

*SMOKE & LIGHT
SPIRIT WORLD*

Ka Xiong



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In the night of origins the world of men and the world of spirits were one.* »

Kenneth White, *Kr'ua ke, Showing the Way*, 1983 :9

“*The series or subjects that I love to play with, are smoke and light.*”

Ka Xiong

Ka Xiong est un étudiant et photographe vivant à Luang Prabang. Comme bien des Hmong, lui et sa famille sont originaires de villages environnants de l'ancienne capitale royale du Lane Xang.

Dans ces régions du nord Laos, les dynamiques sociales mettent diverses populations, communément appelées « minorités ethniques », en présence et en relations étroites entre elles : Khmou, Akha, Lènten, Tai, Hmong, Lao, dont la plupart sont originaires du sud de la Chine et réparties des plaines aux monts sur l'ensemble du territoire allant de la frontière birmane à l'ouest à celle du Vietnam à l'est avec, au centre, celle de la Chine. La distinction entre « montagnards » et habitants des plaines correspond à une influence plus prégnante du bouddhisme (gens des plaines) et à des pratiques agricoles différentes : essartage (agriculture sur brûlis) pour les uns, et riziculture inondée pour les autres.

Plusieurs « marqueurs » linguistiques, socio-économiques et religieux permettent de différencier leur identité perçue et revendiquée par les formes d'habitat, les relations de parenté, les mythologies et récits d'origine ou encore plus simplement le vêtement et les parures. Parmi ces populations, les Hmong, sont les derniers immigrants établis, au cours de la première moitié du XIXe siècle, sur des terres d'altitude. Ils se répartissent en deux groupes principaux : les Hmong Blancs et les Hmong Verts, parlant des dialectes représentatifs du groupe linguistique miao-yao. Néanmoins, la grande variété ethnique et linguistique observable sur l'ensemble du nord Laos, (langues *môn khmer, tibeto birman, tai, miao yao*) contraste avec une uniformité de la civilisation matérielle et religieuse.

LES ANCÊTRES, ÂMES ET GÉNIES

On souligne effectivement une grande affinité religieuse entre ces populations voisines, une sorte de toile de fond qui tisse des liens étroits entre les sociétés villageoises et les « ancêtres » ainsi qu'avec les forces surnaturelles, manifestées par la présence de « génies » sur tout le territoire. Par ailleurs, les « âmes » signalent leur présence permanente et sont des éléments actifs, souvent incontrôlables qui s'attachent aux humains, aux animaux, aux végétaux. Les expressions religieuses associées à ce substrat commun

sont nourries à la fois par des sacrifices d'animaux d'élevage, permettant de sceller le contrat liant les villageois à leurs esprits tutélaires et en même temps ravivées par les pratiques chamaniques que les grands courants religieux, dont le bouddhisme, ont en quelque sorte absorbé sans les faire disparaître. Répandu dans l'ensemble de l'Extrême-Orient, le chamanisme constitue la religion des Hmong, elle associe un certain nombre de croyances et de pratiques thérapeutiques encore fortement suivies et respectées. Parmi elles retenons deux caractères primordiaux : le voyage des âmes et les interventions du chamane.

Les humains sont dotés de plusieurs âmes (*plig* et *ntsuj* chez les Hmong Blancs) (jusqu'à 32 selon l'acceptation commune) susceptibles de quitter le corps des humains en particulier et de voyager dans des mondes différents en provoquant ainsi la maladie ou la mort.

« L'âme la plus importante est sans doute celle qui se réincarne « l'âme qui va à la rencontre des embryons ». Elle fait l'objet des rites les plus nombreux et les plus fréquents. D'elle dépend directement le destin de l'être humain. Sa réincarnation marque la fin de la vie présente. Aussi c'est en agissant sur elle, en la préservant, en la retenant dans le corps par des attentions et des soins que l'on évitera la mort et que l'on pourra peut-être modifier le destin des autres ».
(Moréchand, 1968 :86).

L'ÂME OMBRE ET LA PETITE FUMÉE

Un personnage doté de pouvoirs spéciaux, le chamane, en état d'hypnose ou de transe, va partir à la recherche de ces âmes égarées, les disputant parfois à des divinités redoutées, discutant le prix de leur libération, afin de les ramener auprès du corps de la personne atteinte de troubles physiques ou psychiques.

