Terror in Transition: Hmong Folk Belief in America

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With the fall of the capital city of Vientiane in 1975, thousands of Hmong fled their native Laos and, often after extended delays in Thai refugee camps, began arriving in North America. In the West, the Hmong are more widely known than other Lao ethnic groups because of their efforts during the war in Vietnam, especially after it spread to Laos and Cambodia. Thousands of Hmong were funded directly and secretly by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to combat the Communist Pathet Lao. Hmong men served as soldiers, pilots, and navigators, and their familiarity with the mountain terrain helped make them remarkable scouts and guerrilla fighters.1 By the end of the civil war, the Hmong had suffered casualty rates proportionally ten times higher than those of Americans who fought in Vietnam;2 it is estimated that nearly one-third of the Laotian Hmong population lost their lives.3 When the Laotian government changed hands after the departure of American troops, large groups of Hmong were forced to flee Laos rather than chance "reeducation" camps or possible death under the new Communist regime.4

There are currently over 110,000 Hmong living in the United States, with 70,000 in California's Central Valley alone.5 The city of Fresno is now home to the largest single community of Hmong in existence. The transition these refugees from Laos face is an extraordinarily difficult one.

These displaced and resettled Hmong, while finding welcome freedom from persecution and physical annihilation, are nevertheless going through a grave cultural crisis, immersed as they are, in overwhelmingly dominant majority modes of living, norms of behavior, beliefs, and values. Everywhere they face the possibility of cultural annihilation, and struggle to maintain, for themselves and their children, a clear idea of who they are, of their identity as Hmong, of their place in history, and in the cosmic realm of spirits, ancestors' souls, and human societies.6

The Hmong who have fled Laos leave behind them a homeland ravaged by war, but in their transition to the West they encounter new and unique problems. Those Hmong who have come to the United States find themselves in a place where their religion, language, and skills are decontextualized and where their previous social support system is greatly weakened.7 In particular, for many Hmong the move marks the end of the existing form of their traditional religion.

In the traditional Hmong worldview, the natural world is alive with spirits. Trees, mountains, rivers, rocks, and lightning are all animated by distinctive spirits. Ancestor spirits continue to interact with their living descendants, and many animals share and exchange souls with human beings. As Dwight Conquergood explains in his life history of a Hmong shaman:

The Hmong celebrate their humanness, not as a discrete and impenetrable part of the natural order, but as part of the circle of life of all creation—caught up in the rotation of the seasons, and deeply connected with the configuration of the mountains, and the reincarnation of life from generation to generation, even from species to species. Life, in its myriad forms, is intimately articulated through souls and spirits.5

Many Hmong feared that the ancestor spirits who protected them from harm in Laos would be unable to travel across the ocean to the United States. Solace was taken, however, in the conviction that the myriad evil spirits who challenged Hmong well-being in Laos would also be prevented from following the Hmong to their new home. Among these evil spirits assumed to remain behind was the nocturnal spirit dab tsog (pronounced da cha).9 It soon became frighteningly apparent, however, that the notorious evil spirit had made the journey to America as well.

The Nightmare

Dab tsog is the Hmong manifestation of the supernatural nocturnal experience that I refer to as the "nightmare."10 I use the word nightmare not in the modern sense of a bad dream, but rather in older traditional terms as the nocturnal visit of an evil being that threatens to press the very life out of its terrified victim.11
According to descriptions of the Nightmare spirit, the sleeper suddenly becomes aware of a presence close at hand. Upon attempting to investigate further, the victim is met with the horrifying realization that he or she is completely paralyzed. The presence is usually felt to be an evil one, and often this impression is confirmed by a visual perception of the being, which places itself on the sleeper’s chest and exerts a pressure great enough to interfere with respiration. To avoid confusion, I use *Nightmare* (uppercase) to refer to the spirit or demonic figure to which these nocturnal assaults are attributed, and *nightmare* (lowercase) to refer to the basic experience; that is, the impression of wakefulness, immobility, realistic perception of the environment, and intense fear.13

