

Subcontracting sovereignty

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In his stirring manifesto *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, Mahmood Mamdani suggests that U.S. proxy wars in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have changed the global political landscape.¹ By arming ethnic, religious, and political splinter groups as so-called counterinsurgents, and giving them the job of deposing nation states, U.S. proxy wars have encouraged claims of sovereignty to proliferate. Sovereignty is a confusing word because it is often associated only with established states. But anthropologists have been willing to imagine sovereignty more flexibly to follow less fully institutionalized claims as well as sovereignty's partiality even in the strongest states. Sovereign power, following Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, is "a tentative and unstable project whose efficacy and legitimacy depend on repeated performances of violence and a 'will to rule'."² U.S. proxy wars have sponsored performances of violence and the will to rule for a shifting set of claimants with varied and uncertain relations to the apparatus of states. This subcontracted sovereignty competes and overlaps with other performances of violence and political community.

Proxy war is often most effective where it joins older strategies for maintaining a landscape of multiple sovereignty. In Southeast Asia, both states and tribal minorities have maneuvered within a many-centuries' long legacy of competing and overlapping sovereigns. In the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. proxy war in the hills of Laos and Vietnam joined these older political resources, later expanding their possibilities with new arenas for performance including refugee camps in Thailand and immigration to the United

States. My talk today explores the dilemmas and strategies of citizenship of Hmong refugees from Laos, now living in California, as they work to sustain the doubled, subcontracted sovereignty once facilitated by U.S. anti-communist war. In speaking of citizenship, I will focus on the performance of violence-laden prerogatives for political community, rather than legal inclusion and exclusion. I am interested in the continual repetition of war stories full, not of bravery, but of fear and pathos.

I composed this talk in response to a shock. As I sat down to revise a completely different paper for you, news came that a Hmong student of mine had just been shipped to Iraq. I eventually learned that this was not true; he had merely been reassigned from the navy to the marines. Still, the shock of having to prepare to lose him had possessed me. There was nothing I could think of to do—except to continue the work that he and I had started together, but with a new urgency.

I have known Gary as a gentle and curious young man, bravely peering into the esoteric rituals of the Western academy. Gary was born in Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand but came to the United States with his parents at the age of five. He grew up in the densely knit ethnic enclave of Fresno, California, where his mother could buy supplies at the Hmong supermarket and Gary could have his hair cut not just by any Hmong but by a fellow White Hmong, since, as some of his relatives claimed, the Green Hmong used to be cannibals. His father, a military leader under Hmong General Vang Pao during the CIA secret war in Laos of the 1960s and 1970s, kept tight control of who came through the door of their house, since even the wrong Hmong could leave traces of poison to kill you. Gary's world growing up was a Hmong American world. Hmong neighbors formed the majority in Gary's public school and the main body of his

childhood friends. For Gary to attempt the University of California's education was a brave and difficult act of mastering new languages, new genres, and new systems of understanding. I felt privileged to re-learn the unfamiliarity of this world—the deep exoticism of our academic ways of knowing—by working with Gary. He also taught me about Hmong Americans. He had begun to write what seemed a brilliant senior thesis on the forms of political rhetoric Hmong Americans use to mobilize their community by reliving the emotional experience of war in Laos. He wanted to go to graduate school. But he ended up, as his brother before him, joining the navy. I doubt he will be the same person when he comes back. I write this talk for the Gary I knew, in dialogue with the many things he taught me. I wish I had the knowledge to write his senior thesis, but I don't. Still, I write what I learned from him—but, necessarily, within those rituals of the Western academy I have deeply internalized.

Let me begin again, then, in the security of counting. *One*, Hmong exemplify the pleasures and dangers of proxy war, with its subcontracted sovereignty. *Two*, Hmong Americans continually call up the experiences of war as a way of mobilizing a political community with the *feel* of sovereignty. Evocations of war are intended to interpolate listeners, including non-Hmong anthropologists. They are powerful calls to return “freedom” to the Hmong in rightful exchange for so much battlefield injury and death. *Three*, this dearly bought freedom requires overlapping and sometimes incompatible practices of sovereignty and citizenship. Caught in the repetitive evocation of military time, leaders cannot but advocate the overthrow of Laos and the return to the homeland. Yet, as the 2007 arrest and recent release of Hmong General Vang Pao from just such charges has shown, this requires a delicate dance of loyalty, simultaneously grasping and

disavowing multiple sovereignty and citizenship. *Four*, to dance across overlapping and unreliable citizenships, Hmong Americans learn to tell stories full of the fear and pathos of survival. The teller, the “I” of the story, must speak for many. Hmong public discourse creates and recreates multiple sovereignty through its rhetorical forms. These are my main points today. The rest of this talk works to bring them to life.

