

" A window into Laos, a door to the world "

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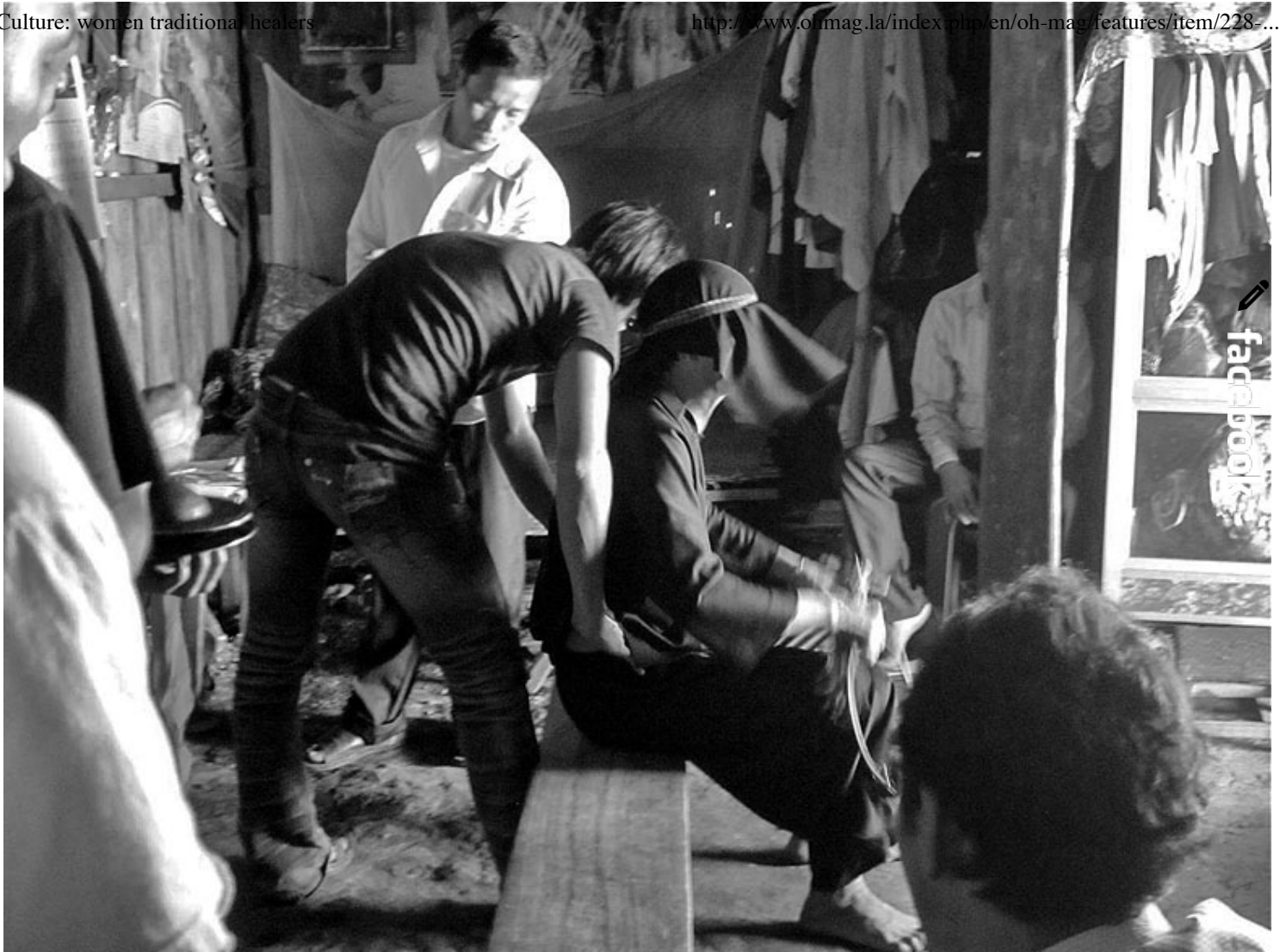


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In most Lao cultures, there is no clear division between physical and spiritual health, and it is believed that misfortune in one realm is often caused by an imbalance in the other. Women, who tend to the daily rituals of home and community, prepare food and materials for ceremonies and festivals and create sacred textiles, also play an important role in helping to maintain the balance between body and spirit.