Pour parvenir à l'état de transe, le chamane a besoin de humer une certaine quantité de fumée, produite par de la résine, d'entendre des sons particuliers, des chants spécifiques et de se prémunir d'actions néfastes d'ennemis toujours prêts à dérober les âmes. Parmi certains sous-groupes hmong, afin d'attiser les rivalités entre clans, des individus malveillants répandent des histoires horribles et des légendes, soutenant, par exemple, que certains humains sont capables des pires cruautés et de se nourrir en particulier d'enfants volés (Moréchand, 1968 :65).

"I am Hmong and grew up in a culture of ceremonies and stories of the spirit world. I started to hear about this spirit world when I was 3 or 4 when the elders would tell us stories to scare us into behaving and not wandering off where we shouldn't. They were good storytellers and I clearly imagined the ghosts and spirits in my mind. It was even scarier when we knew someone in the village had died and we knew that a spirit was out there and we didn't want it to scare or harm us."

Dans certains chants chamaniques, selon Moréchand, une âme particulière revient fréquemment, elle a pour nom : l'âme-ombre (*Ntsuj duab*). Par ses chants, le chamane la recherche pour la ramener à la maison. L'ombre d'un être humain paraît jouer un rôle particulier chez les Hmong et beaucoup d'entre eux l'assimilent à une âme. L'ombre est considérée comme vivante et vulnérable, elle concentre la forme virtuelle d'un homme. Cependant il ne faut pas confondre ces ombres avec les fantômes. Ceux-ci ont toute l'apparence des vivants, ce sont des morts qui ne sont pas résignés à mourir. Il existe enfin une croyance importante concernant les ombres. On suppose qu'elles peuvent impressionner pendant la nuit les mauvais génies (*dab*) qui guettent à l'extérieur de la maison et sont ainsi détournés de l'intention d'y pénétrer.

Les Hmong veillent toujours à projeter de grandes ombres sur les cloisons de la maison, le soir venu. Pour cela ils ont soin de placer les points de lumière très bas, de préférence au ras du sol. Accrocher les lampes à hauteur d'homme serait très néfaste, dangereux ou comme insensé. Les Génies ne seraient plus intimidés mais au contraire encouragés devant des ombres minuscules. (D'après Guy Moréchand, 1968 :110).

“Recently, coming back from working in the fields I saw shadows in the smoke of a roadside fire that distorted the people caught by my headlights. They didn't look real but rather like what I had imagined as the ghost and spirit world. Since then I have worked with those same conditions, dark nights away from town with smoke and light, to capture the shadows of people in action to create a feeling in the viewer and trigger their imagination, to lead them into the world that they can not see in everyday life, the world that they can only see in their minds.”

Les images de Ka Xiong explorent la modernité de Luang Prabang en même temps que les soubassements de sa propre culture ancestrale. Comment et pourquoi résister à ce qui advient, à ce qui fait partie de cette irrémédiable fusion dans un monde où l'influence occidentale vient ainsi envahir et s'imposer à l'Orient ?

Péninsule fluviale, cité entre deux eaux, dont les berges furent habitées, déambulées, foulées et animées par les habitants, puis se sont transformées en allées d'un monde autrement recomposé mais où les ombres ne cessent de s'aventurer. Ce qui fut propice aux génies des lieux, aux carrefours pèlerins et aux esprits migrants et même au tombeau d'un explorateur, est devenu une superbe « destination » de voyages modernes soit, mais les génies veillent toujours...

“TO BE ABLE TO CREATE NEW IDEAS”

La véritable pulsion créatrice est aujourd'hui entre les mains et les imaginaires de la jeunesse qui a digéré cyber-café et vaste toile mondiale, autant que les sirènes de l'ailleurs qui interpellent de si près maintenant. La grande aubaine pour Ka Xiong a été la Biennale précisément. N'a-t-elle pas, alors qu'il a vingt ans à peine, déployé, démultiplié son horizon ? Il a pu côtoyer artistes, photographes, critiques, amateurs de tous bords.

Gens de Chine, de Corée, du Mali, de Paris, de Biélorussie des Philippines lui ont alors permis d'imposer sa vision, celle qui prend source dans la longue histoire des esprits migrants que les Hmong vénèrent et dont son enfance a été nourrie. L'ouverture vers cette diversité et les dialogues a donc pu, paradoxalement, devenir la voie la plus évidente vers ce qu'il avait de plus authentiquement personnel à dire.

