

Name Changing

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A long-standing tradition in the Hmong culture is the changing of a man's name. As a boy is born, he is given a kiddy name. Normally, this is a single syllable name such as Neng, Chong, Tou, etc. This name is to remain in effect until there is a need to change or when he is married and has one or two children. At this point in his life, he should be in his late teens or early twenties, in which he is considered a man. A mature name, npe laus, is given to him. To properly change his name, the father-in-law (the wife's father) is invited to his home to institute it. If there is no father-in-law or he lives too far, then the closest relative of the wife would do. Special preparations are needed for this occasion.

Before a man can have his name changed, he must prepare a set of burial clothes or ris tsho laus for both mother- and father-in-laws. For green Hmong, a special embroidery called teng kia or teem kiam is also given to the in-laws. Once everything is set, a messenger is sent to ask the father-in-law. Normally, the messenger would personally go to the in-law's home and ask. A phone call usually does the job.

The father-in-law usually brings a special gift as well. Oftentimes, such a gift should be one with sentimental values as opposed to something expensive. My father gave my brother-in-law a silver bar as a gift on a similar occasion.

When the in-laws arrive, they usually bring a spokesperson to make talking easier. The son-in-law should also have a relative who knows how to conduct such a ceremony to be in charge. At this point, the father-in-law is called to sit at a small table and given a drink. Then he is officially asked to select a new name for the son-in-law. A large domestic animal, usually a pig, should be ready. The pig is shown to the in-laws before being slaughtered. There are steps taken in the process. Essentially, the father-in-law would give some money to the son-in-law as a gesture of respect and acceptance of the offer.

This is considered a fairly elaborate or important ceremonial service so all relatives should be present. It is said that the more people at the name changing ceremony, the more likely the name will stick.

Sometimes, the father-in-law will ask whether or not his son-in-law favors the name to be given. There are times it is done with the consent of the son-in-law. In either case, this is a huge undertaking. Some people can afford it. There are some, who never have the capability to do it. For those unfortunate souls, they either find another way to earn an adult name or just keep that child name forever.

When the name is selected, the pig and a pair of chickens are used in the soul calling or hu plig. The animals are slaughtered and a meal is prepared. There are no restrictions on the types of dishes that can be prepared on this occasion. Fish, chili pepper, vegetable and whatever else can be used at this ceremony.

Another sizable pig is also slaughtered to honor the father-in-law. It, too, needs to be shown to the father-in-law. This pig is also cooked so as to be feasted on at the same time.

Once the table is set, the elders are called to sit at the table first. They are honored and then each guest ties a string to the son-in-law in which everybody now wishes him well and calls him by his new adult name for the first time.

During the course of the feasting that follows the string tying ceremony, there are many rounds of drinking that should be conducted. Each round of drink has a name. The first one is called soul calling. Then there is the name changing round. There is a string tying round. And so on and so forth. Oftentimes, liquor is used and people do get drunk at these ceremonies.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, a hind quarter of the pig is given to the father-in-law to take home for ceremonial purposes. When he gets home, he uses the packed meat to prepare a feast of his own and invite his relatives to come join. He then tells his relatives that his son-in-law has a new name and for them to go by the new name.