

**HMONG SUDDEN
UNEXPECTED NOCTURNAL
DEATH SYNDROME:
A CULTURAL STUDY**

by

**Bruce Thowpaou Bliatout
(Thojpov Npliajtub)**

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Bruce Thowpaou Bliatout (Thojpov Npliajtub) is Hmong, born in 1948, and raised in Xieng Khouang, Laos. He was the son of a farmer and has four brothers, one sister, four half-brothers, three half-sisters, one step-brother, and two step-sisters. Although Bruce's father passed away when he was about seven, he was fortunate to be allowed to continue his schooling because he belonged to one of the few Hmong families of that time who believed in the value of education. In his late teens and during his twenties, Bruce received a series of grants which enabled him to obtain his higher education in the field of Public Health in the United States.

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PREFACE

This investigation's intent was to open avenues for alternate types of research on the subject of Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome. The author hoped to promote the idea that cross-cultural considerations must be given when investigating a specific ethnic group.

The results of this study show that much more research is needed on the subject, and the author does not want to give the impression that this work has established the cause of the *Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome*. Rather, the author feels he has just scratched the surface of the research needed on this subject. The author wishes to encourage other researchers and the Hmong community to continue in their efforts to discover the mechanism of sudden nocturnal death, and how to prevent this type of death from occurring. It is the author's special hope that the Hmong youth of today will build on the present research until a solution is found. They will have the benefits of a Western education as well as knowledge of the Hmong culture, and the community looks forward to any future contributions from them.

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ABSTRACT

The Hmong are an ethnic minority group found in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand; and since 1975, Argentina, Australia, Canada, France and the United States. The Hmong of Laos were heavily involved in the cold wars of Indochina during the 1960s and 1970s. When the Lao government changed hands in 1975, this group of people underwent diaspora.

Since 1973, there have been documented cases of mysterious sudden nocturnal deaths in the Hmong population. Although these deaths also strike other ethnic groups such as the Cambodian, Filipino, Japanese, Laotian, Mien and Vietnamese, by far the Hmong have experienced the highest death rates. Therefore, these deaths have become known as the Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome. The deaths are associated with sleep and most victims had been relatively young, previously healthy men. Despite several ongoing investigations, the cause of these deaths has not yet been found.

This study was done in an attempt to discover if these sudden deaths could have some cultural origins. The Hmong concepts of health and illness are very much intertwined with their beliefs in ancestor worship. The first focus of this study investigated whether beliefs in the power of spirits and other religious concepts, along with being unable to keep up traditional religious practices and rituals in Western communities could possibly be a contributing factor to the Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome. The second area of examination was to see whether the usage of traditional Hmong healing arts influenced the occurrence of these sudden deaths. Thirdly, the study considered whether membership in certain Hmong subgroups, clans or lineages was an added risk factor for sudden nocturnal death, indicating a possible genetic origin for the syndrome. Fourthly, the study questioned whether past geographic locations were common to the sudden nocturnal death victims' backgrounds. Fifth, other aspects of Hmong

culture were considered for possible correlation to these deaths. Lastly, the study reviewed certain other investigators' theories that the sudden nocturnal deaths were linked to exposure to chemical warfare; depression caused by the stress of assimilating into a Western culture; terror induced by nightmares; as well as other miscellaneous theories on possible causes of these deaths.

Although no conclusive results were found, the evidence suggested that the cause of sudden nocturnal death may be genetic in origin. There were indications that certain members of the Hmong population are predisposed to sudden death. However, what causes some individuals to die at certain times has not yet been determined. There was some evidence that the deaths were linked to the presence of a higher level of stress. This stress was sometimes caused by beliefs in the powers of spirits, the inability to perform traditional religious ceremonies and rituals in Western countries, as well as a variety of other causes.

It also seemed possible that exposure to chemical warfare was a common background for many of the sudden nocturnal death victims; if not exposure to an actual attack, then exposure to chemical residuals remaining in various areas of northern Laos. Whether this could cause sudden nocturnal deaths at a later date is still under debate.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Problem of Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome

The Hmong are one of the new minority groups to arrive and settle on American soil. They are refugees from the country of Laos, but are a separate ethnic group from the lowland Laotian refugees, many of whom have also settled in the United States. The Hmong have been among us since 1975 when their homeland of Laos changed governments. The Hmong remain a close knit cultural group and have exhibited special resettlement problems.

