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What is This?
Ancestral personhood and moral justification

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Abstract
In this article I seek to elucidate the theoretical relationship between the concepts of morality and personhood. I argue that cultural models of personhood are more concretely available to the imagination as compared to philosophizing about objective moral goods, despite the fact that people commonly gravitate toward moral realism. Models of personhood provide a more practical underpinning for conceptual moral goods. I demonstrate these connections through an exegesis of a Hmong model of ancestral personhood and its relationship to moral discourse collected during my fieldwork. Future emphasis on these explicit connections between cultural models of personhood and moral discourse will help answer some of the methodological and theoretical concerns in the evolving anthropology of morality.

Keywords
Ancestors, ethics, Hmong, morality, moral personhood, personhood, self

The concepts of personhood and morality are often evoked together as coterminous or at least significantly overlapping ideas. Occasionally these assumptions are made bare in the use of terms such as ‘moral personhood’ (e.g. Parish, 1994; Shoaps, 2004) or ‘moral identity’ (e.g. Hardy and Carlo, 2011; Hardy et al., 2014). I will tease apart these concepts in order to analyze their interrelatedness. In doing so, I hope to shed new light on the particular ways in which cultural models of personhood give rise to moral models for people who ascribe to them. In other words, I want to separate ‘morality’ from ‘personhood’ theoretically in order to show how the relationship between these concepts reveals something new about the formation, development, and expression of moral ideals. This analysis will elucidate some of the psycho-cultural underpinnings of moral reasoning and
moral discourse, which is critical for research that seeks to understand how people justify their moral stances.

This is not to say that it is improper to talk about ‘moral personhood’ or assert a deep integration of cultural models of personhood and moral ideals in the ways people think about them. In fact, in the end I expect my analysis to make this very claim – that these two cultural constructs are necessarily interconnected. However, it is also the case that the unexamined collapsing of morality and personhood overlooks the processes by which cultural ontologies of personhood undergird particular moral systems. A more thorough theoretical focus on this relationship is essential to the development of an anthropology of morality and ethics, which has experienced a resurgent interest as of late (e.g. Fassin, 2008; Heintz, 2009; Lambek, 2010a; Laidlaw, 2002; Laidlaw, 2014; Zigon, 2008).

I will argue that ideas about personhood can provide ontological cement for moral arguments and ground them in a less abstract sphere. Despite the natural tendency that people have toward moral realism (Shweder, 2004), ‘objective moral goods’ sui generis can be hard to imagine (except perhaps for the moral philosopher), whereas ‘persons’ are comparatively more concrete entities that are imagined – even if not consciously – and are ontologically filled out in cultural models of human being. Models of personhood categorize various types of persons in relationship to each other, theorize human origins, metaphysically situate mortality, and classify stages of biological and social development. As such, these collective imaginings of personhood can also carry important deontological implications and thus provide a grounding for moral thinking even if the actor does not explicitly theorize the actual moral goods that extend from them. While these moral goods may well be taken for granted by actors themselves, they may also be revealed as underpinning their thoughts according to an analysis of their moral discourse (a method I employ in my work on moral thinking; see Hickman, 2011; Hickman and DiBianca Fasoli, forthcoming). One way to methodologically approach moral thinking and moral discourse, then, is through a more thorough analysis of corresponding models of personhood and considerations of how these cultural models underpin particular moral discourses.

It may seem that the approach I am describing here aligns well with a virtue ethics approach. Lambek’s (2010b) work is instructive, as he seeks to develop an approach whereby ethics are treated as intrinsic to human action rather than constituting some sort of external domain unto itself.1 This approach can be seen as an anthropological adaptation of virtue ethics, following from Aristotle (1934) and Alasdair Macintyre (e.g. 2007), among others. Lambek’s approach is similar to what I am trying to accomplish, with two qualifications. First, I restrict my analysis to how ethics are undergirded by ideas and practices related to personhood, a restriction that I think is particularly instructive. By contrast, Lambek’s focus is much broader, encompassing all potentially relevant language, ritual, and thought. That being said, the cultivation of moral character is central to virtue ethics. As such, ideas and practices surrounding personhood can be seen as particularly central to (although not isomorphic with) such an effort. Rather than reduce ethics to
‘practical judgment’ (Lambek, 2010b: 62), I am interrogating the relationship between ideas of personhood – a concept admittedly tied to the notion of ‘character’ in a virtue ethics framework – and morality, and I argue for one form of this relationship in the ethnographic case that I lay out below. However, my second qualification is that I would argue that the particular connections between notions of personhood and morality are likely to be culturally variable. In some cases these may more closely approach a virtue ethics way of seeing morality and action, whereas other cultural accounts might diverge more from it in ethnotheoretically distinct configurations of personhood, moral models, and ethical practice. The ethnographic case I will present here does coincide in many ways with Lambek’s formulation of an anthropological approach to ethics, although it diverges on some important points as well. Lambek argues for ‘the exercise of practical judgment at the expense of following (or rejecting) rules, that is in large part because it is a more accurate description of how we live’ (2010b: 61). While a virtue ethics approach might explain lived moral experience in some cases, I would leave the door open to ethnographic cases that might challenge this view. Shweder and Much’s exegesis of the Babaji’s ‘alternative version of an objective postconventional moral world’ (1991: 229) provides one powerful counter-example. The framework I am putting forward here is not isomorphic with a virtue ethics approach, although the similarities are worth noting.

