

TO CATCH A NYUS VAIS FOREST SPIRIT WITH A CELLPHONE

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One afternoon in late March of 2014, I was hosting a Hmong focus group discussion on forest spirits/guardians/ghosts (hereafter spirits) in relation to hunting and resource extraction for economic gains when one of the villagers asked if I would be interested in possibly catching a *nyus vais*. I was shocked. One does not simply go and try to catch a *nyus vais*. In fact, Hmong children historically are taught from an early age to do what is necessary to avoid coming into contact with such a powerful and malicious forest spirit.

To put the shock in perspective and understand the significance of this offer, we must familiarize ourselves with a few basic concepts associated with traditional Hmong religious practices and spiritual beliefs.

Hmong cosmology consists of two worlds. The *yaj ceeb* or living world, and the *yeeb ceeb* or spirit world. A person's well-being is dependent on maintaining a harmonious relationship between these two worlds. The relationship is maintained by respecting the many spirits that are found in all living and non-living objects (Tapp 1989). Respecting these spirits means that a person should perform various rituals to honor and appease them, including when hunting or extracting resources in the forests. In addition, one should not commit actions considered taboo while in the forest. Many of these taboos are environmentally friendly in nature. For example, a person should not cut down trees or branches in a forest to make fire. Instead, he should gather branches that have already fallen to the ground. Other taboos include shooting rare animals, shooting an animal more than twice, starting large uncontrollable fires, plugging waterways, and dumping liquid wastes. Committing one or more taboo acts will infuriate the spirits and they will retaliate with devastating consequences. This belief is what primarily shapes how Hmong traditionally view and interact with forest resources.

Perhaps the most famous forest spirit within the Hmong ethnic group is the *nyus vais*. The *nyus vais* is most commonly described as a creature weighing at least 20 kilograms and physically resembling a cross between a macaque and a gibbon (Figure 1). Its body is covered in whitish or silvery hair, except for the chest, which is covered in bright red hair. It usually walks on all fours but is capable of walking on two legs as well. In addition, it seems to enjoy swinging on and hanging from tree branches. However, the *nyus vais* is a shapeshifter, and as such it can take many other animal and non-animal forms. It is also one of the most evil and vengeful forest spirits. When it gets angry or offended by people in the forests, it will make its presence known in two primary ways. The first is through obvious fear-invoking tactics such as conjuring up powerful winds, making high-pitched screams that can be heard for kilometers, conjuring up noises as if it is swinging on and breaking tree branches around where the people are camping, and thrashing and running back and forth in the darkness just out of sight of the terrified human intruders. The goal is to frighten the people to the point that their own spirits or *ntsuj plig* will flee the physical body. Once an *ntsuj plig* flees the physical body, it either wanders off and eventually gets lost in the forest, or is captured by the *nyus vais*. The terrified people are then allowed to leave the forest and return to their village. However, those who have lost at least one of their *ntsuj plig* can no longer maintain the harmonious relationship between the two worlds that is necessary to be in good health, and as such they will soon become gravely sick and die. Thus, the *nyus vais* accomplishes its goal of eliminating those who have offended and angered it. The second way that a *nyus vais* will cause harm to a group of people that have offended it is more direct. Here the *nyus vais* takes the form of a person, casually approaches the people who have offended it, and introduces itself as just another person looking for goods to harvest in the forests. On many occasions the form it will take is that of a person that someone in the group, knows, while at other times it will be of a complete stranger. Regardless, the *nyus vais* will ask if it can join the party around the campfire. Once it receives permission to stay (and it always receives permission due to cultural

norms), it will sit down and start friendly conversations on various topics ranging from hunting to family matters. The *nyus vais* will then innocently pull out an edible item such as a banana or a piece of meat jerky from its bag and proceed to eat it. Unbeknownst to the excursion party, the *nyus vais* is actually consuming both the physical body and spirits of one of the party members. Sometimes, the person being consumed will die instantly, while on other occasions he will fall severely ill and die within a few hours. The *nyus vais* will politely excuse itself and leave once it has killed enough people to satisfy its anger at being offended. In short, encountering a *nyus vais* is a sure guarantee of becoming severely sick and likely dying. Thus, it is in the best interest of villagers to avoid *nyus vais*. This was why I was shocked at being offered an opportunity to try to catch one.