Recently, the phenomenon of what has become known as Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome has come sharply into focus as a special health problem of the Hmong. To date, there has been no conclusive evidence as to what the cause of these mysterious deaths might be. As the Hmong culture is uniquely different from even other Asian cultures, the author feels an investigation into the culture of the Hmong could possibly give clues or indications as to reasons why sudden nocturnal deaths are striking these people at such a high rate of occurrence.

Before beginning an investigation of possible cultural reasons for the Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome, a brief discussion on who the Hmong are, what their history is, some aspects of their traditional lifestyle, and some of their resettlement problems in the United States will be presented. In addition, an overview of Hmong religion will be given as many of the Hmong concepts about illness and death are tied in with their religious beliefs; therefore some investigations into this area may shed some light on the cause of the Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome.

Background Information on the Hmong Ethnic Group

The Hmong are a minority group found in the countries of China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. During the recent war in Vietnam, which spread to Laos and Cambodia, the Hmong of Laos were recruited by the American supported Royal Lao government to combat the Russian supported Pathet Lao troops. The Hmong of Laos became known as hard-fighting, loyal soldiers. In 1975, when the United States decided to pull their military and economic support out of Indochina, the Laotian government changed hands. Since many of the Hmong of Laos had supported the American war effort in Laos, large groups decided to flee Laos rather than chance reeducation camps or possible death under the new Communist regime. The majority of Hmong refugees have relocated in the United States and France. Smaller Hmong refugee communities have settled in Canada, Argentina and Australia. Many Hmong of Laos still remain in Thai refugee camps and more keep trickling in across the Mekong river, all hoping for resettlement in a third country.

As the Western world becomes more familiar with who and what the Hmong people are, more attention is being given to their rich and ancient culture. It is unfortunate that there is so little literature on Hmong history. Partly this is because the Hmong did not have a written language of their own with which to document their history until about thirty years ago when a missionary created one for them. The only known historical references to the Hmong are found in ancient Chinese literature.

History of the Hmong

The Hmong as a separate ethnic group were first cited in Chinese literature around 2300 B.C. Southern China was

their earliest recorded homeland. Unfortunately, from the third through eleventh centuries A.D., no direct references to the Hmong can be found in Chinese literature because the literature of that time period referred to all non-Chinese groups collectively as "man" or "nan-man" meaning "barbarians" or "southern barbarians." Starting around the twelfth century, some direct references to the Hmong can again be found. Several references are made to military operations of the Yuan and Ming dynasties against the Hmong, which may have been contributing factors towards the Hmong people moving more and more southward to remoter areas of China (Yih-Fu, 1962).

Chinese suppression of the Hmong continued through the Ching period up through the late nineteenth century. The last large-scale migration of the Hmong appears to have taken place during that time and took them south and southwestward out of China; first into Vietnam, then into Laos and lastly into Thailand. Other reasons for the Hmong people's southward migration may have been overpopulation, lack of food, economic disaster, or some combination of these reasons (Yih-Fu, 1962).

Chinese literature refers to the Hmong as "Miao" and others refer to this group as "Meo" or "Hmung." The Hmong prefer the term "Hmong," a word which has come to be interpreted as "free man." At the present time there remains an estimated two million six hundred eighty thousand Hmong in Southern China (Morechand, 1969), two hundred fifty thousand Hmong in Vietnam (Yang, 1975), five hundred thousand Hmong in Laos (Hang, 1982), and forty-five thousand eight hundred Hmong in Thailand (Young, 1962).

Hmong Lifestyle in Laos

Wherever the Hmong in Asia live, they remain mountain dwellers as they have been for centuries. Opium is their tra-

ditional cash crop as poppies flourish in upland climates. The Hmong dietary staple is mountain (non-glutinous) rice seconded by corn. Their protein intake level is low, although it is supplied by eggs, chicken, pork and some fish and beef. The rest of their diet is made up of fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs.

Hmong poppy, rice and corn fields are cleared by the ancient slash and burn method. Fields cleared and cultivated in this fashion are usually depleted of nutrients after two or three years of use, and the Hmong must then move on to find new fields. As time passes, crop fields grow further and further away from the village, and eventually village occupants may decide to move their houses closer to the fields. Other reasons to move villages are superstitious fears of spirits, high death rates of livestock, poor crop yields, or harassment by other ethnic groups (Chindarsi, 1976). Thus, the Hmong have become known as a people always on the move.