In order to frame my analysis, I will begin by reviewing some of the ethnographic work that approaches the explicit theoretical emphasis that I am advocating and fills out how the term ‘personhood’ has been used in comparison to my implementation. I will then develop a comparative ethnographic example from my research with Hmong in Thailand and the United States by explaining a Hmong cultural model that I term ancestral personhood. I believe this model to be a particularly lucid case in point of the emphasis that I want to place on how a cultural ontology of personhood drives the more conscious moral justifications that Hmong employ in their moral discourse. This analysis will demonstrate the different levels of rationalization that represent the domains of personhood and moral justification, despite the deep implications these constructs have for each other. From this case I will draw a wider framework for how anthropologists concerned with ‘moralties’ and ‘ethics’ in their own right should consider notions of personhood in order to more thoroughly theorize culturally specific notions of the moral and analyze patterns of moral discourse in particular cultural milieux.

Personhood and morality

Before proceeding further, perhaps a few words are in order as to what precisely I mean by ‘personhood’.

In his 1938 Huxley lecture, Marcel Mauss (1985) outlined variations in the imaginations of different societies as to how persons are thought about. While I disagree (along with others, e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Shoaps, 2004) with the fundamentally evolutionary bent of Mauss’s outlook, he did point to the fact that individual subjective experience is deeply affected by the
prominent ways that persons are imagined in different societies – a point that has been reiterated forcefully more recently (Shweder and Bourne, 1984). Mauss traces the evolution of the concept of the ‘person’ from what he asserts to be its most primitive form as it was used among North American native groups, to the ‘modern’ western sense in which individuals became ‘selves’ – self-conscious individuals bearing political rights. In essence, Mauss’s history paints the picture of a grand shift from thinking of ‘persons’ as constituting masks that are worn (i.e. ‘personas’) and embodying some essence (the essence of the ancestors, for example), to being infused as the wearer of the mask. In other words, the essence of the ‘person’ shifted from the mask (or role) itself to the individual who wears the mask (or performs the role) in the modern sense. Christianity concretized this individualistic conception of the person, framing persons as entities that are ultimately culpable before God for individual actions.

Almost two decades after Mauss’s lecture on this topic, Kenneth Read (1955) uses this foundation of a Christian universal concept of persons that is rooted in the West, and he compares it to the ‘tribal morality’ of the Gahuku-Gama. Taking off from Mauss, Read compares the different models of personhood in the West and among the Gahuku-Gama in order to argue that western universal personhood provides a foundation for universal morality, which the Gahuku-Gama supposedly lack. Christian morality starts from the assumption of the morally universal nature of human beings. Everyone is on the same footing with the same ultimate obligations – we will all face God’s judgment. Thus, in the Christian framework, the moral demands on any given person would be the same. For Gahuku-Gama, on the other hand, ‘men... are not conceived to be equals in a moral sense’ (Read, 1955: 260). Instead, Read argues, one’s position within social relationships determines the moral obligations and status of a person. The lack of a universalizing model of persons precludes universalization in Gahuku-Gama moral thinking.

Clearly, Read is asserting a relationship between morality and personhood here, but the nature of this relationship is not clear, and I argue elsewhere that this lack of clarity in fact leads him to make some potentially erroneous conclusions about Gahuku-Gama morality (Hickman, 2011: 84–85; see Laidlaw, 2014: 214–216 for a related critique). Following both Mauss and Read, I use the concept of personhood to denote fundamental cultural variations in how people conceive of persons as social and (often) spiritual beings, including their qualities, obligations, essences, and relationships to other persons. As opposed to Mauss, I treat synchronic variation in these beliefs as indicative of varying ontologies, rather than hierarchically organized in an evolutionary scheme. To Read’s work I want to add a more nuanced consideration of how personhood and morality relate to one another, which I think ultimately challenges some of his conclusions.

There is one other popular sense of personhood from which I want to distinguish my use. Meyer Fortes’s (1971) treatment of personhood among the Tallensi is representative of subsequent uses (as but one example, see Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001). The Fortesian conception of personhood, which has dominated
the scholarship in Africa (a geographical focal point of personhood research), focuses on one aspect of personhood – becoming. Fortes paints a picture of Tallensi personhood as one that starts from scratch and grows in quantity, perhaps to be realized in its full potential, or perhaps not. In fact, full personhood is not attained until it is demonstrated at a person’s funeral that the deceased was in fact killed by the ancestors, thus marking the person’s worthiness to become one of the ancestors. As elaborated below, I am operating from a more qualitative notion of personhood that assumes that cultural models of personhood exist everywhere. These models may be more or less quantitative in some contexts, more contextualized or more universalized in various cases, or they may be more or less explicitly elaborated. Regardless, I use the term ‘personhood’ to denote these foundational models for how persons are imagined, and not something that is attained (which is only one version of such a model). Through my example below, I will demonstrate one way in which these models can implicate various lines of moral rationalization and justification.