One: The legacy of freedom

According to Hmong oral history and shamanic text, Hmong originated, thousands of years ago, in what is now northern China. The slow Hmong migration to the south, resisting Han Chinese authority all the way, is central to the stories Hmong tell themselves about Hmong identity and freedom.³ The truth of the stories is less important than the weight of sovereignty claims carried on their long durée. “Hmong means we came from Mongolia,” many California Hmong told me, with how much jest I couldn’t tell. Gary participated in the mix of fact and fiction that reconfirms this legacy of autonomous Hmong time. He wondered if the great mythical beasts whose names are remembered by the elders might be dinosaurs. He told me of the Hmong ancestor who invented metal forging, an invention only later surrendered to the Han Chinese; he puzzled, following the early 20th century Catholic missionary Francois-Marie Savina, about the possibility of a distinctive non-Asian Hmong racial type. Like most of the Hmong Americans I have known, he “knew” the story of a defeated Hmong king as a beacon for Hmong political ambitions stretching into the future. Resisting ethnological attempts—however friendly—to classify Hmong as a non-state, upland “tribe,” Hmong Americans prefer to be imagined as subjects of a kingdom in almost-perpetual exile.

Hmong arrived in the northern mountains of what are now Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam less than two hundred years ago. Although Hmong Americans call Laos their homeland, they are aware of their status as pioneers to what is now Laotian territory. They were pioneers, and they were soldiers—as well as rebels. Through their participation in armies and rebel militias, alike, they played the possibilities of multiple sovereignty as a strategy for autonomy.

Consider how historian Thongchai Winichatkul explains multiple sovereignty before the enforcement of colonial standards in and around the kingdom of Siam:

[U]nlike the modern concept of a sovereign state, a tributary's overt and formal submission did not prevent it from attempting to preserve its own autonomy or "independence," nor did the quest for autonomy prevent a state from submitting itself to more than one supreme power at any one time. Indeed, the practice of multiple submissions was often indispensable if the state was to save its "independence." ...[S]uch a tributary would be regarded by each overlord as its own possession....⁴ The situation of multiple sovereignty was common for the smaller kingdoms and tiny chiefdoms on all the frontiers of Siam...⁵

Multiple forms of military participation—both for and against one or more states—offer one strategy for maintaining autonomy. The choice of allies is less important, perhaps, than the defense of room for maneuver. In Chinese records, Hmong have figured strongly among rebels to imperial authority as well as among mercenaries to many causes, including the empire. In colonial Southeast Asia, Hmong continued to achieve military pre-eminence, both as colonial soldiers and as anti-colonial rebels. In

French Indochina, for example, Hmong leader Pa Chay Vue led the millennial anti-French Guerre du Fou, the Madman's War, between 1918 and 1921. Millennial leaders have been charismatic and active in consolidating Hmong ethnicity. Shong Lue Yang, a mid-20th century millennial leader, composed a unique Hmong written language, which later inspired the Chao Fa anti-communist resistance that gathered fighters on an isolated mountain after the retreat of U.S. forces in 1975.⁶ Vang Pao himself had some features of a millennial leader. Here's how one of his CIA backers told journalists he performed:

Vang Pao rode shotgun, his CIA man in the rear seat. Their single-engine plane, buffeted by strong crosswinds, aimed at a short dirt airstrip scratched into the face of a rocky northern Laotian mountain. To Vang Pao, the Hmong warrior, there was little to worry about—divine spirits controlled his fate.

The plane landed near a village of about 300 people, defended by 60 men with old flintlock rifles, recalled Vinton Lawrence, the CIA operative. Pathet Lao Communists let loose almost immediately with gunfire and mortar. "Instead of cowering, Vang Pao was up, directing these poor people who hadn't even been trained," Lawrence said of that day in the early 1960s. "His reaction was extraordinary. He assumed he was not going to get shot. He just exuded bravery."⁷

At least today Vang Pao does not call himself a divine leader, nor is this the kind of story I *ever* heard from Hmong about the war. Instead, it's the kind of story CIA operatives had to tell themselves to explain what they were doing with Vang Pao and his bands of flintlock rifles in early 1960s Laos. Vang Pao, fighting for the American cause,

exuded supernatural bravery. As another CIA operative put it, more succinctly, "Vang Pao's a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch."⁸

Vang Pao, or VP, as he is affectionately called by Hmong Americans, was trained by the French colonial military in Indochina and became an officer in the Royal Lao army before being selected as the head of the CIA secret army in Laos, charged with saving the country from communists. VP was effective because he was able to mobilize the Hmong as an ethnic group to take the war on their own shoulders. Some Hmong fought for the Pathet Lao, and some tried desperately to stay out of the conflict, yet across vast areas VP succeeded in making the American cause appear a Hmong cause. This still seems to me one of the great crimes of U.S. involvement in Indochina; upland peoples were mobilized to fight as whole ethnic groups—men, women, and children—through promises of ethnic empowerment, subcontracted sovereignty.