Chinese literature makes references to several subdivisions of the Hmong, examples being Red, Black or Flowery Hmong (Yih-Fu, 1962). These descriptive names probably reflect regional differences in Hmong costumes. However, there are only two major subdivisions among the Hmong of Laos which are demarked by linguistic and cultural differences. They are the White Hmong and the Blue or Green Hmong. The Blue or Green Hmong generally prefer to be called Green Hmong, so they will therefore be referred to as such for the duration of this text. Both Hmong groups have a strong feeling of being Hmong, versus being non-Hmong. The two groups can understand each other, despite accent, tonal and word differences, and intermarriages are not uncommon. One can distinguish between the two Hmong groups by observing their women's style of dress. Jackets and turbans reflect regional differences, but in general, the Green Hmong women traditionally wear dark green, almost black, pleated skirts. The material to make these dark colored skirts is superimposed with light blue batik and brightly colored embroidery. The White Hmong women

prefer black trousers and wear plain white pleated skirts for formal occasions.

Both the Green and the White Hmong groups are divided into twenty-three known clans. They are the Cha ("Tsab"), the Chai ("Cai"), the Chee ("Tshib"), the Cheng ("Tsheej"), the Chue ("Tswb"), the Fang ("Faj"), the Hang ("Ham"), the Her ("Hawj"), the Khang ("Khab"), the Kong ("Koo"), the Kue ("Kwm"), the Lec ("Lis"), the Lo ("Lauj"), the Moua ("Muas"), the Phang ("Phab"), the Plua ("Plua"), the Tang ("Taj"), the Thao ("Thoj"), the Vang ("Vaj"), the Vue ("Vwj"), the Xiong ("Xyooj"), the Yang ("Yaj"), and the Yao Jua ("Yob Tshuab"). However, thirteen of the clans, the Cha, Cheng, Hang, Her, Kue, Lee, Lo, Moua, Thao, Vue, Xiong, Vang and Yang clans, are larger in numbers than the others. Clan ties follow paternity lines and extended family relationships are considered very important. Each clan is divided into many lineages. Membership in a lineage depends upon the ability to track back to a common ancestor. Hmong persons prefer to live with, or near, other lineage and clan members for mutual protection against attacks from other ethnic groups or wild animals. Intermarriage within one clan is strictly forbidden, so sons must seek wives from other clans.

The Hmong are traditionally polygamous and custom requires them to have many children, preferably sons. After marriage, daughters become members of their husbands' clans and work to help that clan. Therefore daughters are less desired when having children. Sons are bound by custom to care for parents in their old age and to provide necessary funeral services, so are more cherished by Hmong parents. Sons usually bring wives home to live with their parents until they are considered sufficiently mature to start a new household (Chindarsi, 1976). Marriage age is quite early among the Hmong. For the girl the normal age range for marriage is between fourteen and sixteen, and for the boy, between fifteen and twenty. Couples will normally have at least one or two children before considering moving into a home of their own. Even at that time, a son will

typically build his house near his parents' home.

The Hmong house is usually built on a mountain slope and has only an earthen floor. The walls are constructed out of wood and the roof is usually thatched with a special type of hay. The house is usually a large, rectangularly shaped building with two doors and a central pillar. The house is sectioned by walls into two separate areas, the sleeping area and the living and eating area. In the sleeping area, the Hmong bed is usually a simple wooden platform elevated about one foot off the ground. Often whole families will sleep together in one bedroom. In the living and eating area, one usually finds a large fireplace for major cooking, a small fireplace to provide warmth and also to act as a supplementary cooking area, a guest bed, an eating area, and any spiritual altars the family may have.

Hmong villages rarely have any running water or sewage system. Even privies are not commonly built. When it is time to excrete, most simply go out into the surrounding jungle or crop fields and squat among the bushes. Hmong livestock (usually chickens and pigs with occasional ducks, cattle or water buffalo) are allowed to freely wander about the Hmong village and even enter their owner's house. Pigs provide a type of sanitary service by keeping the Hmong house and surrounding areas free from human feces (Chindarsi, 1976).