The nightmare syndrome appears to be universal. There are innumerable instances of the nightmare throughout history and in a multitude of cultures. References exist to the Assyrian *alāh,*13 the ancient Greek *ephaîtes* (“leap upon”), and the Roman incubus (“lie upon”). Instances of the nightmare are present in many other areas, as evidenced, for example, by terms denoting the experience from the following languages and cultures: Eskimo *angumangga,* Filipino *urum* or *ngarar,*14 French *cauchemar* (from Latin *caelare,* “to trample upon, squeeze”); German *Alpdruck* (“elf pressure”), *Nachtmaer,*16 or *Trauer,*17 Newfoundland “Old Hag”,18 Polish *zmora,* Russian *kitkina,* Spanish *pesadilla.*19

The Nightmare and Laboratory Sleep Research

The stable features of the nightmare, that is, those that comprise the core experience, are better understood with the assistance of concepts from laboratory sleep research. Current scientific thought on sleep phenomena also offers one explanation for the pervasiveness of the nightmare.20

Somnologists distinguish between two major divisions of sleep: active sleep (known as REM because of its characteristic rapid eye movements) and quiet sleep (non-REM or NREM). REM sleep is characterized by brain waves resembling those of wakefulness. In contradistinction to the waking state, however, the body is paralyzed, apparently to keep the sleeper from acting out his or her dreams.21 In rare instances, this normal muscle inhibition or atonia occurs during partial wakefulness, either during the period of falling asleep (hypnagogic) or, less frequently, the period of awakening (hypnopompic). This condition is known as “sleep paralysis,” a stage in which the body is asleep, but the mind is not.22 Often sleep paralysis is accompanied by hypnagogic hallucinations, which consist of complex visual, auditory, and somatosensory perceptions occurring in the period of falling asleep and resembling dreams.23

Sleep paralysis and hypnagogic hallucinations are products of “sleep-onset REM,” a REM stage that occurs earlier than normal, when the individual is still partially conscious.24 Both David Hufford25 and Robert Ness26 show convincingly that sleep-onset REM accounts for the subjective impression of wakefulness, the feeling of paralysis, and, as a result, the tremendous anxiety that mark the nightmare experience. I would extend Hufford’s and Ness’s explanations to include that the sense of oppression or weight on the chest and the attendant feature of lying in a supine position are a result of the fact that when the sleeper is lying on his or her back, the atonic muscles of the tongue and esophagus collapse the airway. The relaxed muscles not only hinder breathing, but actually create a sensation of suffocation, strangulation, or pressure on the chest of the terrified sleeper.27

The Hmong Nightmare: *Dab Tsog*

In the Hmong language, the Nightmare spirit is commonly referred to as *dab tsog.* *Dab* is the Hmong word for “spirit” and is often used in the sense of an evil spirit, as opposed to *neeb* (*ngeng,* which is a friendly or familiar spirit. *Tsog* is the specific name of the Nightmare spirit and also appears in the phrase used to denote a Nightmare attack, *tsog tsuam* (*cho chua,* *Tsuam,* the Hmong word meaning “to crush, to press, or to smother”28 is used in conjunction with *tsog* to mean “An evil spirit is pressing down on me!” or to refer generally to a Nightmare attack.29

*Tsog* are evil spirits thought to live primarily in dark, deserted caverns. In Laos, Hmong women and girls of childbearing age avoid going into or near caves because of the danger that the supernatural being will rape them. When a *tsog* rapes a woman, she becomes sterile (or, if she is pregnant at the time of the attack, a miscarriage will ensue and she will subsequently be infertile). These Hmong traditions regarding the effect of Nightmare spirits on childbearing are reminiscent of the widespread European belief that Lilith, as a succubus, poses a danger to pregnant women and newborn children,30 as well as medieval traditions regarding the rape of women by incubi.31

*Dab tsog,* however, is most widely feared because of its propensity to come in the night to sleeping men and women and sit or lie upon them while pressing down and squeezing them tightly, rendering all movement impossible, and suffocating them.

