

SHADES OF AUSSIE BLUES

Vanghoua Anthony Vue / 20 February 2016



Hmong Australian community members during the Grand Parade for the Cairns Festival 2015. Photo: the author.

There came a point in my teenage years that I realised some Aussie truths. For me and many of my peers in the Hmong Australian community, it was a rougher period of character development and formation than others in Australia. The Hmong community in Australia had only just arrived in mass (though still relatively minuscule) numbers throughout the 1980s, crossing not only the oceans but also a whole way of life and understanding of themselves and the wider world. For the generation privileged enough to follow the turmoil of war and migration and enjoy an upbringing in Australia also came the difficulties of continually negotiating the differences of being both Hmong and Australian.

As a young teenager I watched as my peers and I struggled with these discomforts. Those kids I spent much of my childhood with felt the strain of balancing values and ideals which clashed often. The weight of continuing cultural traditions and upholding family values, as well as becoming an active and productive citizen in Australian society weighed down too heavily, and with this came an outright rejection of one or the other—or both. Alcoholism, drug abuse, crime, and other forms of rebellion became the norm. For myself

and my peers, being Hmong, being Australia, or being Hmong Australian weren't options we could choose, but burdens enforced upon us, generated by the family, the community, and the nation-state.

Australia does not enforce or promote assimilation. Rather, it is multiculturalism which not only prevails but promoted with gusto. Multiculturalism in the Australian sense, and also elsewhere around the world—entails the promotion of distinct cultural groups and the differences they bring to the benefit and enrichment of the country. The buzz words of multiculturalism are “diversity”, “diversity”, and finally— “diversity”! There is no better evidence of this than at multicultural festivals around the country. Here you'll see the Japanese in their kimonos, the Chinese with their lion dances, the Scottish with their kilts, the Tongans with their ta'ovala and their drums, and of course, too often than not, the Hmong (with whatever limited visibility they have) with their 'colourful' and 'traditional' outfits accompanied by the sounds of jingling coins. The flags of nation-states are weaved into one, or waved about accordingly by community members.



Photos from the author's home in Cairns.

The only problem with this is that we don't see Australians at these festivals. When I say 'Australian' I don't mean the typical Australian—the *larrikin*, the *battler*, the *true blue Aussie*, the Paul Hogans, the Steve Irwins, the Nicole Kidmans and the Chris Hemsworths. The typical Australian is far from reality—too far and detached to truly reflect a nation long in transition. Although embracing multiculturalism, Australia's core identity continues to idealise past notions which excludes the multiplicity of experiences and expressions from peoples of this place and time. Rather than allowing for a diversity of 'Australianness' to be explored and expressed, multicultural Australia bounds community groups and individuals to stereotypes, perpetuating the romanticism of cultural authenticity at the detriment of cultural experimentation and creation. Cultural communities remain in positions of service—'enriching Australia' through images of stagnated identities and exotic differences which are showcased once or twice per year—or whenever the occasions calls for this 'celebration of diversity'. These displays only skim the surfaces of the nation's imagination, but never delve deep enough to change the core. Cultural groups remain tamed ethnicities at the service of a dominant Anglo-Australian nation.

In contrast to this are those many remaining days outside of these festivals and events where *real* Australians adapt and adjust the Australian way of life to suit their own preferences and inclinations. Whether that be eating a meat pie with sriracha sauce, playing a quick game of cricket in the backyard before having to water countless rows of bok choy and coriander, or simply popping down to the local Bunnings or buy-back-shop to purchase some wood and tools for a chicken pen. More often than not, these and other more nuanced, contradictory, complicated and layered expressions and ways of life are excluded from national narratives in favour of that which is palatable, definable and easily categorised. Instead of enriching Australia, it may perhaps be Australia enriching communities and individuals, and in turn allowing for a diversity of expressions which drives into the crux of what is Australian.

Although now over four decades in Australia, the image of being both Hmong and Australian remains mostly unseen as the community continues to embrace the prospects propagated by multicultural Australia of maintaining and preserving 'Hmongness' and its distinct differences to 'Australianness'. Like my peers, the struggle of keeping both entities distinct from each other rather than some sort of fluid, messy, jumbled, and unresolved cultural hodgepodge was too much to bear. Fortunately for me, art has provided me with a privileged space to confront the differences and productively create from their infusibility. But behind the colourful costumes, exotic sounds, and the friendly smiles of other members in the Hmong community remains the private pains and struggles of ordinary Australians whose shades of blue continue to exist outside Australia's imagination of what is authentically true.



Vanghoua Anthony Vue, *Hmussie Willow (Green & Gold) # 3* 2015.
Carved English willow cricket bat, coloured beeswax and French varnish.