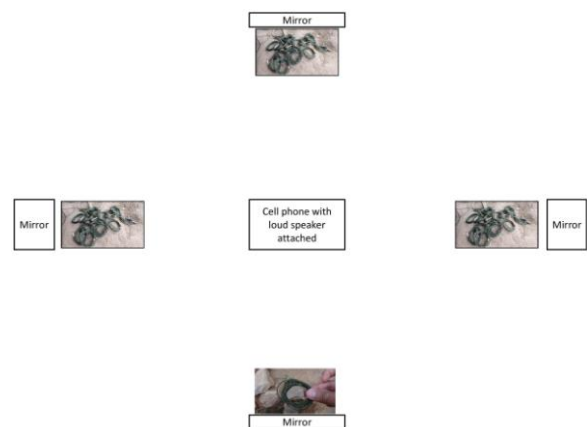


Nyus vais: Illustration by Yinkong Vue

To return to the story in the beginning of this essay, having heard horrific stories about *nyus vais* growing up as a Hmong child in the United States, I stammered: “Aren’t they dangerous?” The villager smiled and said that they are. However, people are now more powerful due to advanced technologies, so it possible to capture a *nyus vais* if one knows how. After the initial shock, my eyes gleamed and I replied: “Okay, but how do we do it?”

“Quite simple”, he answered: “First, we need four mirrors and a cellphone with a loudspeaker attached. Tape recorders work too but it is not as good as cellphones because we cannot remotely activate tape recorders but we can with cellphones. Next, we make some snares, and that is it. Now the actual process is a two-step

process. The first step requires getting a recording of *nyus vais* howls. The best way to do this is go into a forest and deliberately do things to get the *nyus vais* angry so that it will come howling. Record its howls when it does, and then run. Once you have the recording, you can then proceed to the second step. In this step, take the mirrors and place them facing each other in the area where you are going to set up the trap and then place the speaker-attached cellphone with the howls set as the ringtone at the center (figure 2). Now as before, commit taboos on purpose to get the *nyus vais* angry so it will come looking for you. Once it is near, call the speaker-attached cellphone so the ringtone will play. The *nyus vais* will think there is another *nyus vais* intruding and challenging it for control of the area, and will move toward the cellphone to accept the challenge. It will then see its own reflection in one of the mirrors, think that it is the *nyus vais* challenging it, and run toward the reflection to fight, only to be snared by the trap that was placed in front of that mirror. Once a *nyus vais* is snared, it loses some of its power but is still quite powerful, so call the cellphone again so the ringtone will play again. Repeat the process and soon it will become so weak from being snared by multiple traps that you will be able to capture it. Once you have done so, it takes the form of an animal and you can then do what you want with it. More importantly, you can proceed to do whatever you want in the forest and not have to worry about it coming for you.”



Nyus vais trap

Two weeks later, I was in one of my research villages talking to a villager when I brought up the idea of catching a *nyus vais*. He smiled and said he would take me if I really wanted to try to catch one. The next day, we, along with two other villagers were on our way to the hills south of the village where a malevolent *nyus vais* is believed to live. After about three hours of scootering and walking, we arrived at our destination. After settling down, we proceeded to disrespect the *nyus vais* by committing various taboo acts. That night we waited but nothing came, not even a puff of wind was felt or the sound of a breaking twig was heard. The next morning as we were making our way back toward where we had stashed our scooters, the villager said to me with a smile: "Oh well, we can try again another time if you want to but I do not think it will come just like it did not come this time. You see, we are stronger than they are now. We are more powerful because Laos is now becoming modern and with modernity comes advanced technologies that we can use to make us more powerful." He then took out and showed me his smartphone.

Stories and conversations such as these convey a powerful message in that they suggest that ordinary people (non-shamans or non-magic-users) can challenge and overpower forest spirits with modern technological gadgets such as cameras and smartphones. This new aura of confidence was evident when talking to villagers about forest spirits and resource extractions. For example, a villager grinned widely and proclaimed that technology has made Lao citizens 'modern' and 'intelligent' so the forest spirits are now afraid of the people because people are more powerful than they are. Another villager states that forest spirits are afraid of people now because many people have cameras and camera cellphones. They are afraid that someone will take their pictures and show the 'technologically-advanced' countries of the world. If people from these advanced countries find out that these forest spirits exist, they are going to come look for and try to capture them. The forest spirits are afraid of this, which is why they are harassing hunters less and less. Thus, villagers can go into a forest armed with nothing more than a smartphone and extract all the re-

sources they find without having to fear any forest spirits. These comments suggest that the majority of Hmong who believe in forest spirits do not believe that such spirits and ghosts are ceasing to exist in the face of modernity. Instead, they believe that there are now fewer confrontations because the spirits are becoming more secretive and less confrontational in order to continue to persist in a rapidly modernizing world.

References

Tapp, Nicholas. 1989. Hmong religion, Asian Folklore Studies, 48:59-94