

# Tradition and Survival: Kmhmu Highlanders in America

by Frank Proschan

Most traditional cultures are intimately connected to the natural environment in which they are grounded — technical artifacts are shaped by the availability of materials and resources, and expressive and intellectual traditions are influenced by environment directly and through the mediation of those material objects. But what happens to a people's traditional life when they are uprooted, torn from their nurturing homeland and forced to flee across the globe? Such cultural disruption and dislocation are part of the heritage of many Americans — those whose ancestors left the savannahs of Africa or the steppes of central Europe, as well as Native Americans relocated from their ancestral homeland. When we look at these peoples today to discern the contributions that they have made to our common heritage of traditional crafts and folklife, we see cultural practices that have managed to survive over time. When our glance turns to those more recently arrived, however, we see the processes of cultural survival in action.

America's legacy of traditional crafts is a rich and vital one, but it is, in a sense, merely a small remainder of what once was. How can these two statements, seemingly contradictory, be uttered in the same breath? How can we balance the remarkable persistence of so many folk crafts and practices against the fragility and transitory nature of so many other folklife traditions? And, most important, what can we learn from the survival of traditional crafts in the United States, what lessons can folk craftspeople teach us regarding our own survival in a world where our enveloping environment is subject to a disruption so massive as to threaten our continued existence as a species? The experience of some of our newest neighbors, Kmhmu highlanders from northern Laos who have come to this country as refugees over the last dozen years, allows us to see in action the processes of accommodation and adaptation, of loss and replacement, of cultural traditions in a new environment.

The journey that brought the Kmhmu here began more than 30 years ago, when they and their cousins served as front-line troops for both sides in the battle of Dienbienphu, near Vietnam's border with Laos. The next decade saw a gradual but unending conquest of the hills of northern Laos by communist insurgents. Many of the Kmhmu now living here have been refugees since the early 1960s, when they fled their home villages in Muong Sai (north-central Laos) for internal refugee camps located in areas still under control of the Royal Lao Government.

In 1975, as Cambodia and then Vietnam fell to the communists, the pretense of a coalition government in Laos was dropped and



A Kmhmu weaves a bamboo basket.  
Photo by Frank Proschan

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For Kmhmu in America, the annual New Year celebration provides an opportunity to practice traditions, such as playing the bamboo flute, that have few other performance occasions. Photo by Frank Proschan

Keo Rathasack spins cotton for the first time since she left Laos a decade ago. Photo by Frank Proschan



communist control was consolidated. The Kmhmu remained, but increasing taxes, crop losses, and fears for their own safety led many to cross the border into Thailand in the next few years. After two to four years waiting in the Thai refugee camps, those accepted for resettlement in this country took the last, largest step of their journey, leaving behind the rice fields and bamboo groves of Southeast Asia for the garden apartments and duplexes of Stockton and Richmond, California.

Despite the turmoil that characterized their lives in the refugee camps, the natural surroundings in which they found themselves were at least familiar to the Kmhmu. In Laos, they were able to reestablish farms and to practice their hunting and fishing traditions despite being moved from their home villages. In the camps in Thailand and the Philippines, space and mobility were both restricted, but every family had a garden plot to grow vegetables, and it was possible to leave the camps to get bamboo or other natural materials needed for one or another folk craft. But the Kmhmu realized that the journey to America would take them to new and unfamiliar surroundings. In the space of an overnight airplane flight, the Kmhmu would travel from a land of subsistence agriculture to one of post-industrial technology, from a land of water buffalo and canoes to one of automobiles and speedboats, from a land of stories and songs to one of television, and from a land of bamboo to one of plastics.

For most, it was difficult to anticipate what awaited them in their new homeland, so some would even lug 50 pounds of rice with them, skeptical that it could be obtained in modern-day America. Others had a better idea of what lay in store: preparing to leave the camps for their new lives, many Kmhmu affiliated with the Catholic Church. (As one explained, "We knew that in America we wouldn't have water buffalo to offer to the spirits, and we didn't want to be left unprotected.") Families that had carefully, over many generations, bred and selected vegetable strains for desirable qualities, brought along seeds of purple long-beans and tiny white eggplants, fiercely hot peppers and pungent herbs. Some brought heirlooms of silver or bronze, and a few had photographs of family and friends. They carried knives and tools, some musical instruments and cooking utensils. The most important thing they brought, many would now tell you, was their knowledge of Kmhmu tradition and belief, their sense of what it means to be a Kmhmu, their expertise in Kmhmu folklife, their technical skills in Kmhmu crafts. Despite





the radically different environment that awaited them in California, their traditional knowledge would survive, helping *them* to survive in the process.

