

The Meo Laws:

The Meo or Hmoob as their real name have been one of the historical people in the world. One thing that made them disappear for centuries is that these people were uneducated and they did not remember what they had done very long time ago. This, now makes other people look at the Hmoob as a very new group of people. These people lived very high on the mountains. Their communications to cities or towns were very little or none. Eventhough they had no judges like in cities, they could still organize their people by using their own laws. The judges were the cleverest people in a certain village. Everyone of the very old people said that the Hmoob had 120 rules altogether. However, they were not able to remember all of them. What they remembered were something like divorce criminals and murder because these seemed to be more important for them. Some of their rules are:

1.) Divorce: This information is brought from a Nai Ban, Xice Xeng, at Ban Nam Phete.

*The husband decides to divorce the wife:

a) If she doesn't take care of the children and the house: This will be Judged by sending the wife back to her parents first. Her parents will advise her what she is supposed to go back to her husband and help him. If she is advised till three times and still doesn't change her behavior. The husband and the wife will divorce. The divorcement will be settled in The Pho Ban or Tasseng but not in the relatives of either the wife or the husband. The wife will have nothing given back to her. The children or dowry will all belong to the husband. This is because

she has been an unsirtue wife for him.

b.) The wife doesn't like her husband's relatives. This is quite similar to part (a). However, the dicision of divorce is dependant upon the husband. If the husband likes to have friends or relatives in his house, he has to talk to them about his problem first. The relatives of the husband can have a small meeting where the wife is present in it. The wife is advised to do what the relatives and the husts and like. If there is no change after two or three times of advices, she is sent to her parents and relatives to give her advice. If there is no change either the husband can divorce her. The wife will have nothing returned, even her dowry. This is the first type of divorce. The second one is the husband just divorces the wife without having any meeting or advice for the wife. The wife can have all of her dowry back plus what she thinks she needs in the husband's. However, the children will be-long to the husband. This means that he doen't care about the wife's price at all. If the husband doesn't want any children, the children will be hers. This is only a very small percentage that the wife has the children.

C.) The husband dislikes the wife because he! (the husband) has another lover. This is conduced that the wife is normal, that is, she likes his relatives, has babies and takes care of everythng in the house. The most common way for this type of divorcement is that both the wife and the husband go to see a Pho Ban or a Tasseng. The wife's relatives now have the right to come to the dispute and check how many things the wife has done with the husband and how many are left. These left stuffs plus the dowry and the children

(3)

will belong to the wife. The house itself is for the husband. Remember that every single thing in the house, for instance, pot and knife is all taken by the wife. The husband also has to pay a maximum of one pig or two chickens to make a meal for the husband's and the wife's relatives to eat. At this meal, the Pho Ban or Tasseng who makes the decision of the divorce will bring the two sides together, organize them, and ask them to be close relatives forever, except the husband who has made the wife's relatives lose their faces. Another type is quite the same as the first one. The only difference is that after the decision of divorce is made, the husband will leave the house without picking anything in the house with him. This means that the house belongs to the wife, too. What the husband has are only the clothes around his body at the present.

d.) The wife commits adultery with a man of even the husband's relatives or another clan. This proof can be done when someone sees the intercourse with a man or the woman is pregnant when the husband knows for sure the baby is not his. Now the husband and his relatives catch the wife. Binding her hands together, the husband and his relatives fight or hurt the wife as hard and as long as she tells them the man whom she commits adultery with. The husband's relatives now go to find that man and catch him. They will hurt him as much as possible whenever they catch him. After having caught him, they will take both the guilty couple to a Pho Ban or Tasseng. Now each one of the husband's relatives will have the right to hurt the couple as much as they want to but not put to death. The guilty man is made to pay "ob com" of Chinese money made of copper or alloy of copper and zinc. "Ob Com" in the

Hmoob language means something that has a cost of 100,000 k for today. If the husband still wants to marry the wife, she will be made to pay for a meal for the judges. This is because the wife is not afraid of anything and she has stepped on the judges' heads. The wife will do everything for the husband without any argument.

If the husband decides to divorce his wife because of committing adultery the wife will have nothing returned to her. What she has with her will be only her clothes that she is wearing (just one pair of clothes.) The husband can force the guilty man to marry his wife and make him pay twice the wife's price that he had paid for his wife. Both the wife and the guilty man will be made to pay for a meal of at least a pig for the judges to eat. This meal is a symbol that the two guilty people are surrendered under the husband's hands and that they have broken the laws.