Throughout much of the anthropological literature, it is important to note that the concept of personhood is much further developed than the concepts of ‘morality’ or ‘ethics’. More often than not when both topics are treated, ‘morality’ and ‘personhood’ are compounded on top of one another, but this provides less theoretical precision as to what is meant by either. More recent scholarship that has focused on the moral reasoning side of this equation is quite helpful in parsing out these phenomena and examining their relationship. Richard Shweder and colleagues (Shweder et al., 1987, 2003) have developed a theory of moral reasoning, positing minimalistic ethics that undergird much of moral thinking to varying degrees in different moral frameworks. Built into their model are related self-concepts that ground each ethic.

Presupposed by the ethics of autonomy is a conceptualization of the self as an individual preference structure, where the point of moral regulation is to increase choice and personal liberty. Presupposed by the ethic of community is a conceptualization of the self as an office holder. The basic idea is that one’s role or station in life is intrinsic to one’s identity and is part of a larger interdependent collective enterprise with a history and standing of its own. Presupposed by the ethics of divinity is a conceptualization of the self as a spiritual entity connected to some sacred or natural order of things, and as a responsible bearer of a legacy that is elevated and divine. (Shweder et al., 2003: 99)

These assertions are theoretical presuppositions that are built into Shweder et al.’s conceptualization of moral reasoning. Their emphasis is on the implications of their model for critiquing universalistic notions of moral development in psychology (Shweder et al., 1987), as well as the implications for this model and the various causal ontologies of suffering (Shweder et al., 2003). By contrast, my present intent is to call more attention to both a theoretical as well as an empirical treatment of precisely how different models of the person lead to distinctive types
of moral thinking, which is more assumed than an actual object of analysis in many approaches.

Following Shweder (1990, 2004), I would argue that most people in most places tend to be at least implicit moral realists. That is, they operate as if the moral goods underpinning their beliefs are real, objective moral goods, independent of our perception or construction of them. I would add the observation that it is likely that moral realism, while pervasive, also tends more often to be implicit than explicit. Moral goods, sui generis, can be slippery things to imagine. But just because one is not a moral philosopher does not mean that one does not subscribe at some level to a moral realist stance (Shweder, 1990, 2004). At this point, Lambek’s (2010b) approach is instructive for getting a better grasp on the implicitness of moral action that is built up and expressed through language, ritual, and action. At the same time, some of Shweder’s work suggests that, in some of these cases, an ethnographic focus on the ways the moral domain is constructed in explicit terms is also warranted.

One way to reconcile these competing views is to say that it is much easier, more natural, and perhaps even just more practical to imagine the nature of persons, since ‘people’ are seemingly more concrete entities than abstract moral goods. Operating from a model of personhood, one is already armed with ideas about the nature of a person, how persons came to be in the first place, the ultimate fate of persons, and a host of ideas about how persons can or should interact. These frameworks of personhood provide an ontological underpinning to deontological belief systems. Whether or not one is explicitly conscious of their moral outlook per se, it strikes me that beliefs about personhood provide ontological cement for moral thinking, concretizing and grounding aspects of potential moral goods. Beliefs about personhood need not even be explicit themselves. But if they provide a cultural model for imaging the nature of what constitutes human being and how human beings (ought to) interact with one another and themselves, then such models are also prime for setting up one to believe in particular arrangements of moral goods. I argue that this is true regardless of whether individuals even have implicit models of moral realism. Even in the absence of an explicit moral philosophy, deontological prescriptions can be based on a set of ontological beliefs about personhood.

I hope to make this connection more lucid through an ethnographic example from Hmong communities in Thailand. I describe the ethnographic and historical background of this group and my particular fieldsites elsewhere (Hickman, 2007, 2011). For my present purposes it is sufficient to note that this example emerged from ethnographic work with White and Green Hmong families living in Thailand and the United States. Most of these families were refugees from the Secret War in Laos. A generation ago almost all of them were living in patrilocal itinerant swidden horticultural villages in the highlands of Laos and Thailand, and for the most part their ritual life revolved around shamanistic practices and ancestral rites. I analyze the larger scope of Hmong ritual practice and personhood in my other work, but here I want to focus solely on a core Hmong cultural model of personhood and delineate how this model grounds various lines of moral thinking.
What is ancestral personhood?

Hmong ancestral personhood is a type of subjectivity that is constantly reinforced through rituals that mark the passing of time and unique occurrences in family life. This concept constitutes an essential dimension for how Hmong conceive of themselves as persons and think about their eternal life course. Ancestral personhood also has significant implications for how Hmong men and women conceive of and enact social relationships. I will begin by briefly sketching out what I mean by ancestral personhood. I will then describe how this model is marked, expressed, and instantiated through ritual practice, with particular attention to the assumptions of ancestral personhood built into ritual performance. I will then analyze some moral discourse from Hmong in both Thailand and the United States to demonstrate how ancestral personhood leads to particular lines of moral discourse.