VP's tactics are still much debated. Certainly, he influenced American bombing targets, and he controlled the delivery of American rice to villages unable to farm because of the bombing. Even supporters agree that he shot prisoners, dissenters, and those about whom he had suspicions, without process. Critics argue that American transport consolidated his key role in the opium trade, which generated vast resources.

VP was also able to draw upon the Hmong legacy of organizing fighting men. Leadership inspires Hmong military prowess, but so too does kinship. Patrilineal clan and lineage identifications bring Hmong men together in solidarity. The strength of patrilineal kinship sets Hmong off in sharp contrast with surrounding ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, many of whom practice flexible bilateral kinship. Patrilineal kin ties, enacted in courtship and marriage, in patterns of hospitality and settlement, in funeral

ceremonies, ancestor rites, and in political affiliations, have been a powerful force for Hmong ethnic mobilization. The Hmong American organizations most able to bring out ethnic force are the area-specific councils of the 18 clans. This is work for men, and particularly fighting men.⁹ If Hmong Americans—like Gary—have disproportionately joined the U.S. military, as some organizations claim, it is in continuation of a heritage of male military prowess for the cause of Hmong freedom.

Two: Remembering Laos

Gary asked me to accompany him to his home in Fresno one spring break. He particularly wanted me to interview his father. Gary explained that his father rarely spoke to him about his life. Instead, Gary said, he sat silently for hours in front of the television watching videos of Laos with tears washing down his face. Gary thought that he would talk to me since I am a teacher and, to him, a representative of the United States. It was true. Gary's father, who speaks no English, welcomed me warmly and showed me his pictures of George W. Bush, who, he said, had helped Hmong Americans gain U.S. veteran's rights. He was glad to participate in long life history interviews because he wanted to tell me about the war in Laos, where he was a commander of men. Gary translated.

We didn't prompt him. Prompts would not have been effective. Gary's father had a very specific, almost technical, story he wanted to tell us. It was a story about how carefully he had prepared for war, and how much of his self he had put into it. But this care was not for himself. His life narration told a larger story in which the war experience was the Hmong experience. In this story, Hmong had mastered the challenges

of war and given it their best efforts. They had measured and taken the risks. War had made them, and they weren't about to forget it.

In his boyhood, Gary's father learned hunting, he said, and this trained him for the arts of war. *When I was a boy, he explained, I wanted a knife to go hunting. When I grew a little older, I wanted a bow and arrow, and then a single-shot rifle. Finally I became a man and I wanted an automatic rifle with which to fight.*

The mastery of tools and terrain continued at the center of his experience of war. As a soldier, he left his village to live in a mountain-top military camp. The CIA strategy was to build military installations on the top of the steep karst mountains of central and eastern Laos, where they could peer across the surrounding valleys, ready to bomb anything that moved. Those mountain tops had once been infested by dangerous spirits, but American helicopters cleared them out as they cut down the forests. Hmong military camps sat, with American hardware, atop these mountains, and the job of the Hmong was to call in American bombers. If the planes were shot down, they were to save American pilots, at all costs. Meanwhile, Pathet Lao guerrillas hid in the limestone caves underneath those sharp-sloped mountains. At night, the communists would silently climb the slopes to lob grenades at the CIA army.

Gary's father explained how he came to know the grenades intimately. He described to us how he learned the difference between enemy grenades with three-second fuses—which were about to go off right away—and those with just slightly longer five-second fuses. When the five-second kind arrived, he and his men would pick them up and throw them back to the enemy. When I heard this I felt sure he was getting the times wrong; how could you throw something back within five seconds? But what I've read

confirms: five seconds is long enough to throw back a grenade—at least if you are utterly focused and determined.

Skills of caution, patience, and trust were also key. When someone was shot, he explained, he had to wait patiently, sometimes all night, for his comrades to find him to bring him back to a place of safety. It took me a while to realize that this discussion, told with detail but as if general advice, referred to himself. He had been shot in the chest one night and had lain quietly in the brush until the next dawn when his men found him. He showed me the scar that remains on his chest from this incident. Gary later adroitly diagnosed my confusion as an issue of pronouns. After a short first-person segment describing his boyhood, his father had quickly slipped into using first-person plural pronouns to tell his adult life, blurring the boundaries between his own story and the story of the Hmong people at war.

Hmong Americans almost invariably call the enemy “Vietnamese,” as if the war was entirely an ethnic conflict. Only with reluctance do Hmong I know admit that many Laotians were communists, even though there is no love lost between Hmong and ethnic Lao. In part, I think, this is because many Hmong men were fighting for the Pathet Lao, putting those troops in a complicated relationship between friend and foe. Gary’s father was once captured by the Pathet Lao, he explained. But he had a “brother”—a close cousin—in the Pathet Lao army, who arranged his quick escape. Hmong Americans declare their total submission to American overlords and their cause, but in Laos tactics of maneuvering within multiple sovereignties trumped full submission to any imperial ideology. If “Hmong means free,” as refugees in the United States proclaim, it is because of this legacy of maneuver.

