ASIAN AMERICAN WOMENS ADVANCEMENT COALITION AAWAC: AGENCY, RESISTANCE AND ETHNOCGENESIS

by
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I am interested in understanding the processes by which people recreate their cultures and use them for material survival. More specifically, I join with other anthropologists in their efforts to understand the ways poor and ethnic peoples maintain their identities while changing their traditions. I have been exploring these processes in Visalia, California in the heart of the agri-business driven central San Joaquin Valley, by focusing on Hmong immigrants' interaction with government practices. This has provided a window on changing Hmong identities. Hmong identity is not homogenous; identity formation varies, at the least, by gender and generation and it is contested within the ethnic community and between Hmong and the surrounding society.

In Laos and in Visalia, Hmong men have held public leadership positions. In Visalia, Hmong women are central to new identity formation and to cultural maintenance. I would like to illustrate women's centrality by talking about the Asian American Womens Advancement Coalition or AAWAC. AAWAC women's mere coming together constitutes a challenge to accepted and traditional notions of male hierarchical leadership.

AAWAC is an alliance of Hmong, Mien, Lao and Lahu women and non-Asian women working in impacted refugee programs that organized to address the specific problems of Laotian women and their families that have been mishandled or ignored by both Social Service Agencies and traditional Laotian social organization. These problems commonly cluster around gender and intergenera-
tional conflicts such as marriages of young girls, child bearing choices for married women with many children, and parents' frustration with "out of control" children who change "faster than rockets" countered with adolescents' claims of abuse. These problems reflect the profound changes in mens and womens relations and in ethnic identity. Today I want to show 1) how women and men are handling the seeming contradiction of womens' leadership, and, 2) how new notions of Hmonghood or Laotianhood are being created when women simultaneously resist cultural expectations while struggling to preserve traditions and protect communities. I want to explore the idea of emerging Laotian ethnogenesis: the creation of Laotian identities and groups from the multiplicity of Hmong, Lao, Mien, and Lahu identities and groups.

Although AAWAC women agree in their challenge to the power imbalance, the necessity of a united Laotian course of action and a strong alliance with non-Asian women who work closely with Laotian communities they are often divided by generation, interest and the "appropriate" manner to proceed with group plans. One unresolved internal AAWAC debate illustrates the complexity of Laotian womens' task to assert themselves as a political entity that builds on old networks while creating new ones. Since the beginning of this year, the state required that all Mutual Assistance Associations or MAAs have both men and women serve on their board of directors. This change came about, in part, from objections to all male run and directed MAAs that receive federal monies for programs whose stated purpose is to serve the entire Laotian community.

AAWAC is currently at the threshold of non-profit incorpora-
tion. The question that divides the group is whether to become an MAA that seeks public monies thus requiring a man or men to obtain board membership and the opportunity to attend weekly meetings. The arguments break down like this. One side says that by going after both public and private monies AAWAC expands its financial base and, likewise, by admitting men to the group, the community support base is broadened. The other says that once men are admitted into the group, the very reason AAWAC formed in the first place will be undermined. AAWAC will no longer be a safe place for women to articulate their ideas, problems, frustrations and fears. It is often pointed out that the mens groups are weakened by clan and ethnic disputes. One woman pointed out, "if a man comes, he will dominate. And if a man leads, the group will be just like all the others." They also suggested that AAWAC would be stronger without government regulating constraints.

As with most AAWAC exchanges this debate does not break down ethnically but more generationally and experiencially. The first inclusionist view is led by two Hmong women who are experienced in public discourse, have represented Hmong women politically in the community and at national conventions, and have been verbally attacked and criticized by individuals in the Hmong community for their positions that often contradict notions of decent Asian women. "When a Hmong woman steps out," one of these women told us, "there are many levels of Hmong men that she must get through." These two women have traveled those steps and taken the risks and urge AAWAC members to take advantage of all opportunities in the course of "stepping out." But having argued this,
they are also the two in the group that caution to move "appropriately and gently." Appropriate and gentle, a euphemism in the group for dealings with the Laotian male leadership, means extending membership to men out of respect, from knowledge of mens expectations, and because it is politically expedient.

The others, who find it difficult to open AAWAC to men, make up two distinct decision making bodies. They are married women of all four Laotian groups, who are new to the public political process; and young unmarried high school and college students who live with parents in households where most issues are contested. Both of these groups have declared AAWAC a safe place to speak and both clearly possess a new found sense of license and independence. They are protective of this forum and fearful of losing what they have only recently gained. I asked the group, in the middle of one of these dialogues, how a discussion on contraception or wife abuse would go with a man at the table? After the initial silence, a Lao woman slowly shook her head, holding her lips tightly together. A young Hmong woman said there wouldn't be one. Most women made it clear that rather than express their unpolished and untested ideas and emotions in the presence of a man they would choose silence.