By casting it as a concept of personhood, I mean to imply that this notion deals with specific ideas about the fundamental nature of persons, their origins, destinies, obligations, and characteristics. It is important to distinguish the concept of ancestral personhood from any attempt to place person concepts in a quantitative hierarchy (i.e. having more or less of it) and instead focus on qualitative differences in the models of personhood for different groups of people. Hmong ancestral personhood is quite different from Fortes’s (1971) emphasis on ‘accumulation’ for the Tallensi or Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2001) emphasis on ‘becoming’ for the Tswana. What I mean is that Fortes (and Comaroff and Comaroff) presents personhood as a status that is gradually sought after in one’s life. Personhood is the status of having become an ancestor, and this status (or at least its expectation) is accrued throughout one’s life as one does the proper things to mark their own achievement of personhood.

By ancestral personhood I mean to denote that a particularly Hmong imagining of persons not only emphasizes the importance of one’s relationship to one’s ancestors but anticipates one’s own future as an ancestor as well (although in different terms than the Tallensi; see below). In other words, ancestral personhood denotes a particular view of the life course as eternally embedded in kinship-based relationships and hierarchies that are enacted through ritual and discourse. These relationships continue in very much the same fashion after one’s passing (as a point of comparison, see Eberhardt’s discussion of a Shan ethnotheory of the life course in this issue). The important implication for ancestral personhood is how it shapes Hmong subjectivities and imagining about themselves as persons. One’s relationship to one’s ancestors clearly drives ritual behavior, but I argue that one’s inevitable future as an ancestor is equally important in this type of subjectivity. As Hmong imagine themselves as future ancestors and as they construe kinship relationships and interactions to continue after the death of some members, their conceptions of themselves are extended beyond that proposed by other models. Ancestral personhood has profound moral implications and behavioral injunctions that influence the ways people live and the choices they make both as descendants and future ancestors.
This Hmong notion of ancestral personhood is quite distinct from Fortes’s representation of Tallensi personhood. Ancestral personhood is a cultural model of the self and its eternal life course and not an end to be achieved in one’s life. One might call Fortes’s notion ‘achieving ancestorhood’. Instead, I am referring to the extent to which one in fact comes to see oneself as an ancestor, or at least as a future ancestor in the incipient stages of becoming. The key difference here is that a Fortesian concept of personhood may or may not be achieved, whereas Hmong ancestral personhood is more of a way that Hmong come to see themselves – it is an identity and a lens through which one comes to view social relationships. Hmong do not strive to become ancestors, they come to adopt the view that, inevitably in the life course, they will become ancestors. This model gives shape to the way that they see themselves, and in turn shapes their moral thinking as well. David Wong (this issue) discusses alternative ways that both Confucian and Oriyan models of personhood lead to particular moral implications for people who hold them. The fundamental relationship between models of personhood and their ethical implications in these cases is parallel to what I present here with the Hmong case.

**Ancestral personhood as a cultural model**

It is essential to note that I conceptualize ancestral personhood as a cultural model in the general terms that many contemporary psychological anthropologists theorize (D’Andrade, 1993; D’Andrade and Strauss, 1992; Shore, 1996). While the debates surrounding cultural models within culture theory are beyond the scope of this essay, suffice it to note that I am using the term in a similar vein to Roy D’Andrade:

A cultural model is a cognitive schema that is intersubjectively shared by a social group. Because cultural models are intersubjectively shared, interpretations made about the world on the basis of a cultural model are experienced as obvious facts of the world. … A further consequence of the intersubjectivity of cultural models is that much of the information relevant to a cultural model need not be made explicit, because what is obvious need not be stated. (1993: 809)

As Bradd Shore (1996) points out, the concept of cultural models does not necessitate a one-to-one correspondence between the idiosyncratically held cognitive schema and the model in its modal manifestation within a group. It also does not necessitate the oft-critiqued assumptions that cultural models are homogeneous, bounded, or static cultural goods of a past era of anthropological theory. It is important to document variations in the idiosyncratic manifestations of important cultural models. I argue that ancestral personhood is one of these important cultural models in a Hmong cultural context and that one must consider the variety of individual interpretations of this model. I take up this variation and the various subjectification processes that lead to significant variations in the
instantiation of this model elsewhere (Hickman, 2011). For the current purposes, however, I focus on the importance of ancestral personhood as a cultural model for understanding the moral discourses of people that ascribe to it (notwithstanding idiosyncrasies in their conceptions of the model). Even despite this variation, it is clear that the ways in which individuals hold these models and operate from them assume a greater intersubjective unity than can be warranted from an empirical analysis of their many idiosyncratic manifestations. In other words, people tend to essentialize their own worldviews and operate from that essentializing mode of thinking. I now turn to some of the ways in which ancestral personhood is instantiated through ritual practice.