**Case 1: Chue Lor**

A typical nightmare experience is recounted by Chue Lor,32 a fifty-eight-year-old Hmong man from Xieng Khouang province in Laos. He arrived in the United States in 1979, after spending six months in a Thai refugee camp. He
experienced his first of four or five Nightmare attacks, which he referred to as "tsug tsama", at the age of nineteen or twenty.

Like many who have undergone a Nightmare attack, Chue recounted his personal experience dramatically and with great intensity. Although the supernatural encounter took place more than thirty years earlier, his mannerisms and tone conveyed an immediacy to the event of his retelling. Furthermore, the impact of the nightmare experience, as well as the significance accorded the event, is evident from the fact that Chue was able to recall details with astonishing precision many years after the actual occurrence:

I was in my bed at night. There were people at the other end of the house and I could hear them talking. They were still talking outside. I heard everything. But I knew that someone else was there. Suddenly there comes a huge body, it looked like a big stuffed animal they sell here. It was over me—on my body—and I had to fight my way out of that. I couldn’t move—I couldn’t talk at all. I couldn’t even yell, "No!" By the time it was over, I remember, there were four other people inside the room and they said, "Gee, you made all this noise." I was trying to fight myself against that and it was very, very, very scary. That particular spirit was big, black, hairy. Big teeth. Big eyes. I was very, very scared.\(^\text{33}\)

Chue’s account not only contains the core symptoms of paralysis and intense fear, but also exemplifies the semiconscious nature of the experience. Most people who have experienced nightmares make an effort to convey the fact that they were not asleep during the encounter. As Chue describes, “There were people at the other end of the house and I could hear them talking.” This combination of elements of waking (realistic perception of the environment) and sleeping (paralysis and dreamlike visualizations) is largely responsible for the nightmare’s basic impact, not only on the Hmong, but also on people without animist beliefs. The perceived intrusion of a supernatural figure into everyday reality prevents the dismissal of the entire experience as merely an unconscious dream.

The Nightmare and Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome

The continuation of terrifying Nightmare attacks after the Hmong departure from Laos is not the only unexpected element of their transition to life in America. Chue’s narrative is part of a body of data I collected during an investigation of a mysterious fatal illness that has affected Hmong refugees and, to a lesser extent, other Southeast Asian immigrants.\(^\text{34}\) Scores of seemingly healthy male Hmong immigrants in America have died mysteriously and without warning during the night from what has come to be known as Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome, or SUNDS.\(^\text{35}\) (Only one Hmong woman has died of SUNDS since the first reported death in 1977.) The rate of death from SUNDS among Hmong men has reached alarming proportions, being equivalent to the sum of the rates of the five leading causes of natural death among U.S. males.\(^\text{36}\) Despite numerous studies of SUNDS—which have taken into account such varied factors as toxicology, heart disease, genotics, metabolism, and nutrition—medical research has provided no adequate explanation for the Hmong sudden nocturnal deaths.

Based on preliminary fieldwork and a review of previous research, and from my perspective as a folklorist, I undertook a belief-centered investigation of Hmong SUNDS. The case definition presented by epidemiologist Neal Holton and his associates in the Final Report of the SUNDS Planning Project provided further impetus for my approach.\(^\text{37}\) Holton and his colleagues emphasize the need to observe closely people “who fit the demographic characteristics of SUNDS” and who have transient nocturnal events that include “(1) a sense of panic or extreme fear, (2) paralysis (partial or complete), (3) a sense of pressure on the chest, (4) a sense that there is an alien being (animal, human, or spirit) in the room, [and] (5) a disturbance in sensation (auditory, visual, or tactile).”\(^\text{38}\)

This list of five symptoms of SUNDS-related events is identical to the characteristics of the nightmare experience as it is known in countless folk traditions, including those of the Hmong. Since the conditions described by Holton and his colleagues as “SUNDS-related” are consistent with the symptoms of a Nightmare attack, I decided to investigate the possibility that SUNDS is triggered by such a confrontation. Rather than searching for an exclusively pathophysiological etiology for SUNDS, therefore, I explored the role of powerful traditional beliefs in illness causation.