In breaks between talking, I looked at the portraits that surrounded us in the house, which showed the family in varied guises: Hmong traditional outfits; military uniforms; American graduation and wedding garb. Gary's grandfather and his brothers had been trained in the French colonial army; their fading sepia portrait in military dress, carried from Laos, took up the biggest frame. Beside them were more recent but stranger Fresno portraits. Camouflage-dressed men posed against a studio backdrop of the Laotian Plain of Jars, the site of so much American bombing. Gary's father had one portrait with a walky-talky next to his ear and his arm extended, pointing across the imagined plains, recalling the times he had called the bombers. The most bombed place in the world, I read somewhere, a hard record to keep.

During my visit, Gary's father was also performing something, but I wasn't sure what. The first day I was there he appeared in a traditional Hmong outfit, bright embroidery on black cotton. The second day he wore a Hawaiian shirt and slacks. The third day he donned his camouflage army uniform. Only then did I realize that he wanted me to photograph him and the family, and I began. Perhaps he was continuing his story of both loyalty and room for maneuver through these changes.

One day, Gary pushed too far. He asked his father why he just told stories of the technologies of war, and never of his family. Didn't he miss his many wives and children, waiting for him at home? Gary's father stopped talking and then started to cry. That was the end of our session.

But it was time, anyway, for a much more public ceremony to begin. Gary's family had decided to sacrifice a bull for a ritual to heal a rift with a son-in-law's family. We killed the bull early in the morning and spent most of the day butchering and

cooking. By the afternoon, the house was packed with guests. In the kitchen and on the back porch, the cooking continued. In the living room, older female guests gossiped about which marriages were failing and which young people might be ready for matchmaking. Outside the men sat with the choice parts of roasting meat. I asked Gary to translate. To my astonishment, the whole group was describing the specific events of a battle in the 1960s. On top of the hills were the Hmong units. In the valleys below the despised “Vietnamese.” They reconsidered the angles: Which hills were the most vulnerable to big guns fired from below? Which had a lip that might protect the Hmong combatants? They reconsidered the moment of political maneuvering: Who were the captains who gave the key orders? Where were the bombers? Where was Kong Le, the notorious and unpredictable “neutralist”? Every tactic and topographic feature was dissected, item by item. I had never witnessed such deeply focused intensity—and in consideration of a 40 year old event. But Gary explained that, although the battles in question changed, this was *always* the conversation. The men never stopped remembering; it was the substance of their lives.

Three: Necessary betrayals

The subcontracted sovereignty of proxy wars requires transactions based on warily calculated as well as oblivious misunderstandings. The U.S. government never intended to offer the Hmong a kingdom even if they won the war. Hmong soldiers never planned to become U.S. veterans. But CIA transactions with the Hmong were not just based on lies. The kind of colonial mimicry described by anthropologists such as Michael Taussig and Ganneth Obeyesekere was surely at work here: The colonial intruders, here the Americans, performed the savagery they attributed to natives. In turn,

native middlemen mimicked the savagery of the new men in power.¹⁰ The most famous example is the CIA operative said to have inspired the film *Apocalypse Now*, who was known in Laos for rewarding soldiers who brought him human ears; when he found out that the children of his soldiers were missing their ears because of this policy, he required, instead, severed heads, which he collected and dropped on enemy villages.¹¹ Perhaps the “contract” part of the subcontracted sovereignty of proxy wars is always of just this sort. Exaggerated performances of violence are exchanged across gulfs of incomprehension. Through this exchange of performances, permission to rule is offered and accepted, although interpreted by each side in its own way.

Such multiply interpreted exchanges must always provoke feelings of betrayal on every side. Even the CIA agent I just mentioned is said to have left Laos in protest against Vang Pao’s use of the war to enrich himself through the opium trade. Another famous CIA handler received a hero’s funeral from Hmong in Montana, yet in the knowledge that other, rejected Hmong may have murdered him.¹² It is possible that subcontracted sovereignty just can’t be worked without multiple instances of acutely felt betrayal. Just what kind of sovereignty is this anyway? How long is it supposed to last, and under what circumstances? Who’s in and who’s out? Disagreements on these issues are inevitable, and charges of betrayal multiply.