Women tend to wounds, care for the sick, and support extended family and neighbours through their healing skills and blessings. Experienced mothers with healthy children assist other women in labour and early motherhood, and some knowledgeable Hmong women provide herbal medicines that ease a difficult birth and heal the body quickly.



"A Hmong shaman in trance is supported by an assistant."

HEALING THE BODY

Access to western medical services has greatly expanded in Laos, with child mortality dropping due to vaccines, disease prevention and treatment, and more births taking place in health facilities with trained birth attendants. When available, people actively visit hospitals and clinics for treatment recognising the benefits of western medicine.

However, many still trust traditional remedies and the healers, usually women, who provide them, particularly if modern treatment is too expensive, invasive, or proves unsuccessful. During their many years of apprenticeship, Hmong medicine women refine their craft, learning how to diagnose and treat conditions from physical injuries to chronic illnesses with remedies made from plants and animal parts. In the local markets, they continue to sell a wide array of products with advice for various ailments. An important aspect of their practice is offering treatments related to women's health. Their medicines often include herbs and infusions to improve fertility and ensure that a next child will be a healthy son.

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In the beginning, I learned to make medicine from others. Then I dreamed about medicine until now, for 50 years. - Mai Nau, Traditional Healer

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Mai Nau, the medicine woman featured in the exhibition, “Caregivers to Culture Keepers: Women in a Changing Laos” at the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) in Luang Prabang, grows plants in a small garden and collects bark and other forest products near her home to make medicine for those who seek her out. She is a highly respected healer in her community, and closely guards the knowledge she has developed over decades of experience. She is willing to teach others, but has not had any apprentices – troubling for the future of her craft.



Photo by Ye Her

... AND THE SPIRIT

Traditionally, people first treat illnesses with herbs, and if their condition does not improve, they seek the services of a spirit specialist or shaman. Shamans are believed to have access to, and influence in, the spirit world. Through their mediation, harmful spirits can be banished and beneficial spirits appeased.

Shamans communicate with the spirit world using special tools, such as oddly shaped stones, buffalo horns and offerings, to reveal causes of illnesses or misfortunes and their remedies. Hmong shamans go into trance for a spiritual journey to the land of the souls to seek answers. Lu Mien and Tai Daeng shamans rely on special verse and the power of the spirits to eradicate health issues and hardships. The spirits must be appeased first with alcohol, rice, boiled eggs, candles, and clothing for every ritual and on annual basis. For an offering of meat, the type of animal depends on the kind of spirit causing the illness. It is not uncommon for western medicine to be combined with herbal remedies and shamanic rituals.

“ *Even though I was so sad, when people called me to do ceremonies, to help others, I had to pretend and smile.” - Tong Vang, Spirit Healer* **”**

The ability to communicate with the supernatural is not hereditary and only some receive the calling. For some Tai Daeng groups, a person born with the umbilical cord wrapped around the neck has the potential to become a shaman. Though shamans are important members of animist and pantheistic cultures in Laos, their lives can be filled with hardship. Women, and men, who are shamans hold a great responsibility to their communities. Expected to help maintain the peace and wellbeing of its members, they are not always able to support themselves or cope with the physical and emotional demands of their calling. That burden may be felt particularly by women.

-BY TARA GUJADHUR -



The TAEC exhibition “Caregivers to Culture Keepers: Women in a Changing Laos” focuses on the vital and evolving role women play in their families, communities and country. It is on view until September 2016.

For more information on the lives of women in Laos visit their website & watch it on youtube:

 www.taeclaos.org