I conducted fieldwork with a representative sample of 118 Hmong in California’s Central Valley from January 1990 to March 1991 in order to determine whether there was a connection between Hmong Nightmare attacks and SUNDS.\(^\text{39}\) By studying first-person accounts of these nocturnal visitations, I was able to investigate whether the disruption of traditional Hmong culture—evident from factors such as rapid acculturation and changes in religious practices and gender roles—may be responsible for the sudden deaths.\(^\text{40}\)

I developed the following hypothesis regarding the etiology of SUNDS: A supernatural nocturnal experience traditionally known as the nightmare and familiar to the Hmong acts as a trigger for the sudden nocturnal deaths. I also determined that, in order for this hypothesis to be proven correct, it was necessary to test the veracity of a series of suppositions.
1. The Hmong supernatural experience that I had isolated is in fact a culture-specific manifestation of the universal nightmare phenomenon.

2. Hmong belief regarding the experience forms a collective tradition (i.e., there is widespread awareness of the nightmare tradition among the Hmong).

3. The nightmare, in specific contexts, causes cataclysmic psychological stress.

4. Intense psychological stress can cause sudden death.

**Dab Tsog as a Culture-Specific Nightmare**

In his pivotal work on the nightmare, *The Terror That Comes in the Night*, David J. Hufford formulates two opposing ideas regarding the origin of the nightmare (as well as other supranormal experiences): the “cultural source hypothesis” and the “experiential source hypothesis.” According to the cultural source hypothesis, supranormal experiences are either fictitious products of tradition or imaginary subjective experiences shaped (or occasionally even caused) by tradition. This is the prevailing view in American society and an example of what Hufford refers to as “traditions of disbelief.” The experiential source hypothesis, on the other hand, posits that the supranormal nightmare tradition contains elements of experience that are independent of culture. It is this hypothesis that Hufford confirmed in his investigation of the Old Hag phenomenon in Newfoundland. Rather than assuming that preexisting traditions completely determine the nature of unusual experiences that we have, Hufford shows that it is possible to have real albeit strange experiences that are subsequently elaborated upon by culture. By taking the beliefs of his informants seriously, by trusting their perceptive and descriptive capabilities, Hufford is able to present a phenomenology that eludes skeptical investigators. Taken a step further, the methodological stance of accepting informants’ beliefs and experiences as rational and plausible allowed me to learn the true role of the nightmare in Hmong culture and as it relates to SUDDS.

Hufford writes that “one check for the cultural shaping of certain perceptions is the determination of whether the same perceptions are found under different cultural conditions.” Examples of nightmare traditions and experiences throughout history and from a host of cultures highlight one of the most fascinating aspects of the nightmare experience: its apparent universality. Researchers such as Hufford and Ness have explained that the major factor in the worldwide appearance of the nightmare seems to be its physiological nature. The mechanism of the nightmare experience is found in human physiology, while the Nightmare’s manifestation is elaborated upon by each individual’s personal and cultural experience.