For the older generation of Hmong leaders in the United States, these are pressing issues. Without their subcontracted sovereignty, they are nothing. To hold on to positions of leadership, they must evoke the war. They must have a continuing cause. The existence of active Hmong rebels in the hills of contemporary Laos is necessary for the cause, and they are forever organizing to support those rebels, however tiny their

spark. VP has done a pretty good job of this. The most important thing to hold on to is perhaps not even the once-and-future kingdom but instead the sense of betrayal itself. When the U.S. left Laos, the Hmong were betrayed. As long as Hmong Americans nurture that betrayal, the cause is safe. Subcontracted sovereignty remains, held in suspension by its betrayals.

In the ebb and flow of American politics, betrayal spreads around. VP was in hot water with his own troops some years ago for suggesting that it might be possible to cooperate with the government of Laos. Another betrayal. But his position of leadership was reconsolidated in 2007 when he was quite surprisingly arrested on federal charges of plotting to overthrow the Laotian government. Then the councils of the 18 clans brought out the Hmong people to express their full support. Fresno City Council Member Blong Xiong explained the rapid mobilization: "It's difficult for the mainstream community to realize that the Hmong community has the same reverence for the general as Americans have for George Washington or Thomas Jefferson."¹³ Sovereignty indeed.

The charges resulted from a sting operation in which a fake special-forces agent offered to sell a load of weapons to invade Laos. VP himself seems mainly to have stroked and admired the weapons. The charges seemed particularly awkward in the context of the U.S. preemptive invasion of Iraq; under what circumstances do you get to invade a country? Meanwhile, Vang Pao had friends in high places, many still regretting U.S. withdrawal from Indochina. One former CIA handler admitted with nostalgia, "We taught him how to do these things....that he and his troops are now charged with."¹⁴

Not all Hmong have agreed with VP's leadership. During the heady months following VP's arrest, dissenters were branded as betrayers. Dr. Yang Dao, a Minnesota

retired professor, counseled calm and was slandered all over the Internet as “actually a Vietnamese” in Hmong garb.¹⁵ Hmong Americans came out in great numbers to support the general. The mad scramble to get on the Fresno buses for demonstrations in Sacramento reminded some of the last U.S. planes to leave Laos: everyone wanted to get on. Amazingly, everyone wore white shirts, as the councils of the 18 clans had decided. White is for the “good guys” in America, they said. Only bad guys wear dark colors here. Signs were also centrally coordinated. It is hard to think of other U.S. demonstrations in which such discipline held. To me it suggests how seriously Hmong Americans take their double citizenship: Hmong as well as American. For many it is a “double or nothing” strategy: Without Hmong political community, they would disappear through the cracks in U.S. public space, and be left with nothing.

This September, less than two months ago, the charges were dropped. The federal prosecutor said that, in dropping charges, he considered the defendant’s history as well as the consequences of a conviction. "He's viewed as a quasi-martyr," said Phillip Smith, executive director of the Center for Public Policy Analysis in Washington and Vang Pao's friend. [Quote] "If these charges had remained, the government would have been putting itself on trial for betraying the Hmong." [unquote]¹⁶

Four: War stories

As part of my research on commercial wild-mushroom collectors in the forests of the U.S. Pacific Northwest, I conducted formal interviews with about a dozen Hmong collectors. I also interviewed a similar number of Khmer, ethnic Lao, and Iu Mien pickers, as well as white Vietnam veterans.¹⁷ The Hmong interviews stood out starkly. All of the pickers had war stories to tell, but only the Hmong launched into them with the

confidently scripted determination to draw me into their history. Whereas many of the others spoke of wanting to overcome or forget the terrible tragedies of war, Hmong pickers were explicit about wanting to remember. Mushroom picking in the Oregon hills was for them one way to remember jungle fighting in Laos.

While many Hmong helped me learn about forest foraging during my days of participant observation in the field, in the formal interviews I conducted at night, they did not have much to say about mushrooms—or, indeed, life in the United States. They wanted to talk about Laos. The questions I had prepared about seasonal livelihood strategies had to be abandoned. Before I had a chance to speak, my Hmong informants launched into their stories, and they did not stop until everyone, including my Hmong assistant, was so emotionally drained that we had to call it a night. And while a number took the same path as Gary's father, telling me of the survival technologies of the CIA war, many others talked mainly about what happened *after* 1975 when the U.S. withdrew.

When U.S. forces left Indochina in 1975, Vang Pao and his top officers flew to safety in exile. The rest of the Hmong troops were left to decide what to do on their own. A panic ensued. Some returned to civilian life in rural Laos. But some ran to the inaccessible jungle area around Phou Bia mountain, where the Hmong millennial Chao Fa movement had established a base. Phou Bia became the core area for continuing Hmong armed rebellion against the state. Others ran to the Mekong River and crossed to Thailand and the UN-sponsored refugee camps that soon sprouted up near the border. Vang Pao's influence created a special camp—reportedly the best and the safest of all the Southeast Asian camps—for Hmong refugees. After the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980, many Hmong refugees moved to the United States.

