

# Public Library Services to the Hmong-American Community: Much Room for Improvement

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## ABSTRACT

Today there are more than 160,000 Hmong living in the United States. Significant Hmong populations can be found in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Michigan, and Colorado. From personal observation and experience, the Hmong do not seek any information from the library like other new immigrants. This paper offers some insights and recommendations to assist public librarians to add the Hmong-Americans to their list of library users and supporters.

## BACKGROUND

Public libraries today are as representative of American culture as apple pie and baseball. From the very beginning these institutions were “advertised as places where American democracy would flourish as all citizens enjoyed equal access to the fruits of the world’s knowledge, wisdom, and art” (Downey, 1995, p. 3). It is common knowledge that in the United States, public libraries are “quintessentially American institutions, symbols of American faith in education” (Molz and Dain, 1999, p. 1). Even today, with the ever increasing impact of electronic technologies on our lives, the public library remains “the traditional public library --popular, non partisan, community based, and within real, not virtual walls” (Molz and Dain, 1992, p. 2).

Through all my years of schooling, libraries have been important and special to me in several ways. First and most importantly, they offered the experience of reading for enjoyment. Secondly, a quiet place to study --even people in a one-story three bedroom apartment was not an ideal environment for anyone to study. In addition, the public library had all the resources I needed to help me complete my homework assignments.

I am a Hmong-American. Hmong are from Laos; however, they are racially different from the ethnic Lao --culturally and linguistically, they have more in common with the Chinese (Chang, 1994). During the Vietnam War, the Hmong were recruited by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to assist in the fight to free Laos from the Communist Pathet Lao. The war disrupted Hmong way of life and divided the community. When the United States pulled out in 1975, life in Laos became increasingly insecure for the Hmong who had sided with the CIA (Miyares, 1998).

Unlike many other Southeast Asian refugees, the Hmong who immigrated to the United States faced a very difficult adjustment to American culture. Their rural background and traditional values conflicted with the social and economical fabric of American society. The main occupation of the Hmong in Laos was swidden agriculture, a type of cultivation in which forest growth had to be cut and burned.

Swidden agriculture did not require the Hmong to go to school. In the oral tradition, information about farming was passed down from father to son. The Hmong have no native script. Although missionaries in the 1950s developed a Romanized writing system for the tonal, monosyllabic Hmong language, many of the adult Hmong remain illiterate to this day. My grandmother, who passed away in April of 2002, was one of them. She was 87 years old when she died and had never learned how to sign her name or read.

The Hmong do not fit the usually stereotyped “Model Minority”<sup>[1]</sup> of the other Asians who have come to the United States. They are one of the poorest and least educated ethnic groups from Southeast Asia. They are hard-working but most Hmong are information poor and culturally isolated from mainstream America. Many of them don’t know what a library is or what services they may receive there.

Imagine not being able to read the name of the street on which you live or read Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice*. My parents and hundreds of other Hmong parents are among this group because they could not read. My parents never helped me with any homework assignments because they had no idea what I was learning at school. More importantly, they never took me to the library for Story time or to check out any reading materials because there was no such thing as “free books” or libraries where they grew up. They never understood why I like to go to the library after school. They assumed that libraries were probably part of “being in school” or somehow associated with school. Every time I went there I would always take books with me to return and come home with even more books. They understood that education was important and it was crucial that I did well, but they never knew or experienced learning that is central to school, reading and libraries.

According to Payne, author of *Public Libraries Face California’s Ethnic and Racial Diversity*, my parents were right to connect the library with education and school. “Studies show that low-income minorities are more likely than other users to use public libraries for education, rather than recreation” (Payne, 1988, p. viii). My father did have some schooling. He completed the sixth grade in Laos, but my mother had never held a pencil in her hand before coming to the United States in 1978. Today my mother still cannot read or write in either English or Hmong.

## PROBLEMS

It is a fact that the library user must have at least some knowledge of and be in agreement with the social practices and values of the library in order for the library to be beneficial to the user (Constantino, 1997). For example, most new immigrants live in ethnically segregated communities due to language and cultural differences that divide them from mainstream society. Therefore, when they go the library, they often seek survival-type information about their new environment. Common requests may include “information on acquiring English language instruction; English language study materials, either audio or video; immigration forms and requirements; study guides for citizenship tests, and information on locating housing, jobs, health care, and social welfare benefits” (Luevano-Molina, 2001, p. 142).

From my personal observation and experience, the Hmong do not seek any

information from the library like other new immigrants. They do not seek information from the library because they either rely on family or friends for necessary information or they go to the agencies, organizations and centers in their community.

Some major public libraries in the United States where there is a large community of Hmong collect Hmong language materials. However, the majority of Hmong students and Hmong adults do not read or write in their native tongue. They speak Hmong in incomplete sentences injected with English to replace their deficient Hmong vocabularies.