In my own interviews with Hmong informants I was careful not to bias questions regarding the nightmare experience phenomenologically (i.e., sleep paralysis and hypnagogic hallucinations) with inquiries regarding Hmong traditional belief. It was essential to separate the core nightmare experience from cultural elaborations in order to determine whether or not the nocturnal phenomenon that I planned to study was, in fact, a type of nightmare experience. To this end, I began the central portion of the interview with the question, “Did you ever wake up during the night and realize that you were unable to move or speak?” Rather than phrase the question in terms of a nocturnal pressing spirit, I intentionally used a vague description of sleep paralysis and hypnagogic hallucinations. By simply outlining a sleep-onset REM experience, I hoped to: (1) elicit responses that were uncolored by my use of a particular, and perhaps not widely known, cultural term, (2) afford informants the opportunity to describe the experience in their own words, (3) provide an opportunity for Christian Hmong, who I assumed might be reticent to discuss the experience in traditional Hmong supernatural terms, to describe their encounters, and finally, (4) replicate Hufford’s findings regarding the recognizability of the experience in the absence of cultural elaborations.

I was not optimistic about the number of positive responses to such a vague question, and did not expect that sixty-four from my sample of 118 informants would immediately recognize the experience described in the question and answer affirmatively. Another five people were initially confused by the question, but in subsequent discussion described a Nightmare / dab tsog experience that they had had. In total, a remarkable 58 percent of the sample had experienced at least one nightmare. On the basis of the data from this initial question and informants’ subsequent narratives, I concluded that the Hmong supernatural experience that I had isolated was in fact a cultural manifestation of the Nightmare phenomenon.

I also elicited the native terms informants used to denote their nightmare experiences. *Dab tsog* and *tsog twam* were mentioned almost an equal number of times and were overwhelmingly the most widely known: 115 informants used either *dab tsog* or *tsog twam* to denote the nightmare experience. All of the informants who were able to provide a name for the nocturnal encounter could also define it. Thus, 97 percent of the sample interviewed were familiar with the nightmare experience. Also, 76 percent of the informants interviewed knew of at least one other person who had had a nightmare experience. This widespread awareness of the Nightmare tradition among the Hmong clearly establishes that Hmong belief regarding nightmare experience forms a collective tradition.
The Nightingale and Religion in Stress

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Tong: A shaman has to do a ceremony. Or you can ask the priest to pray in church for that person. But you don’t say, “This person has dab tog—an evil spirit,” you have to say, “My cousin is sick.” Christians who are not Hmong do not understand. But also some Hmong—Hmong who follow the old way—do not understand.53

When I asked Tong about the immediate causes of his recent Nightmare attacks, he responded, “After I became Christian, it usually only happens if I don’t go to church or don’t pray for a long time.” Ironically, Tong has incorporated his traditional Hmong beliefs and experiences into his new religion in such a way as to interpret dab tog attacks as the consequence of his failure to meet his Christian religious obligations. Tong’s intense fear of dab tog, however, is consistent with traditional Hmong belief.

Case 4: Cheng Her

Cheng Her is a thirty-one-year-old Hmong man from Vientiane province in Laos. He fled Laos in 1975 and came to the United States three years later, after living in a Thai refugee camp. Cheng had one tog tsuam encounter in 1979, a few months after arriving in the United States. He was initially helped by the Christian Missionary Alliance and he converted to Christianity in 1979. In describing his nightmare encounter, Cheng used the terms Devil and dab interchangeably, a conflict that is mirrored, on a larger scale, by his ambivalence regarding the true nature of the Nightmare spirit. Cheng is representative of a group of Christian Hmong informants who appear to be struggling with the exclusion of aspects of traditional Hmong religion even years after their conversion to Christianity. His fears of tog tsuam are rooted in Hmong traditional belief, but he responds to the threat of a Nightmare with prayer.