"I am not really sure that when I decide to work on a subject if I have a specific approach or not, but I am sure that esthetical is not the only approach that I have. My imagination is one thing that I use all the time when I work on a subject. I think maybe I do not belong to a photographic style for now, but I do not know about the future, because I want my photographs to be different from other photographers and I do not want to copy other people's style, but I want to see other people's photographs to be able to create new ideas for my own photographs."

Ses images sont nocturnes, elle se composent d'un halo brumeux avec, au centre, des personnages dont un enfant, marchant d'abord, puis porté, comme si les séquences racontaient une histoire, une sorte d'enlèvement, une échappée. Les enveloppes corporelles surlignées d'un halo de lumière, émergent de composantes invisibles comme pour nous dire que le sens de ce monde est donné par un monde autre, caché dans les nimbes. Faut-il donc réapprendre à voir ? Quelque chose semble toujours secret, dérobé, clos, derrière les apparences. Mais ce monde étrange qui nous hante et nous poursuit en rêve, est en réalité bien présent, il n'est ni loin, ni ailleurs. Pour montrer cette évidence-là, Ka Xiong emploie les moyens du bord : une lampe, une camera, un personnage devant une ampoule et le jeu des ombres flottantes, afin que la magie opère. Une simple ombre portée peut alors troubler les sens, inquiéter. Ka Xiong a ainsi une manière originale de projeter sa vision en la plaçant exactement sur l'écran culturel qui lui permet ainsi de s'assimiler le monde tel qu'il va. En imposant une vision, la sienne, portée par des figures inconnues ou imprécises, troublantes toujours, il témoigne du lien précieux qu'il a su garder avec ses origines et la mémoire.

Baj Strobel & Ka Xiong

Vientiane-Luang Prabang, aout 2011

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Ka Xiong is a photography student living in Luang Prabang. Like many Hmong people, he and his family are originally from villages outside of this former capital of the ancient kingdom of Lane Xang.

In these areas of Northern Laos, the social dynamics put different groups of people (usually called ethnic minorities) in close proximity with each other; Khmu, Akha, Lenten, Thai, Hmong, Lao, of whom the majority are originally from the south of China and are dispersed from the plains to the mountains. The region stretches from the Myanmar (Burma) border in the west to that of Vietnam in the east, with China in the middle. The distinction between “mountain people” and plain-dwellers corresponds to an influence more impregnated by Buddhism (the people of the plains) and different agricultural methods; slash-and-burn or swidden agriculture for one and wet-rice cultivation for the other.

Many linguistic, socio-economic and religious factors allow us to differentiate their different - and self-claimed - identities by their forms of habitation, the family relationships, their mythologies, historic narratives, and even, quite simply, their clothing and ornaments. Among these groups of people, the Hmong are the most recently arrived immigrants, having arrived in the first half of the 19th century. They are divided into two principal groups. The White Hmong and the Green Hmong, speaking dialects representing the Miao-Yao linguistic group. Nonetheless the great ethnic variety seen in the mix of Northern Laos (Mon Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, Tai and Miao-Yao) contrasts with the uniformity of the material and religious civilization.

ANCESTORS, SOULS AND GENIES

A strong religious affinity can be found between these neighboring groups, a sort of basic fabric which weaves a close tie between the village society and their ancestors and thus with supernatural forces, manifested in the form of spirits throughout their territory.

Furthermore these souls signal their permanent presence and are active elements, often uncontrollable, which attach themselves to humans, animals and plants. The religious expressions associated with this common substratum are fed by both animal sacrifice

which allows for the sealing of the contract joining the villagers to their tutelary spirits and at the same time revived by shamanistic practice and strong religious currents which Buddhism has in a way, absorbed without making them disappear. Spread across the Far East, shamanism is the religion of the Hmong and it is associated with a number of beliefs and therapeutic practices more strongly followed and respected. Among these are retained two primordial features - the voyage of souls and the intervention of the shaman.

Humans are endowed with several souls (*plig* and *btusj* among the White Hmong) (around 32 being the most commonly accepted number) likely to leave the bodies of humans (in particular) and to travel to different worlds, causing illness or death.