Hmong Resettlement in the United States

There are currently approximately forty-six thousand five hundred Hmong refugees resettled in the United States. There are no accurate statistics of the Hmong because United States Immigration does not differentiate between the various ethnic groups of Laos, the Lao, Hmong and Mien. Although the influx of Hmong refugees into Western countries has slowed considerably in the past two years, the Hmong community in the United States is still slowly grow-

ing as more refugees are processed through Thai refugee camps. Although United States policy has been to distribute Hmong and other Indochinese refugees as evenly as possible throughout the individual states, much secondary migration has occurred. The Hmong in particular prefer to follow clan or lineage leaders. Once admitted into the United States, families will save until they have accumulated the money to move to the city where their relatives are located. Thus, large Hmong communities, with a population of three thousand or more, have sprung up in Chicago, Illinois, Fresno, California, Merced, California, Minneapolis, Minnesota, San Diego, California, Santa Ana, California and Stockton, California. Smaller Hmong communities with a population of one thousand or more exist in Denver, Colorado, Des Moines, Iowa, Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington, and Providence, Rhode Island.

The Hmong have had a difficult time in adjusting to Western lifestyle. One of the biggest problems is that the majority of Hmong are illiterate, even in their own language. Most other groups of Indochinese refugees have at least a sixth grade education or higher in their own language. However, the Hmong lived in the mountains outside the mainstream of Laotian life and few managed to learn to read and write even the Laotian language, much less any Western language. Due to their limited background in formal education, many Hmong find it difficult to learn English in the classroom setting. Also, the Hmong have very little experience in the use and upkeep of modern American homes and appliances.

Without the ability to speak and understand English, the Hmong are unable to compete for jobs. Since many are unable to read or write, they cannot even understand job announcements or fill in a job application. Therefore, a large percentage of the Hmong have remained in the Welfare system. With the threats of Welfare and other assistance cutbacks, many Hmong have grown more and more fearful and depressed over their future well-being in the United States.

Many Hmong in the United States have clung to traditional practices even though they are living in a new setting. Hmong families remain large and many still live with an extended family. On occasion there may be up to eighteen family members squeezed into a two or three bedroom apartment. At times, this and other Hmong practices have caused neighborhood and community friction.

Despite their many resettlement problems, the Hmong are new Americans and are here to stay. Their culture is an ancient one and has many points of interest. Every effort should be made to understand and learn from their fascinating background and heritage.

Hmong Religion and its Relationship to Hmong Concepts of Health and Illness

The Hmong religious beliefs are closely interwoven with their beliefs on illness and death. It is impossible to discuss their beliefs on illness and death without first reviewing Hmong theology. Unfortunately, it is difficult to present a consistent theology on Hmong religion. This may be because most of the Hmong religious practices and rituals were traditionally handed down from father to son by observation and word of mouth. As time passed, regional, clan and lineage variations developed.

Different clans often have variations in religious practices, and within one clan lineages may have differences in ritual details. These differences denote which family ties are considered close and which ones are not. Those who follow exactly the same practices and rituals to the last detail consider themselves closer relations.

However, despite the many slight differences and variations, the broad outlines of Hmong theology have some consistencies throughout all Hmong clans, both the Green and White groups. This is because common Hmong traditional

religious practices are all somewhat centered on ancestor worship. In addition, the Hmong also believe in many other spiritual entities.

Hmong legends explain the origins of the many spirits the Hmong believe in. An abbreviated account of these legends will be given as background information, because the story relates to Hmong beliefs on sickness and health.

Hmong Legends

Long ago, the chief of gods and his wife, who both lived in the center of heaven, gave birth to two sons. Both sons grew up and got married. Their wives became pregnant, but the eldest son's wife gave birth first. She gave birth to a great balloon. The chief of gods gave the couple the earth to be their home. He told the couple to descend to earth through the gateway between heaven and earth and there they should burst the balloon. In the balloon would be everything needed to start life on earth. They did as they were told, and when the balloon was burst, all good things came out. All the spirits of nature needed to make earth a good place to live came from that balloon. Also from that balloon came the ancestors of Hmong people today.

When the second son's wife gave birth, she also gave birth to a great balloon, only hers was shaped like a peanut. The chief of gods told them not to burst the balloon, but to burn and destroy it. He then gave this second couple the area of the gateway between heaven and earth to be their home. When the couple arrived at their new home, the second son felt strongly that despite what his father had told him, he would burst the balloon instead of destroying it, so that he could see what his child looked like. When he burst the balloon, all manner of evil spirits spewed out. Ogres, evil spirits that cause illness and misfortune, and all wicked things poured out of the balloon. These evil spirits immediately attacked the second son and his wife. The wife was