One might think that the choice for one of these routes precluded the others, but, in fact, there has been a great deal of movement back and forth across them, and most of the stories the mushroom pickers wanted to tell me were about the trauma and danger of that movement. Farmers joined the rebels; rebels became refugees; refugees returned as rebels. The border between Laos and Thailand remained active—and is probably still active with potential Hmong refugees. Refugees in Thailand went back to Laos all the time, urging Hmong still in Laos to leave their lives as farmers to become rebels or refugees. Even after the U.S. began to welcome Hmong refugees, many refused to leave the camps because of this back-and-forth access, with its political possibilities.

One husband and wife explained that they were living a perfectly ordinary life in rural Laos in the late 1970s when they decided to take off into the jungle to join the Chao Fa rebels on Phou Bia mountain. They left all their property—the husband had been a comparatively well-off Village Head—bringing their children with only the clothes on their backs. For several years after, they experienced great privation. They did not farm, and, when they could not get food from nearby villages, they were forced to eat foraged forest foods, such as wild yams. Their group was poorly armed and always in danger. There was a good deal of sickness, and everyone was hungry. The only way I could imagine what they were describing was through the literature on millennial movements in Southeast Asia—which tells of people leaving their farms to live on nothing in the wilderness while waiting for the new era. Outsiders tend to call Chao Fa a millennial movement; the journalist most sympathetic to the Hmong cause labels them “mystical warriors.”¹⁸ But the husband I interviewed explained their acts within a framework of revenge: “When a man’s father is killed and he becomes a bandit in the jungle, that is

Chao Fa,” he explained. The wife explained her state of shock after the death of the family dog at the hands of Vietnamese soldiers. The soldiers ate the dog. After that, she explained, she couldn’t stand to live at home and wanted to run away. By the end of her story, we were all crying.

Most of the Hmong I spoke with told of going back and forth between Thailand and Laos after they had entered the refugee camps. Some of the crossings were officially sanctioned by some state, including Thailand.¹⁹ In one of the more bizarre incidents of the resistance, China decided to train and support Hmong rebels as long as they were willing to aim their attacks against Vietnam. One of my mushroom pickers told me about riding in official Thai buses to the Chinese training camps—and back to the refugee camps. But most of the crossings were informal and unprotected. One man took his pregnant wife on one of his forays into Laos. She started having labor pains soon after they crossed the Mekong, and he was forced to take her back to the Thai side of the river. Much of the back and forth was related to the rebellion. Money and weapons for the Hmong struggle came through the refugee camps and were brought by registered refugees back into Laos. Other forays were to collect or mobilize relatives. Yet every time one crossed the Mekong there was great danger. The river was deep and swift; soldiers were posted on both sides to stop crossings. Many Hmong used bamboo poles under their arms, or air-filled water jugs, or tires as ballast for the crossing. Some were shot. Some drowned.

Most everyone I spoke with had a story of being the amazed exception when death was all around. For Christian Hmong, there was an explanation: God had saved them. Soldiers pointed straight at them, but God made them invisible. They lost their

families in the forest, but God brought them back together. Thomas Pearson writes about similar stories he heard from Christian Montagnard refugees from central Vietnam.²⁰

What surprised him was how these stories refused the conversion tropes that American missionaries had worked so hard to induce in the mountain people. Instead of God saving them from personal sin, God saved the Montagnard from inevitable death. God worked rather like a spirit amulet, Pearson observes, except that He was more powerful than the other, older spirits. In the Christian Hmong stories I heard, God had a similar role.

But as in American Christian conversion stories, telling these stories of fear, pain, and unlikely survival had a message—a message for *me*. Like a sinner running from conversion, I tried very hard to escape it, but eventually I could not. One evening stands out in my memory. I had made an appointment with a very serious mushroom picker, one of the best. I was hoping to hear about how he had developed his foraging skills, but I never got to ask a single question. He took control right away by challenging my right to listen: Was I any part Vietnamese? If so, he would not tell the story, because Vietnamese are all communists. (I told him my mother is Chinese, which somehow miraculously passed his communism test.) When he began then, it was with deliberate slowness, opening with one of his first memories: going up the hill at the edge of the village every day with his mother. She would gaze over the hill and cry. Then they would walk back. That was the hill his two brothers had crossed when they went to war. They never came back. This of course was just the beginning. Filling in for his brothers, he went over that hill himself to join the war. After 1975, he went back and forth between Laos and Thailand, continuing to fight but with many losses. As I listened I hoped I had

hardened myself to hearing about such losses. When he got to the U.S., I thought I might survive the narration intact. But he brought me up short in a direct confrontation when he explained that he had now sent his sons to Iraq. Why, he wanted to know, why should he sacrifice and sacrifice for *me*—a born and bred citizen of the United States? I had no answer.