Ancestral personhood in ritual practice

Hmong ritual practices are key in the instantiation of this type of subjectivity that I am calling ancestral personhood. The *ua nyuj dab* ceremony is a particularly poignant practice that emphasizes central assumptions of this model. The name of this ritual can be translated as ‘to perform the spirit rite of a cow’. This ceremony is designed to provide material care for one’s deceased parents and grandparents a number of years (colloquially ‘120 years’ or *ib puas nees nkaum xyoo*) after their passing. I observed an instance of this ritual which took place three or four decades after the passing of the couple for whom the rite was conducted. Sometimes the appropriate time for this rite is simply divined by the descendants, and in other instances a person may became ill or otherwise receive a cue from the deceased that it is now the time to perform the rite.

In the instance of this ritual that I document from my fieldwork in Thailand (Hickman, 2011), the ceremony had several components and lasted one-and-a-half days. Beginning the afternoon prior to the central rites, a shaman was recruited to travel to the ancestral village to find the focal ancestral couple and lead them to the home of the ceremony’s sponsor. The ancestors were led to inhabit a set of male and female clothing (for the father and mother, respectively), where their spirits would reside for the duration of the ceremony. The shaman would lead them back home to the ancestral village the following evening. They were invited to the sponsor’s home, told to make themselves comfortable, offered alcohol, and welcomed to stay with their relatives for a night. They were told that a feast would be held in their honor the following day. The sets of clothing were addressed throughout the ritual just as though they were the deceased couple themselves. They were treated according to customs just as if they were living relatives visiting from a far-off place.

The second, full day of the ceremony consisted of a minor and major offering – a pig and a bull, respectively. The pig was offered earlier in the day, as an early meal or preliminary feast for the two celebrated ancestors. Following the slaughter of the animal, its spirit was directed to the ancestors to remain in their possession for sustenance in the ancestral village. The animal’s physical body was then butchered and cooked, and the preliminary feast was held for the ancestors of honor and
several other deceased ancestors who were also invited to attend. This preliminary offering and early feast of the pig was followed by an escort to a small spirit house, located outside the sponsor’s home, close to where the ox would soon be offered to the ancestors. A string was tied from the ox to the clothes where the ancestral spirits were residing, and the ox was sacrificed and cooked, followed by a parallel feast for the ancestral spirits in the same fashion as the first feast. After the principal feast, the ancestors were put into a small model spirit home and offered burnt money and a final drink of alcohol. Following this final rite, the relatives sat down to eat an extensive meal of the meat of the sacrificed bull. After the meal, the performers of the different parts of the ceremony formally thanked one another, and the family officially accepted the performance. Later that evening, the shaman guided the ancestors back to their ancestral village.

In this rite, the orientations of space, the oratory engaged in by the actors, and the general form of the meal paralleled the relationality between living kin. Hierarchy was enacted in the very same fashion as the hierarchical relationships among living kin. The ancestors ate first, as did the older males in a typical post-ritual feast. The host directed the meal to the ancestors in a similar oratory fashion to the way he might have for a living guest of honor. The use of a split bamboo stick to divine communication from the ancestors to the orator mimicked the symbiotic communication between living people, as questions were posed and answers given by how the sticks fell. What I want to draw attention to is that the qualitative similarities here lead one to conclude that one’s relationality to these ancestors, whom the older living kin knew personally, continues beyond death. Their interactions with these deceased ancestors were carried out more as if the deceased had moved to a far-away village and had come back after a long time away to enjoy the company of relatives, receive gifts, have a few drinks, stay a night, and then return home. The personhood of these ancestors extends beyond their physical life as they continue to interact with their descendants and kin after death – even participating in conversation through the ritual enactment. This fact reinforces the reality that living kin will eventually receive similar rituals and offerings from their descendants, thus further instantiating the conception of self for presently living kin as ancestors-in-embryo.

As participants saw their elders interact with their deceased ancestors, their continuing personhood was marked and played out, and the fact that they continued to interact with living descendants was reinforced. One could also point to the myriad of ways that ancestors can affect the health of their descendants and to other ritual practices that mark interactions between ancestors and descendants and are designed to restore health through ancestral offerings (Hickman, 2007). These are powerful ideas for many who participate in these rites, and I argue that individual conceptions of personhood are duly shaped by these ritual interactions. One’s own future as an ancestor is anticipated and embodied in the ritual performance.

Ancestral personhood is further instantiated in the common practice of a daughter-in-law crafting a ritualized set of clothing for her husband’s father when he
advances in age. Importantly, this ritually bestowed set of clothes is never to be worn in life, but is given as a token of deep respect and admiration, as a gift for the father’s use in his post-mortal existence. The clothes are to be buried with him in order to be available to him in his post-mortal journey, but they are presented to him personally in the later stages of his life as a token. This preparation presupposes the extending relationships through which wants and needs of ancestors are to be fulfilled by living descendants. These needs will eventually be communicated to living descendants through dreams, spiritual manifestations, and even bouts of illness, which are often taken as meaningful communication that deceased ancestors are in want of food or resources in the spiritual realm. Again, the continuity of interaction with dead ancestors is anticipated in life.