Many public libraries have programs like Story time for children, plus literacy programs, computer classes, and resume workshops for any adults who are interested. But often the services are never publicized in the Hmong community because many librarians are mistaken in their view that all citizens are aware of the library and its services. However, most Hmong parents are unaware of the services or their value due to their limited language skills and limited outreach by the library.

Literacy programs and computer classes aimed at helping adults to achieve their goals as parents, employees, and community members are all great programs. But once again, the Hmong are not aware of these services or primary obligations limit their participation in these services. Most Hmong families have six to eight children and Hmong parents are busy with earning a living --they do not have time for personal dreams and goals. They leave those personal dreams and goals to their children.

For example, my aunt and uncle work a four-acre plot of land they rent from an American farmer. They grow everything from cabbages, cucumbers and green beans to Hmong lemon grass. Every Wednesday and Saturday they leave home at 2:00 a.m. from Merced, California and drive to the San Francisco area to sell their produce at the Farmer's Market. In my own family, my parents were never home because they worked. As the eldest, I did all the activities expected in a parent-child relationship. I helped my siblings with their homework assignments and took them to the library.

Public library programs designed to help immigrants find job openings on the web and write a good resume are wonderful services. However, the services are not publicized to the Hmong community through their local media. More importantly, most adult do not even know what a resume is or how to write in English.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that public libraries and librarians in the United States have contributed to the success of immigrants of all races and generations. It is understandable that one might attribute the lack of library use on the part of the Hmong to cultural misunderstandings or a lack of language proficiency. However, libraries are obligated to provide a service to the community at large and therefore are obligated to include and serve all members. This means that public libraries should take a proactive stance and role in providing services to the Hmong. Hmong culture, like most Asian cultures, values harmonious relations highly and dissonance is frowned upon. Consequently, members of the Hmong community are not going to make a fuss over the lack of library services to them. Of more

immediate concern is preventing their children from joining gangs and keeping the Hmong language and culture alive.

Literacy is much more than the ability to decode letters and words in text. It is a socio-cultural activity tied to group membership" (Constantino, 1997, p. 53) and literacy starts at an early age. With the exception of a few minority groups, including a majority of Hmong parents, this activity is identified with community. With modification, the library's Story time program would be a great catalyst for librarians to introduce the Hmong to the library and literacy to Hmong children. But the storyteller would have to be Hmong who speaks Hmong fluently and is knowledgeable in Hmong history, myths and legends. Hmong parents consider it desirable to bring their children to story telling because it serves to keep the Hmong culture alive. However, for this service to be successful, the library must aggressively publicize the event in the Hmong community on Hmong radio stations, television or in the newspaper. More importantly, they must do outreach to Hmong teenagers who are often part-time care takers of their younger siblings.

Many librarians will agree that the quality that defines successful library programs that target ethnic groups are "...the librarians who persistently seek new ways to serve their communities' needs and thereby make their libraries central to their communities rather than peripheral" (Constantino, 1997, p. 69). Also they are committed to involving their constituents in the development process of the program from its inception. They are not afraid of building bonds in the community they are targeting. Eleanor (Edwards) Ledbetter, a public librarian in Ohio had it right when she took the social work approach to library work with immigrants during the early 1900s. Public libraries today need to do the same thing. Librarians "must know the community, must study its component parts, its industries, its recreations, its connections with the rest of the world" (Jones, 1999, p. 132) if they hope to be successful in adding the next generation of Hmong to the library's list of library users and supporters.

## CONCLUSION

The public library is a primary source of information, recreation, and education to many people of different ethnic groups and ages. Library use is voluntary and it is important to find out why some ethnic groups use the library while others do not. These factors include lack of knowledge of the library's potential and benefits, lack of knowledge about how to use the library, lack of comfort with library use, or lack of access in terms of library location (Payne, 1992). It could also be a simple case of the user not being able to read English.

It appears that the majority of Hmong in the U.S. are not using their public libraries and the libraries in turn have limited or no services or programs for the community. Some people will look at this and say nothing more needs to be done and no change is necessary, or that public libraries cannot be expected to take on new roles each time there is a new ethnic community in their city. They are already burdened with severe resource constraints that make it difficult to perform current roles effectively. However, "it is no longer a choice but a necessity that public libraries go beyond serving only their current patrons. They must seek ways to meet the needs of other ethnic minorities. This is a matter of basic practicality" (Shek and Martell, 1992, p. 23) and one which will benefit the Hmong as full participants in American society.

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[1] The phrase was first coined by journalist William Peterson in a 1994 article for *The New York Times Magazine*. It is used as a catch-all to describe Asian Americans as the hard-working, well-educated,

successful minority race.

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