I understood then that all the stories I had heard of the terrors and turbulence after 1975 were intended to teach me the meaning of betrayal, as well as to affirm the steadfast principles of double-or-nothing citizenship. Betrayal and double-or-nothing citizenship: both are central to the subcontracted sovereignty of the survivors of proxy war. I too bore the burden of witnessing.

Such rhetorical strategies have had considerable success, even in the highest realms of international politics. During the Reagan administration, Hmong refugees were key figures in shaping anti-Soviet charges of chemical and biological warfare, which then allowed U.S. chemical and biological warfare preparation to reopen. The refugees had described their persecution by poisonous colored vapors that came to be called “yellow rain.”²¹ Like a combination of the U.S.’s napalm and Agent Orange, the airborne poisons both burned and deformed all future growth. The sample tested in the United States turned out to be pollen from bee cleansing flights. But the stories have kept coming and coming. If you go on to the Internet, you can see a video of a surprised British reporter for Al-Jazeera who in 2008 went to visit the remnant Chao Fa rebels on Phou Bia mountain; men, women, and children bow down on their knees, calling him “father,” and cry, pray, and beg most piteously for his help in their time of fear and suffering.²²

These stories are not just for outsiders. Hmong mobilize each other through these stories. If “saying is believing,” Hmong also mobilize themselves, each, individually, as members of a political community, a sovereign “we.” Gary told me that in the Fresno town-hall meetings held to gather support for VP after he was charged, leaders told stories of the terror times and showed films of the continuing suffering of rebels in Laos. Members of the audience started to cry. Only then was the meeting ready to gather itself for political action. The effectiveness of such stories can be seen, further, in the recruitment of the younger generation, born in Thailand or the United States and unfamiliar with flights through the jungle. The young people have picked up the stories and embellished them with rhetoric of “genocide,” “justice,” and even “peace.” Inflected with these surprisingly Left ways of seeing, the stories, with their promises of subcontracted sovereignty, continue. The war experiences of a new generation of Hmong in the U.S. military promise to keep the stories of fear, loss, and betrayal flowing into the future.

These stories cannot but move and haunt me. They seep into my dreams at night. They drag ugly parallels with other proxy wars into my consciousness. They threaten, even here, to flood this talk with too much unaccounted terror. And so I retreat to the safety of the chanted numbers with which I began. *One*, Hmong exemplify the pleasures and dangers of proxy war, with its subcontracted sovereignty. *Two*, Hmong Americans continually call up the experiences of war as a way of mobilizing a political community with the *feel* of sovereignty. Their stories are powerful calls to return “freedom” to the Hmong in rightful exchange for so much injury and death. *Three*, this dearly bought freedom requires a delicate dance of loyalty, simultaneously grasping and disavowing

multiple sovereignty and citizenship. What I have called double-or-nothing citizenship informs the strategies not just of leaders but also of ordinary Hmong Americans who feel the need to be Hmong and free—yet simultaneously under American protection. *Four*, to dance across overlapping and unreliable citizenships, Hmong Americans learn to tell stories full of the fear and pathos of survival. The teller, the “I” of the story, must speak for many. Hmong public discourse creates and recreates multiple sovereignty through its rhetorical forms.

Thank you.

¹ Mahmood Mamdani, 2004. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. Pantheon.

² Thomas Blum Hansen and Finn Stepputat, 2005. “Introduction,” in *Sovereign Bodies*. Princeton University Press (1-36), p. 3.

³ See, for example, Yang Dao, 2009. “Hmong culture is Hmong soul,” In Gary Yia Lee, ed. *The impact of globalization and transnationalism on the Hmong*, St. Paul: Center for Hmong Studies. Pp. 53-56.

⁴ Thongchai Winichatkul, 1997, *Siam mapped: a history of the geo body of a nation*, University of Hawaii Press. p. 88

⁵ *ibid.* p. 96. In describing state claims, Thongchai is referring to pre-colonial multiethnic governance. Hmong mobilization of *ethnically* organized political claims draws from later colonial and post-colonial arrangements of power and classification.

⁶ See William Smalley, Chia Koua Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang, 1990. *Mother of writing: the origin and development of a Hmong messianic script*, University of Chicago Press.

