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The New Year is the only holiday that the Hmong people traditionally celebrate. It is a time of social gathering and a celebration of a year's hard work. The celebration consists of important rituals, games, talent shows, and courting opportunities. Since no one is to work during the celebration, families pre-stock fresh rice, meat, and firewood. Pigs, chickens, and cows would be fattened and saved just for this holiday.

Before the town social gathering, each family must perform a ritual to rid the current year's bad luck and ask the deceased ancestors for luck and blessing toward the new year. A chicken is sacrificed and incense and ceremonial paper money are burned as a gift of money and food to each family's ancestors. This ritual is always performed before the New Year celebration to give respect to the ancestors.

The town's New Year celebration begins at the break of dawn. Mothers usually wake the little ones from their slumbers to dress in the traditional clothes. The outfits consist of 3 to 4 layers and tightened only by straps and colorful embroideries with dangling beads and silver coins. The different styles of traditional clothes distinguish what type of Hmong (white or green), and what region one is originally from (for example the north, the city, or the mountains, etc). After the clothes are successfully put on, it is accented with a silver necklace weighing about 5 pounds. Then other silver and gold accessories are added to reflect each family's wealth. Then everyone meets at the town gathering where the boys and girls can publicly court and show their love for one another through singing poetic songs and reciting sonnets. It is not allowed for singles to hold hands or get close so courting couples have to throw a tennis sized ball to keep the distance while they sing and talk. Young men demonstrate their talents in katoa, a sport consisting of a mix of volleyball and soccer skills to kick or head a rattan ball across a netted court. Another sport is *thu lu*, a game using hand crafted wooden tops and a rope to spin and hit another spinning top at a distance. While sports are going on, talented folks play the traditional flute *qeej*.

This occasion is the perfect opportunity for parents and grandparents come to see their children and grandchildren sing and court. A lot of times the parents will be looking for possible future daughter-in-laws and son-in-laws for their own children. They also enjoy the new lyrics of poems and sonnets, and especially listening to the music from the bamboo flutes. The flute not only produces sounds that are translated into words but it also produces a sound that takes the elders back in time and perhaps back into their Hmong history.

This celebration lasts all day. Many times, families will find a daughter missing or a son who has come home with a daughter-in-law. Whether it is a new beginning for newly weds or one less working hand who will be missed, at the end of the day, everyone returns home content to their awaiting daily chores.

It will not be until after another year of hard work, that everyone will meet again with family and friends from both near and afar. EW