Chapter 9

Conversion and Community among Iu Mien Refugee Immigrants in the United States

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The Iu Mien (Mien, Yao) have a long history in southern China, though anthropological work on their social forms, religious practices, and the like has primarily drawn on research conducted in Thailand and Laos, and then among refugee immigrants in the United States (Habarad 1987; MacDonald 1997). Among the Iu Mien in Thailand and in the United States, there are some deep divides between Christian and non-Christian communities. But the issue of internal factions is more complex, where, for instance, Mien Christians in Thailand are divided by script, with one faction using the Thai alphabet and the other Romanization. It is equally important to insist that religious difference does not inevitably preclude shared interest or collaboration. There are, for instance, some families where one of the members maintains links to ancestor spirits while the other is Christian.

My chapter attempts to situate Christian conversions among US Iu Mien within a longer history of religious dynamics and shifts, and as one of several means through which people have arrived at forms of community. The historical part of my case emphasizes diversity and specificity. One aspect of this is the difference between chiefs and commoners prior to the 1950s, and the multiple impact of the war in Laos during 1958–1975. Religious orientations and shifts are shaped in specific contexts, as unevenly situated people respond to the conditions of their lives—cultural practices and patterns are not transmitted in any stable way but are instead continually being constructed and reconstructed (Sperber 2005). I draw attention to some of the contexts where differentially situated Iu Mien have arrived
at particular configurations of religion, community, and identity. My aim is in part to counter the expectation of religious or cultural uniformity or stability prior to the Iu Mien becoming refugees or Christians.

The range of Iu Mien religious orientations over the last century and a half suggests various gradations of conversion. Exploring this diversity, I suggest that Mien religious practice has never been singular. Christianity currently offers one of many strategies of building community, maintaining transnational relations, and expressing collective identity. Suspending the expectation of a singular Mien religion undoes the antagonistic binary of tradition/ancestor worship and modernity/Christianity. With that, the questions shift to social and personal orientations and expectations in their particular historical settings. The focus on diversity, specificity, and issues of community-formation and leadership brings out parallels among divergent religious orientations that the expectation of contrast and antagonism makes unthinkable.

My concern is with religious dynamics among the Iu Mien from the late nineteenth century and until 2011, which spatially pertains to southern China, the northern parts of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, and to the West Coast of the United States, where Iu Mien people settled as refugee immigrants after 1975. The social framework for Iu Mien religious activity has ranged from farming to migration, warfare, refugee camps, and finally urban areas of the United States. At all times, Iu Mien peoples have engaged with religious ideas in multicultural and translocal (including international) settings. Religion has always been an engagement across difference: social, spiritual, political, and linguistic. Recent conversions to Christianity are a manifestation of how people’s identities and practices have taken shape in particular circumstances that are of a historical moment and at the same time lend shape to people’s historical being.

Iu Mien have often crossed ethnic and religious lines for particular purposes, and their religious practices have been formed in historical context. War, farming, and migration are three different modes of being, and each privileges particular religious foci. Since 2005, I have come to know Iu Mien people as refugee immigrants from Laos in the United States. While their religious practices had been similar to what I knew from Thailand (intermittently since 1990), it was clear that the context of the Second Indochina War in Laos (1962–1975) had a significant influence on how people engaged with the world of spirits. For one, the war played up a focus on invulnerability and military