“The most important soul is without doubt one that is reincarnated - the soul which goes to the meeting of the embryos.” It is the most numerous and frequent object of these rites. The destiny of human beings depends entirely on this soul. Its reincarnation marks the end of the present life. And it is in relation to this soul, its preservation and continued presence in the body by the care and attention that one will avoid death and that one could possibly alter the destiny of others. (Moréchand 1968:86)

THE SHADOW SOUL AND THE LITTLE SMOKE

A person endowed with special powers, the shaman, in a hypnotic state or trance, will go to search for the lost souls, dispute with them sometimes about feared divinities and discuss the price of their liberation, so as to return to the body of the person beset by physical or psychological troubles.

To reach the state of trance, the shaman has to inhale a certain amount of smoke produced by a resin, to listen to specific sounds and certain chants, and to arm himself against the malicious actions of enemies who are always ready to try to steal the souls. Among some Hmong subgroups, in order to stir the rivalries among clans, malevolent individuals will tell terrible stories and legends arguing for example that some humans are capable of worse cruelty and to feed on stolen infants. (Moréchand 1968 :65)

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In some shamanistic chants, according to Moréchand, a particular soul, called the shadow soul (*Ntsuj duab*), may come back frequently. With his chants, the shaman seeks out this soul to lead it to the house. The shadows of a given person seem to play a particular role among the Hmong and many of them assimilate with a soul. The shadow is considered loving and vulnerable; it concentrates the virtual form of

a person. Therefore one mustn't confuse shadows with phantoms. These have all the appearance of human beings; they are the dead who are not resigned to their deaths. There is also an important belief about shadows. It seems that during the night they can influence some spirits (*dab*) who lurk outside the house but are thus turned away from their intention of coming inside.

The Hmong ensure always to project large shadows onto the partitions of the house as soon as evening falls. To do this, they put points of light very low, preferably on the ground. Hanging a lamp at the height of a man is very harmful, dangerous and senseless. The spirits are no longer intimidated but on the contrary are encouraged in front of these small shadows. (after Moréchand, 1968 : 110)

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The images explored by Ka Xiong explore the modernity of Luang Prabang at the same time as they pay respect to his own ancestral culture. How and why to resist what is coming to that which is part of the inevitable fusion in a world where western influence will thus invade and impose itself on the east?

A riverine peninsula, a city between two rivers whose banks were inhabited, walked, and animated by its inhabitants were then transformed into the lanes of a different world, but where the shadows never ceased to venture. That which was auspicious for the spirits of these places, the crossroads of pilgrims, the migrant spirits and even at the shrine of a explorer, has become a superb destination for modern travelers, but the spirits are always watching.

“TO BE ABLE TO CREATE NEW IDEAS”

The actual creative impulse these days is between the hands and the imaginations of youth who have integrated cyber café's and a vast worldwide web. The sirens from far away call now from very close by. The big discovery of Ka Xiong was the Photography Biennial in Luang Prabang. Didn't it when he was barely 20 years old expand his horizons? He has been able to meet other artists, photographers, critics, and amateurs from many places.

People from China, Korea, Mali, Paris, Byelorussia, the Philippines, have allowed him to show his vision, which comes from the long history of wandering souls venerated by the Hmong and by which he was nourished in his childhood. Opening up this diversity and dialogue has therefore been able paradoxically to become the most obvious way towards that which he has to say with such personal authenticity.

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His images are nocturnal; they are made of hazy halos with people in the center by which a child, walking first, then carried as if a story is being recounted, a kidnapping, an escape. The corporal envelopes outlined by a halo of light emerge from invisible components as if to tell us that the way of this world comes from another world, hidden in the mist. Do we need to learn again to see? Something seems to be forever secret, covered, closed behind the appearances. But this strange world, which haunts us and follows us in our dreams, is in reality quite present, not far away, not elsewhere. To show this Ka Xiong, uses very simple media at hand - a lamp, a camera, a person in front of a light and the play of floating shadows - to make his magic work. A simple shadow thrown can thus be troubling, unsettling.

Ka Xiong has thus an original way to project his vision by putting it precisely onto the cultural screen, which allows him to assimilate the world as it is. In imposing his vision carried by unknown imprecise figures ever troubling, he witnesses to the precious bonds, which he knows will protect his origins and his memories.

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Catalogue















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