Compared to other elements of traditional folklife, crafts are particularly dependent on natural resources. A story or song might be performed outside its normal context, and it can survive, relatively intact, even if the generating environment of its origin is remote. To be sure, Kmhmu children growing up in Stockton do not have first-hand knowledge of the red-necked gecko, *daaq throol*, who is said to have stolen his voice from the *tkam* mole. But when Kmhmu elder Ta' Cheu Rathasack tells the story, playing on the *brôdq* Jew's harp to demonstrate what the *daaq throol* sounds like, listeners can gain a sense of how the story fit into daily life in a Kmhmu village. What is much more difficult is to demonstrate the snare in which the *daaq* would be trapped, or to make the *pui* flute through which a young Kmhmu girl would answer her boyfriend's entreaties on the *brôdq*. The *pui* flute requires a long piece of *tlaa* bamboo, one of some 30 varieties of bamboo the Kmhmu can name. None are cultivated here, however, and few American varieties are suited to anything except landscaping.

For the Kmhmu in Laos, no part of their natural environment was more crucial than bamboo. It was used for baskets and fish traps, mouth organs and percussion orchestras, foodstuff and utensils, house-building and rice-planting, ceremonial paraphernalia and marriage contracts. When it was not itself the primary material for a folk craft, it was still necessary to make the tools to fashion some other material. Kmhmu textile crafts, for instance, require bamboo for the spinning wheel and the backstrap loom on which cotton is transformed from boll to shoulder bag. No matter how much they knew about what to expect from life in their new country, no

Several members of the Kmhmu community from Stockton, California, demonstrated their craft traditions as part of the Cultural Conservation program at the 1985 Festival of American Folklife.

Photo by Kim Nielsen, Smithsonian Institution



Kmhmu ever dreamed of living in a land without bamboo.

How, then, do Kmhmu crafts fare, uprooted from the natural context in which they had evolved over centuries? And what motivates Kmhmu artisans to perpetuate their craft traditions when deprived of the resources on which those crafts depend? Kmhmu in California will drive three hours to get the rice husks they need for the ceremonial rice wine, or spend weekends seeking out species of bamboo inferior to those they had known in Asia but needed as substitutes. They will struggle to adapt strange materials to familiar tasks, refusing to accept the notion that cultural bankruptcy is their inevitable future. What message does their stubborn tenacity hold for the rest of us, what place do they — and their craft traditions — have in the larger American society?

Visitors to the 1985 Festival of American Folklife had an opportunity to encounter Kmhmu craft traditions first-hand. A Kmhmu garden on the National Mall replicated the small plots that every family cultivates in Stockton, with snake gourds and bitter melons, winged beans and hot peppers. Alongside, a craftsman forged knives and swords, while another made a serviceable flute from some *Bambusa oldhamii*. Ta' Lay Sivilay fashioned bamboo into offertory baskets while his son Maw made hunting snares. A model Kmhmu house was constructed as were children's toy whirligigs. What Festival visitors did *not* see, however, was how the experience encouraged the participants to return home to the difficult task of maintaining those traditions away from the appreciative gaze of Washington viewers.

The forces that impel most Kmhmu elders to conserve their craft traditions are usually personal ones, difficult for them to enunciate in words and sometimes difficult for strangers to understand. It is easier to make a basket, despite all the difficulties in getting bamboo and rattan materials, than it is to explain *why* those difficulties must be transcended. And so most Kmhmu are content to persist in their traditions, usually invisible to the larger community, steadfast in their confidence that even if they are unable to explain why it is so important to do so, they have no choice but to continue. If pressed, they will say that they do it for their children, or for their new neighbors, so that they will know what it is to be a Kmhmu, and what it was like to live in their homeland of Laos. If pressed a little further, they will acknowledge that they also do it for themselves, because they know that the survival of their folk traditions is vital to their survival as human beings. For Kmhmu in America, as for so many other traditional craftspeople, cultural conservation is necessary because there is no other alternative.

#### *Suggested reading*

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