The woman decides to divorce her husband:

a.) The man is not normal, that is, he has no babies with the wife: This incident can form divorce or no divorce. However, let's say that all Hmoob people want children because they are farmers who must need children to replace their jobs and support them when they get old. If the wife wants children, but the husband is sterile, divorce can be formed between the couple. The wife's dowry will be all returned to her but she will have nothing which is her husband's. The wife can have what her husband gives to her as gifts. Mr. Ly Thao and his wife, Nang Kice Xiong in the Xieng Khouang Province in 1964 are the best examples for this event.

If both the wife and the husband love each other very much but they have no children, they both can adopt children to support their oldness. An example

for this is Mr. Youa Yeu Moua in Phongsaly in 1950. This is told to me by Mr. Say Pheng Ly, a 72 year old man at Ban Nam Phet.

Having no children causes people to have different associations. Mr. Blice Keu Ly who knows himself that he is sterile, lets his wife to associate with other men, that is, he gives his wife permission to intercourse with other men. When the wife is pregnant because of forming association, she comes back to the husband's house and have the child born. (I don't know why this bad event can happen, but believe me that this is true.) The reason for this is simply because the couple know that they are going to be old and they will need children to support them. This couple finally has 7 sons. After their death each of the 7 sons kills a bull for them and bury them.

2. Untruth:

a.) If a man borrows your money, for instance, 100,000K. He says he will give it back to you in a duration of two days. However, after two days, you don't see your money given back to you. This is judged in two ways: The first way is that if he is poor and he uses that money for something which is important say buying farming land. After the two days he comes to see you and ask you, then, can not force or harm him because at first you are glad to give him your money. Now you can just take him to court, for instance, Pho Ban or Tasseng to let them know that you have really given him that much money. He, the borrower, will pay you back at a duration of one or two years or you can make him work for you and you count the money for what he does until you think he has done enough for your money.

The second way is that if the borrower goes away and never comes back to see you again. This event can be counted as criminal laws if you can catch him.

He will be taken to the Pho Ban or Tasseng after having been caught. He will

be made to pay the lender double, and, if the borrower has used that money for something else, for instance, making benefit. The benefit he has got will be divided into two equal parts. Each person, the borrower and the lender, takes part of it.

Now, if the person borrows your horse and says that he will use it to transport rice from his farm to the house. Instead, he uses the horse to transport materials for trade. For this reason, you can take him to court. The Pho Ban or Tasseng will be the judge. This is mostly decided as: the benefit the borrower has got will be divided into two parts, one for the horse owner and the other is for the horse lender. Each single day that the horse leader takes the horse with him will cost him 1,000K, that is, he has to pay 1,000K per day. This rule has been used for hundreds of years, but, the Nai Ban said, we don't know how much it cost before. What he said up here is still used now, but the payment is in kip today.

3. Murder:

We all now know that the Hmoob people are one of the mountainous people. Therefore, they are their own bosses or lawyers, that is, they judge for themselves. Their laws are very different from today's. Today they use the RLG's laws. Some are very tense and tough while others are weak. For example of a tense rule, father forms association with daughter, brother makes love with sister, son makes love with mother and so on. These are very bad things for every Hmoob person. Judges will be:

a.) If the couple who make love with each other can eat grass like living animals, crawl naked (with no clothes) and intercourse in front of hundreds

(17)

of people like animals, they are set free. The people will count that this couple are animals that the father can make love with his daughter or the son makes love with his mother.

b.) If the couple can not do what part (a) said, they will be murdered by tying their feet tightly to two horses or bulls. After the four feet have been tightly tied, guns are shot in the air to make the two animals afraid. The animals run away very fast and tear the two people apart and there they are dead. Each foot of a person will be with a different animal. The two dead people will not be buried. The animals will pull them to where they release from the animals and there is their grave.

A person' Mr. A, of one clan, for instance the yang group, commits adultery with a woman Mrs. B of another clan. The woman is married and her husband is still alive. Now, if suspicion is discovered to be true that Mr. A has really made love with Mrs. B. If they both were fiances before Mrs. B is married, the judge will be that Mr. A finds another wife for Mrs. B's husband and he marries Mrs. B. Before marrying, Mrs. B's husband's relative will make them drink very salty water for three days with out any food or rice. This is to make the two get very bad disease that they can not earn a good living. This is because the two are said to be strange people that are useless for all the Hmoob and the people around that area. However, if after the two have made love, the woman, Mrs. B, goes to tell Mr. B, and his relatives that Mr. A has raped her or forced to make love with her. Then judges will be to make Mr. A pay for the B's twice the bride's price. If he can not do that he will be put into a wooden barn (Nkuai Tawg) and burned.

