquired English language skills in refugee camps or through work with the US military agents in Laos and Thailand. When they settled in the United States, they received training and sometimes jobs in social work and came to mediate a new reality to their Iu Mien constituents in the 1980s and after.

Settlement in Laos and Thailand over a century ago played to rivalries among farmers with chiefly ambitions, and settlement in the United States has also brought leadership opportunities. Some leaders have been very ambitious and have claimed credit for making the settlement possible and for paving the way for connections back in China and Southeast Asia. But most people dispute such claims and insist that this was very much a collective effort that rested on multiple collaborations for which no individual can take sole credit. And for all of the occasional rivalries, the many people who have contributed to shaping Iu Mien forms of community and identity in the United States have managed to produce very constructive organizations and networks. Each of them has found ways to bridge generation gaps by informing parents about their children's different orientations and needs, and at the same time found ways to give older people—whose capabilities usually were no match to new forms of language, education, social life, and transportation—a role in maintaining and contributing to new social forms.

There has been considerable creative innovation in religious practice. One non-Christian example is *jouh en lua* offerings to ancestor spirits that are supposed to make people wealthy. I have not seen the practice, and the friend who told me about it commented that he never once heard of it back in Laos. But certain innovations are actively blocked: Young women are not taught how to deal with spirits. To the ones interested, this would be useful and a sign of greater equality. The response to them has been that only men are pure enough to engage with the spirit world. This has, in general, discouraged younger women from engagement with the traditionalist community. When Mien formed an ethnic association in Thailand in the early 1990s, the issue played out in the same way. There, the interested young women later married outside the ethnic group; they sought

measures of equality and participation that they found precluded in the name of ethnic traditions.

## Reflections

My aim has been to emphasize internal diversity among the Iu Mien, historically and in the present, and the socially particular contexts that have framed their religious options and practices. Each of the religious orientations represents what Iu Mien people do and what shape their identity can take. As something of a historical anthropologist, I argue against the tendency to take any single community or historical moment as exemplary of the ways of an ethnic group. I have no interest in polemics, but offer the case as a counter to several proposals for the signification of religion in Southeast Asia and among Southeast Asian refugee immigrants in the United States.

One is Jacques Lemoine's (1982, 1983) argument that Daoism is the fundamental religion of the Iu Mien and that the Daoist paintings are a cultural heritage that has been actively endangered by Christian missionaries and communist zealots. The argument, which contributed to the antiques trade in the paintings that Lemoine established with his lavishly illustrated book—and he helped supply the market—makes Christianity or communism seem anathema to Mien identity and culture. Given that there are Mien Christians and that many Mien live in China, Vietnam, and Laos that have socialist or communist governments, I find the case completely untenable. But it is an example of how one definition of Mien identity is tied to its intended audience: affluent and secularist Western urbanites who are keen to acquire novelty items of intercultural allure for their living room walls, and who most likely identify equally against communism and Christian missionary work.

Another is Aihwa Ong's (2003) work on Cambodian Americans, which asserts that in the United States refugee immigrants from Cambodia and Laos (including Mien and Hmong) were viewed as "welfare recipients" and thus as somehow black in a bipolar racial scheme, while Vietnamese, Koreans, and Chinese were considered, because of their supposed business acumen, to be closer to white (2003: 69–83). I do not know if this pertained to the imagination of some social workers in the San Francisco area—where Ong based her work—but find it impossibly constraining for considering identity work among Asian immigrants. Ong further charts Christian missionary work as producing expectations of commercial success and gendered upward mobility that imply whiteness (2003: 195–228).

The overall framework of her account is that social work and health care among refugees manifest different aspects of bio-power: how modern state institutions produce disciplinary regimes that result in autonomous, self-knowing citizens. If this work is in part shaped for an intended audience, it suggests affluent and university-educated people who view churches and state-institutions as antithetical to bourgeois liberties, and who don't have to negotiate for the basics of safety, education, health care, or livelihood (see Jonsson 2012).

The third is more the conventional expectation that whatever ethnographers had described for an Asian ethnic community in the 1960s pertained to an ethnic group or a nation collectively. This is very much the tone of Nancy Smith-Hefner's (1999) work on Cambodian refugee immigrants in the Boston area, where any contemporary and American dimension is seen as a threat to identity, culture, and people. This view implies a search for a timeless Asia. Rather than argue with it, I suggest from Iu Mien materials that any people are internally diverse and historically specific, and that history did not start in the 1970s. Conjuring a traditional Buddhist Khmer culture may give some appreciative Western readers something to hold. But it may not be of any use regarding the realities of any contemporary Southeast Asian people, within Asia or resettled elsewhere. Stressing the particularity, specificity, and diversity of Iu Mien religious orientations, my aim has been to suggest that they are all equally relevant and perhaps tenuous, and that the recent efforts have been creative and had positive impact. The expectation of an ethnic shape to religious life is at best misguided; at worst it is a denial of people's histories, diversity, situation, and creativity.

It seems clear that academic work on refugee populations is always in part a representation aimed at a community of readers, who can come into knowledge and identity based on such material. The case I have made here is aimed against offering any easy convictions about what Christianity has meant for the Iu Mien. Any generalization of the sort may offer a reader a position, for or against Christianity, in a way that denies any diversity, specificity, or particularity to the Iu Mien or anyone else. This problem has a long history; the works of anthropologists and others have come in and out of fashion in relation to how readers wanted to situate themselves regarding religion in general or Christianity in particular (Ackerman 2008; Strenski 2008).

And the issue is not exclusively about religion: The Hmong of Laos were caught up in the same war as the Iu Mien. In Western reporting, the Hmong have been signified as noble freedom fighters

and as ignoble mercenaries and drug-traffickers. These rival claims avail readers' convictions and identity as for or against the US military involvement in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s (Jonsson 2012), in ways that have often ignored the diversity, contradictions, and despair that continued war brought to Southeast Asia. Not wishing to render the Iu Mien or their religious dimensions into props for Western academic self-fashioning, I have insisted on both diversity and specificity of religious ideas, practices, and identities for approximately the 150 years that I can trace. Regarding contemporary religious divides, I placed the main emphasis on the practical diversity of Iu Mien efforts to establish new forms of community and communication in novel conditions, where no single strategy would have served people who settled in different US cities at particular moments.

The history that I can trace suggests that it was only in a crisis situation during war that there was singularity to Iu Mien social and religious dynamics. Once Iu Mien diversity is recognized as a regular condition, then the questions regarding conversion, religious orientations, and identity must be replaced with a different sense of cultural dynamics. Religion is always played out in reciprocal relation to the particulars of livelihood, community, historical moment, and internal diversity. In my perspective on conversion in the United States the fundamental shift occurred when Iu Mien peoples abandoned their wartime orientations that had been sustained by the annual collection of funds to support militias, and shifted toward making a future in their new homeland. Coming into new forms of religious and community organization enabled a new way of engaging with Iu Mien ethnic identity, independent of the previous conditioning of ethnicity during war and in refugee camps.

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