**Moral discourse and ancestral personhood**

I now turn to the moral discourse that I elicited through interviews during my field work. Through the following analysis I will demonstrate how ancestral personhood informs particular lines of moral thinking. The point here is that ontological assumptions about the nature of persons provide the very philosophical foundation for the moral obligations, duties, and reasoning of people where these assumptions are made. This point has been made more generally by Marcel Mauss (1985), Kenneth Read (1955), and Richard Shweder et al. (2003), but I want to interrogate this relationship between personhood and moral thinking in greater empirical depth rather than assume this theoretical relationship (or that personhood and morality merely constitute parts of a greater whole of ‘moral personhood’), as many theorists have done.

In this vein, then, I analyze some discursive evidence of how ancestral personhood leads to particular moral ideation. I will focus here on data gathered using a moral discourse elicitation method, adapted from Shweder and colleagues (Shweder et al., 1987, 2003). This method involves the presentation of vignettes, followed by a series of probes designed to get interlocutors to evaluate the vignette and defend their moral stance. I employed these vignettes in a way that closely resembled Hmong speech genres where people tell stories and comment on the implications of such stories (following Briggs, 1986).

One such vignette that I used in this research goes as follows:

Muaj ib tug tub thiab nws li txiv, nkawv nyob ib lub zog. Lwm hnub leej txiv ua kev txhaum loj heev, thiaj li poob suab npe heev, ua kom tus txaj muag tshaj. Tus tub xaiv mus nyob ib lub zog tshiab, thiab nws xaiv pauv lub npe thiab pauv lub xeem, ua kom tsis muaj leej twg pauv nws yoog leej twg li tub. Tus tub tsis leej nws niamb txiv li ntawv, nws puas muaj kev txhaum?

A father and son lived together in their village. One day, the father committed a serious moral transgression that made him lose face, and the son became very embarrassed. The son decided to move to another village, and he changed both his given name and his clan name, so no one would know whose son he is. Is a son that does this wrong?
It is important to note in presenting this vignette that Hmong commonly change given names. This can occur for a number of reasons, but changing one’s surname is all but unheard of. Clan identification – marked by one’s surname – is a primary marker of identity and one of the first points of introduction for previously unacquainted people. I only documented one case of changing clan affiliation in my field site. In this case, a mother and son were abandoned by the son’s biological father and patrilineal kin. The mother married another man, and her son adopted his new father’s surname. In sum, surname change is rare and generally only seen as acceptable when one has no kin of the birth clan with whom to affiliate. Orphans fall into this category and are seen as acceptable in changing their clan affiliation, as long as they are not survived by any significant patrilineal kin.

Responses to the vignette

The fundamental importance of one’s natal clan name becomes more apparent from Txawj Pheej’s reaction to this vignette, which demonstrates an important point about the model of ancestral personhood. In response to this vignette, Txawj Pheej initially asserted that the son is not wrong in fleeing to another village. Upon clarification, however, he said it is indeed wrong not to own up to one’s true parents and clan, but the mere act of fleeing is not necessarily wrong. He clarified by emphasizing that one must ‘lees’ (admit or confess) one’s true parentage, stressing that this knowledge is essential for one to accept the natural order of being born to certain parents in a certain clan. Txawj Pheej’s assertion about the natural order of parenthood indexes how this must play into one’s identity. The word lees connotes to admit or confess – in this case to confess one’s parents and patrilineal kin in relation to oneself.

I asked if there is any sense in which Hmong practice surname or clan changing. Txawj Pheej replied that there was, but that this extreme case requires all of the patrilineal kin to be gone – either dead or completely severed from the person, such that the person who changes clans ‘is the only one left’ (tsuav nws ib leeg xwb). In this explanation, he reinforced the notion that one is bound to the clan or kin group as a primary identity-affiliation. Importantly, he concludes by saying that taking up an ad hoc affiliation with another clan is the common response to situations such as that of an orphan, and his explanation actually reaffirms the natural order. This adaptation merely constitutes the closest approximation to the natural order, given the circumstances.

Txawj Pheej further explained that the obligation to identify with one’s parents is so strong that it outweighs any personal concerns or feelings of shame that may have resulted from the parents’ actions. When asked what advice he might have for a relative who is in the situation of the young man in the vignette, he responded:

Kuv yuav hais rau nws hais tias cov tov mas yog køj niäm køj txiv yug køj nav! Mas køj yuav tsum lav lees paub lawv. Yuav tsum qhia nws na. Mas, nws chim me me xwb
I would say to him that those people are your mother and father that gave birth to you! [emphatic intonation] You have to just take responsibility for admitting/confessing them as your parents. One must tell him [the son] this. And, he is just a little mad (chim), right, just a little mad, then say to him – he still has to accept his mother and father also, as he is only a little ashamed (txaj muag).