This debate lies unresolved, with no men on the board. It was agreed that AAWAC members will vote to amend this situation when a specific grant is in front of the group. The other MAAs in Tulare County, all male consortiums like Lao Family, chose to ignore and then to sidestep the issue of adding women to their board. Earlier this year a Lao Family board of directors meeting was called after several womens names were added to the roster
according to the new law. Only the women showed up for the meeting. A change of venue had been announced to everyone but them. At another meeting where one Hmong woman was present the Hmong men conducted the meeting in Lao, a language that many Hmong women, including her, cannot speak. Laotian men continue their all male organizations in practice that resist state imposed regulations and the unfamiliar presence of Asian women in their power and influence networks. Women openly debate the addition of men as either potentially harmful to the development of their political expression or useful in terms of community solidarity and financial strength. AAWAC will eventually admit men, in part, due to the arguments of the two Hmong women. Says one, "The women know how to work together. Now it is up to us to show the men how to work together and slowly they will come around and understand what we do."

By its actions AAWAC has also contributed to redefining the traditional meaning of leadership. Within AAWAC's internal discussions and in other Tulare Co. organizations where both Laotians and government service workers are present (Forum on Refugee Affairs, AIDS information presentation) several women have begun to interject terms such as "helping people" and "center people" when speaking of community leadership. This is a strategy that reconstructs the meaning of leader to include women in the shifting Laotian political scene in the region.

In part their success at redefining what it means to be a leader in Visalia is due to the failure of Laotian consortiums made up of elder men from different Laotian ethnic groups who are
often ex-soldiers, veterans from our "secret war in Laos." In
the past, they have been able to present a more united Laotian
front in the face of the dominant community's opposition. They
have recently dissolved in disagreement and are attempting to
regroup. In addition, government imposed regulations that guide
MAAs and their opposition to these regulations has led Tulare
County to suspend all Lao Family services in the area. It is in
this context then that youth, students and Laotian women and men
who work together as employees of the school district and refugee
programs have come to a new consensus that leaders, as people, be
knowledgeable and educated in both Laotian and American systems
and institutions, and responsive to the changing needs of the
communities. Workplace environments, like Refugee Health and
Visalia Unified Schools, where all Laotian employees interact
with each other for the benefit of all other Laotians, are impor-
tant to the process of constructing a more unified identity.

The notion of "centerpeople" springs from AAWAC ...womens' under-
standing that they are a part of the newer leadership that
is pushing onto the Visalia political scene. They also know
that their roles as mothers, wives, household managers, and
culture brokers often place them at the center of family debates
and three generation households with very divergent views on
American life. The remarkable thing in this process of change is
that non-Asians working in local refugee programs have begun to
appropriate the language; city of Visalia supervisors, school
administrators, and refugee health nurses are talking about
"helping" and "centerpeople."

I want to turn again to the idea of emerging Laotian iden-
ties. The nature of the debates that take place within AAWAC meetings are not so much ethnic: between Hmong or Lao or Mien or Lahu as they are generational, between young college women and forty year old mothers of seven, between the married and unmarried, and between women who have been publicly scrutinized and women who are understandably fearful of this scrutiny. The lines change with the issue. From out of AAWACs often raucous weekly discussions comes the common ground that helps to forge a new Laotian identity; common exclusion, common economic and social constraints within the broader community and a common fear that problems they struggle with now will pass on to their children. Laotian women are also discovering that they share many common exile, refugee camp, and U.S. resettlement and multi-migration experiences.

Where the mens coalitions in Tulare County have, in part, been eroded by old factionalized rivalries, the women do not seem to be concerned with these ethnic and clan oppositions. Indeed, the story of the mens' coalition failure is one of AAWACs rallying lessons. Because the women in each ethnic group see their problems as so similar, struggles both within their cultures and with the surrounding society, a united Laotian front has been upheld as the only way to make a difference in Visalia. In the same way, the alliance with a handful of invited non-Asian women was decided early on as politically advantageous. Just as transforming the language of leadership was a tactical maneuver that circumvented the obstacle without destroying it, the inclusion of American women was a choice to broaden and help solidify AAWACs
American connections. A word on the use of the word *American*: American is how the Laotian women in the group describe the non-Asian women. The "American" in Asian American Womens' Advancement Coalition is for the non-Asian women in the group since none of the Laotian women call or consider themselves American. I suggested the "American" in the group's name because I think of the Laotians as new Americans. They liked the idea of American only because it would give us Americans a sense of belonging in the group. So we both compromised and left it in. The meanings of the word are essentially opposite but theirs reinforces emerging ethnic identities and new political alliances.

AAWAC women are demonstrating and helping to create a new concept of leadership and a new, more unified concept of ethnic identity in Visalia. This underscores the need to focus on women as key agents in areas like political process and ethnogenesis which are often not seen as gendered.