The woman is never wrong because it is said that if the woman makes love with the man first, he must to tell the woman's husband and his relatives about that. If Mr. A hasn't made love with the woman, Mrs. B, and Mr. A runs away to Mr. B and tells him that this wife is going to commit adultery with him. Now the woman will be made to pay twice to bride price. The stuff paid will belong to Mr. A. If the woman can not pay that much she is put into a wooden barn and burned. The man is set free.

One kills another (of any clan) by a.) accident. For example, two men go hunting. When they reach the forest they divide their ways to go. Going further in the forest they meet each other unexpectedly. One who is careless looks at his friend like a beast or a wild animal and he fires at his friend who is careful or who hasn't seen the careless. Now this is judged to be accident. The murderer has to kill two cattles for the dead person. He has also made a big meal to ask for excuse from the dead's relatives and work for the dead's parents when needed (Not always).

b.) Premeditated. For example, a man murders his wife because he has a new lover whom he is going to marry to. Now, suppose the truth is discovered to be premeditated murder, the murderer will be tied under the dead person. His food at that time will be the mixture of rice and pus..... When the dead person is buried, the murderer must be put under the dead's coffin. A hole from the coffin straight to the murderers mouth will be screwed. This is to make the murderer drink the Pus--- of the dead person.

Remark: These rules of murder here are not used now, in the present. However, they were used before the RLG spread their now ledge to the Pho Ban or Tasseng at very long distances from cities. They were used when the Hmoob people were in the chinese district.

4. Criminals.

Nobody in the world is pure and that is why the Hmoob people also have criminals. However, I believe myself strongly that the Hmoob criminals are not very dangerous. This is because their people are uneducated and have nothing which is very valuable to make their people become very bad criminals. Before 1960, there were very few criminals. A criminal who steals corns will pay corns back. However, one who steals silver will pay silver back. If, for instance, a person steals one ear of corn from your barn or farm. When the thief thinks he is wrong and he goes to your home and tells you that he's taken your corn. You now have no right to take him to court or make him pay you. However, if the contrast occurs, that is, if you or a person of yours see that another person, Mr. A, has stolen one ear of your corn. You now go to the ~~thiefs'~~ house and ask if he has stolen it. If he ~~denies~~, you can take him to the Pho Ban or Tasseng. If the suspicion is discovered to be true, he is made to pay seven person ears of corn back to you. If Mr. A steals again a second time, he'll be made to pay double the first time, 14 person ears of corn. If Mr. A steals again a third time, he'll be made to pay triple the first time, 21 person ears of corn. If he steals again a fourth time, he's taken to a higher judge and never let him return to the village.

For criminal law, everything is judged in the same way as the top one, that is, if a thief steals one chicken of yours for the first time, he'll be decided (made) to pay you 7 chickens. If he steals 3 chickens of yours for the first time, be made to pay 21 chickens and 42 for the second time and so

on to the last time. It doesn't matter what kind of thief it is, the judge is still the same, that is, this judge for criminals is constant.

5. Disputes of lands.

A group of people have different behavior, though they speak the same language. There-fore, they have different disputes of lands. However, to make these disputes easier to solve, the Pho Ban or Tasseng set up a simple rule for them. If there is a dispute between two people of an area to make a rice field, the proof will be to send the Pho Ban's or Tasseng's assistants to the area and check up the marks that each person cut on the trees long ago. The marks will be something like this.

The person whose mark is older always wins the dispute. However, if the two marks of the two people are similar to each other, that is, they seem to have the same age, an exact date has to be made by each person. This exact date always gives the Hmoob people confusion because they are not interested in noting what they've done down in a book or a piece of wood. Now, if one mark is as old as the other, the land will be checked up by the Pho Ban's or Tasseng's assistants or the bosses themselves to see how wide the land is. If the land is wide enough, it is divided into two equal fields for the two. If the land is very small, it is prevented for anyone to set up a rice field in it." Every field that you need must have your marks on the trees around that area. Your marks must be the oldest ones! This statement is the rule. It is used for

(11)

any kind of dispute for an area.

The dispute between two people who want to build their houses at the same location is a little bit different from the statement up here. If the location is in the forest, the above rule is used to judge the problem. However, if the area is cut a location of having no trees, another proof is made. The two men will have to say their exact date or month they come to see the area. If they come in the same month or day the land is divided into two parts for them. If the land is so small to divide, don't let anyone to build his house in it. If their exact date or month is at a different duration, the first one will get the land.

These are all the Hmoob's laws that they have used up to date. These laws seem to be the most important ones.