The implication here is that, even though the son is presented as very ashamed in the vignette, Txawj Pheej positioned this level of shame as less weighty as compared to the supposedly heavier obligation to one’s parents. Filial piety dominates personal shame or suffering. The relationships of these values as demonstrated here obviously place importance on the psychological suffering of the son, but the sheer consequence of filial piety outweighs this burden. What’s more, Txawj Pheej further delineated the reasons for this importance:


Being ashamed, losing face, is not as important as – the fact that one’s parents provide one’s fate and fortune – which is more important.

I asked a series of clarification questions, to see what Txawj Pheej meant by the fate or fortune provided by one’s parents. He then described how when one accepts one’s parents, one’s parents will mediate the fortune or luck to be sent from the heavens, as well as send this positive fortune or fate themselves. He succinctly stated that:

Yus hwm niam txiv lawv mas yuav tsum muab txoj hmoov hov ntawm lub ntuj los muab txoj hmoov ntawm niam txiv poj koob yawm txwv hais tias nws yog ib tug neeg zoo...koj hwm niam txiv mas hwm muaj hmoov ne yom. muaj txoj hmoov, muaj lub ntuj pom, mas koj ua dab tsi thiaj li tau.

If one respects one’s mother and father, then one must have good fortune from heaven, or one will have good fortune from parents and ancestors because he or she is a good person...when you respect your parents you have good fortune, you have good fortune, the heavens see, and you can do anything. [my emphasis]

Txawj Pheej’s reaction to this vignette is integral to what I mean by the notion of ancestral personhood. As described earlier, this idea includes a conception of the life course that extends beyond one’s physical death, and in which ancestors are integral to the daily lives of living descendants. For living descendants, ancestors
are pivotal in the shaping of their identity, nature, fate, and fortune. Living parents are equivalent to not-yet-deceased ancestors, and these relationships essentially endure death. In other words, the qualitative similarities between one’s relationship with different categories of elder kin – both living and deceased – run deep. Ritual practice at the later stages of life even anticipates this continuing relationship, as described above. The moral implications of ancestral personhood are many, and Txawj Pheej’s moral assessment reveals a few of these.

My analysis of the *ua nyuj dab* ceremony demonstrates the ways in which ancestor spirits are invited back to the home and wined and dined as if they were living relatives visiting from a distant place. Ancestral personhood, then, denotes both one’s potential as an ancestor as well as the deontology of relationships between ancestors and descendants. Funerals in my field site were increasingly intense in ritual and participation in proportion to the number of descendants and relative status of the deceased. The implication here is that the more descendants one has and properly looks after, the more positive characteristics and greater importance can be imbued on their personhood. A large funeral is necessary for the descendants of a prolific deceased person, especially as the descendants begin to receive blessings from that ancestor. With regards to one’s relationships with ancestors – both living and deceased – it is obvious from Txawj Pheej’s view that, for him, one’s temporal fate is directly related to one’s care and respect for ancestors and elder kin. The same could be said for one’s post-mortem fate.

I frequently observed cases in the United States (and to a more limited degree in Thailand) where fathers objected to children converting to Christianity. These fathers feared for their own future welfare as ancestors, which would be jeopardized by their descendants’ commitment to a religion that prohibits the ritual practice through which ancestral support is performed. This view asserts that it is in one’s proper nature to care for elders and the spirits of deceased patrilineal kin, and failure to do so has dire consequences for the self and for future generations. The moral implications for ancestral personhood are profound.

For these reasons, my Hmong interlocutors care deeply about having male children that will care for them when they pass away. Male heirs carry the ritual burden and thus the maintenance of these relationships forward (whereas women change their spiritual clan affiliation at marriage). Ancestral personhood, then, leads to both specific and general moral injunctions that emerged in the moral discourse of my Hmong interlocutors. These include normative ideas of how one should relate to one’s parents, such as claiming their inherited clan and passing that identity on to future generations. It also includes injunctions about caring for one’s ancestors once they have passed away and returned to ancestral villages, such as the devotion manifested in rituals like the *ua nyuj dab* ceremony.

One important distinction must be made between the cultural model of ancestral personhood and the moral ideas that I am arguing arise from it. This regards the relative consciousness of each domain. As I interviewed Hmong and analyzed their rituals, it became apparent that models of personhood often remained unarticulated (by them) and that they operated at a relatively unconscious level. In other
words, the cultural model of ancestral personhood constitutes a cluster of assumptions about persons that affect one’s thinking, but they are just that—unarticulated assumptions. The ethics that people cite in their moral discourse, on the other hand, concern relatively explicit sets of ideas and prescriptions that people talk about, imbue in ritual, teach to their children, and recite to ethnographers. My Hmong interlocutors were able to fairly articulately recite reasons why someone should or should not do something, or what types of behaviors constitute proper kinship interactions, for example. This is not to say that their moral realism was explicit, only that the prescriptive discourses emanating from this realism was explicit. In Lambek’s terms, ‘it is in the definitive acts and utterances we refer to as ritual that particular [ethical] criteria are simultaneously established, acknowledged in principle, and rendered applicable in practice’ (2010b: 62). I argue that the model of ancestral personhood undergirds this moral discourse, and that understanding ancestral personhood in its own terms levies an additional understanding of how this discourse is grounded in Hmong moral thinking.