⁷ Kennedy, Tony and Paul McEnroe, 2005. “The covert wars of Vang Pao,” *StarTribune.com* July 2, <http://www.startribune.com/projects/12669047.html> accessed October 7, 2009

⁸ Retired U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Harry Aderholt, who ran a covert operation in Laos during the CIA secret war, quoted in Kennedy, Tony and Paul McEnroe, 2005. “The covert wars of Vang Pao,” *StarTribune.com* July 2, <http://www.startribune.com/projects/12669047.html> accessed October 7, 2009

⁹ Hmong Americans remember Hmong gender differentiation as a key feature of the war in Laos. “Communist” women participated in armed struggle; CIA-supported Hmong differentiated themselves through their refusal to let women fight. The United States of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has not been an easy place for the reproduction of this differentiation, and Hmong American women have established themselves in leadership roles and have even challenged “traditional” rituals. (See, for example, Vincent Her, 2009. “Animal sacrifice and social meanings in Hmong American funerals,” In Gary Yia Lee, ed. *The impact of globalization and transnationalism on the Hmong*,

St. Paul: Center for Hmong Studies. Pp. 3-12, esp. p. 7.) In Minnesota, a woman serves on the Council of the 18 Clans (Mai Moua, 2009. "Leadership development: a critical component to advancing Hmong society in the United States," In Gary Yia Lee, ed. *The impact of globalization and transnationalism on the Hmong*, St. Paul: Center for Hmong Studies. Pp. 41-52 see p. 42). Influential Hmong scholar Gary Yia Lee argues that Hmong American men are stuck in the space of war in Laos precisely because of changing gender standards in the United States. "[Men] no longer have the authority they once had over their wives and children. Thus, Hmong men in such a situation long for the old days in Laos where they had supreme control in the household.... With the lack of access to meaningful employment, men who used to supervise others might now work as subordinates, sometimes under men they used to command as soldiers in the homeland. Rather than continuing to suffer this humiliation, they might join political groups that tried to regain control of the homeland from the current political regime, even if they had to pay money and spend countless hours on activities they knew to be futile. Yet the new dreary life they are now living makes them dream and long for a Hmong country where they could again be in control.... It is almost as if the longing for the past is necessary to make the present meaningful and worth living for." ("Transnational space and social memories: why the Hmong in the diaspora cannot forget Laos?" In Gary Yia Lee, ed. *The impact of globalization and transnationalism on the Hmong*, St. Paul: Center for Hmong Studies. Pp. 121-131, quote on p. 127.) This astute gender analysis is an important complement to the material I present in this paper.

¹⁰ See Michael Taussig, 1991. *Shamanism, colonialism, and the wild man*. University of Chicago Press; Ganneth Obeyesekere, 2005. *Cannibal talk*. Univ. of California Press.

¹¹ See, for example, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_Poshepny; <http://www.nndb.com/people/157/000130764/>; <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/JFKposhepny.htm>, all accessed October 10, 2009.

¹² Jane Hamilton-Meritt, 1993. *Tragic mountains: the Hmong, the Americans, and the secret wars for Laos 1942-1992*. Indiana University Press, Chapter 30.

¹³ Denny Walsh and Sam Stanton, "Federal charges against Vang Pao dropped," *Fresnobee.com* September 18, 2009, <http://www.fresnobee.com/local/story/1642794.html> accessed October 13, 2009

¹⁴ Larry Devlin quoted in Tim Weiner, "Gen. Vang Pao's last war," *New York Times Magazine*, May 11, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/magazine/11pao-t.html?pagewanted=1> accessed October 13, 2009

¹⁵ The charge was too wide-spread to cite. Yang Dao's rebuttal, in which he says his father was "150% Hmong," can be found in an interview with Wameng Moua for *Hmong Today*, April 13, 2008, <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/article/2008/04/09/scholar-hero-untold-story-how-dr-yang-dao-negotiated-fate.html>, accessed October 16, 2009.

¹⁶ Eric Bailey and My-Thuan Tran, 2009, "Federal charges dropped against Hmong leader Vang Pao," *LA Times.com* September 19, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-vang-pao19-2009sep19.0.4697860.story> accessed October 7, 2009.

¹⁷ I am thankful to Lue Vang, David Pheng, and Hjorleifur Jonsson for translating during these interviews.

¹⁸ Jane Hamilton-Meritt, *Tragic mountains*, op.cit. Chapter 24.

¹⁹ Lee Lor details histories of Hmong refugees from Laos recruited by the Thai army for anti-communist activities. “The Thai military ordered these Hmong to invade Laos,” he writes in “The Thai-Hmong and Hmong refugees in Thailand: the politics of human rights,” In Gary Yia Lee, ed. *The impact of globalization and transnationalism on the Hmong*, St. Paul: Center for Hmong Studies. Pp. 31-40, 2009, quote on p. 35.

²⁰ Thomas Pearson, 2009. *Missions and conversions*. Palgrave-Macmillan.

²¹ Philip Boffey, 1983. “The ‘yellow rain’ debate,” *New York Times*, June 21, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/21/science/the-yellow-rain-debate-scientists-take-sides-as-battle-intensifies.html?&pagewanted=all> accessed October 16, 2009.

²² Tony Birtley, 2008, “The lost tribe,” March 10, *AlJazeeraEnglish* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5k8oXaG-bQ>, accessed October 16, 2009.