Hmong can be quite morally conscious and aggressive in asserting ethics that line up best with what one might term ‘traditionalism’. In other words, I think it is clear that many Hmong are actively seeking social reproduction with regard to moral thinking and socializing their youth, and I think an anthropology of ethics and freedom must account for the freedom inherent in social reproduction itself. Laidlaw (2002, 2014) and Robbins (2007) both work to articulate ways that anthropologists can attend to ideas of freedom more acutely in an anthropology of morality. To this scholarship I would add that we need to attend to the possibility of overt, conscious moral action even in the throes of social reproduction (see the introduction to this issue for a discussion of this topic, as well as Beldo’s article in this issue). Txawj Pheej’s response to the vignette above actively asserts articulated reasons for which the son should act in a way that maintains the cultural status quo (as he perceives it).

One potential problem here, as I have described these Hmong models of personhood and moral thinking, is that it may be that there is less freedom inherent in the socialization of ancestral personhood, in which case there may necessarily be less freedom in moral thinking (since I argue that the one leads to the other). I grant this to be a possibility. However, participation in the essential socializing mechanisms (i.e. technologies of the self) for ancestral personhood—rituals such as _ua nyuj dab_, for example—are engaged in by different people for different reasons. Hmong who choose to emphasize traditional ritual practice in their lives (versus those that actively avoid or de-emphasize it) recognize themselves as engaging in a sort of traditionalism that I would argue leads to a greater instantiation of ancestral personhood. While they may not consciously articulate the model of personhood itself, they do talk about the significance of taking such rituals seriously, making them a significant part of their daily life, and socializing their children into them. These are precisely the types of speech and action that Lambek argues ought to be at the center of attention in ethnographic analyses of ethical practice. In this way, Hmong with various orientations to traditional ritual practice
engage in the self-making described by Foucault (1988) and Laidlaw (2002), even though they may not articulate the particular type of self being fashioned. These issues of moral consciousness need to be dealt with in a more systematic fashion, as there remain a host of untheorized dimensions of moral consciousness and how it varies cross-culturally.

Conclusion

Through the course of this article I have sought to outline a potent form of personhood that figures significantly into the subjectivities of Hmong in the United States and Thailand. I have demonstrated how certain rituals are key in shaping ancestral personhood, and how this form of subjectivity underpins certain types of moral discourse, particularly with regards to responsibilities and obligations to one’s clan and ancestors. In sum, as Hmong come to see themselves through a model of ancestral personhood, this particular conception of the self and its future as an ancestor necessitates the moral prescriptions and directives that place ancestral well-being at a premium – both for oneself and for one’s ancestors – since these modes of wellbeing are deeply intertwined.

At least for Hmong, it is theoretically useful to separate for a moment the model of personhood and the moral prescriptions that extend from them. This is not to say that one can separate ancestral personhood from its logically consequent moral implications. Indeed, I argue that these foundations of personhood critically underpin moral obligations. However, by focusing on the ontological assumptions of ancestral personhood, and by distinctly analyzing the moral prescriptions revealed in the moral justification discourse that are underpinned by these assumptions, I come to a better understanding of variable conceptions of persons and the actual relationship between personhood and morality than I might by considering them part and parcel of the same psycho-cultural construct (as in ‘moral personhood’). In the end, varying conceptions of persons do indeed lead to different moral conclusions. But analyzing, understanding, and emphasizing the how of this connection will provide important insights into the anthropology of morality as this field of inquiry develops further.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for forcing me to think through these connections more thoroughly.
2. Along with Lambek (2010a), I do not distinguish between these terms in ways that some theorists have.
3. A more expanded review of this literature can be found in Hickman (2011: 81–96).
5. Despite cultural differences in how persons are imagined, I would argue that at least the existence of cultural models of personhood is core to both deontological and ontological perspectives in any society.
6. Whether or not these moral goods really exist as such is a philosophical question beyond the scope of this essay, but it is addressed at least in part in Shweder (1990, 2004).
7. My description here is necessarily brief, but I further develop this analysis elsewhere (Hickman, 2011).
8. Ua translates as ‘to do’, nyuj as ‘a cow or a bull’, and dab as ‘spirit’; Ua dab means ‘to perform spirit rites’.
9. In this instance the ritual was actually being carried out by the nephew of the deceased. The direct descendant in the United States lacked the cultural resources and a personal knowledge of their lineage-specific rites to perform the ceremony himself. He therefore recruited his more knowledgeable relatives in Thailand to perform it vicariously for him, while he funded the purchase of the bull and provided a video recorder for them to send the tape back to him in the United States.
10. There are 18 most commonly found clan names among Hmong in Thailand, Laos, and the United States, but this number would increase substantially if the clan names in China and Vietnam were included.
11. This is a pseudonym, as with all other names listed here. This name is pronounced ‘tzuh peng’.

References


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