SRA: Did you behave differently because you were Christian?
Cheng: Oh, yes—after that happened, I prayed. I turned on the light and prayed, and then I felt better. When it happened, I tried to forget the old way. We tend to believe that God will help us, that that is nothing—nothing happened. God will help us, and we pray, and we tend to forget, and we act like nothing happened. When Hmong people become Christian, they tend to forget the old beliefs and how the shamans helped, and how their ceremonies saved people’s lives. They think, “Well, nothing happened like that, and now God is taking care of us.” Now, when we have a bad dream or an evil spirit comes to us, we just pray and try to forget... People who do not become Christian, they will worry so much, and they will have to do something—a ceremony. Christians—even though we will think sometimes, “It is an evil spirit,” we will try to put it away, not to think about it.54

Cheng’s comments, in particular his observation that Christian Hmong “try” to forget their old traditions and beliefs, reveal the lingering influence of dab tog on at least some Christian converts. Since both traditional and Christian Hmong have died of SUNDS, in order for my hypothesis of a folk-belief-centered trigger to be proven correct, it was essential that indications of nightmare belief be present among Hmong of both religions. My own research reveals that psychological stress regarding religious practice is present in both groups, and also that this stress is exacerbated in both groups by the supernatural nocturnal assaults.

Cataclysmic Psychological Stress and Sudden Death

Case 5: Chia Xiong

Chia Xiong is a forty-nine-year-old Hmong man from Sayaboury province in Laos. Chia left Laos in 1980 and, after living in a Thai refugee camp for one year, arrived in the United States in 1981. Chia had two episodes of tog tsuam during the years 1981 and 1982. (Chia is one of a few informants who used the English word nightmare to label his tog tsuam experiences. His usage parallels my own in adopting the classic “pressing-spirit” definition of the English word, and thus the terms nightmare and tog tsuam are interchangeable in his narrative.)

Chia explained that in the first few months after his arrival in the United States, he constantly worried about his family and his own livelihood. On the night of his first tog tsuam episode he was preoccupied with troubling thoughts.

I remember a few months after I first came here—I was asleep. I turned out the light and everything, but I kind of think about, think about, think about, and then—all of a sudden, I felt that—I cannot move. I just feel it, but I don’t see anything. I cannot move my hand. I cannot move my face. I cannot breathe. I think, “Who will help me?” What if I die?55

The emotional stress and preoccupation with worrisome thoughts (“think about, think about, think about”) that formed the psychic background of Chia’s attack are significant in terms of nightmare etiology. (Emotional stress, physical exhaustion, and sleep deprivation have been shown to be predisposing factors for sleep-onset REM.56) I have noted an increased incidence of nightmares during informants’ times of stress.
Chia continues to describe his personal experience with a description of his second attack:

The other nightmare I had was also like that. I was sort of sleeping. My eyes were still open and I was still seeing. I felt that I could—could not move. It’s like a ghost putting pressure on you. Something like that. I saw someone come to me and start pushing me. I could not breathe, I could not talk, I could not yell. But I can still see the TV, I can still see the light. Like, in my brain, I’m saying, “Move! Move!” but my body cannot. I try—keep trying—to move. I am so frightened. I feel I am alone. But I’m still trying to move—kick this spirit off of me. Finally, I can move my legs, and then my arms. Right away, I can move my whole body—and then the spirit runs away.59

Since one of the ultimate goals of my fieldwork was to establish whether the informants themselves perceived a connection between dab tsog attacks and SUNDS, I was particularly interested in comments regarding death and dying that were included in informants’ personal narratives. It was important for me to learn at what point the traditional Nightmare encounter was considered to be lethal. Chia explained:

Chia: During his lifetime, the person who died of SUNDS usually has at least two nightmares before it really becomes serious.

SRD: Why, after two non-fatal attacks, would it become so much worse?

Chia: It is believed that once you have one of those nightmares—you are visited by one of the dab tsog evil spirits—once you are seen by one of those evil spirits, often they will come back to you, until you have the worst nightmare and probably die.58

According to the belief Chia described, tog tsuam assaults are rarely, if ever, fatal on the first encounter. Usually the lethal potential manifests only after an individual has been given time to rectify a situation, but chooses not to, or is unable to, appease the intruding spirit. Chia also explains that, because of traditional countermeasures undertaken in Laos, SUNDS did not occur prior to the Hmong exodus: “There were nightmares, but the sudden death was unheard of. It might have happened, but I never heard of it.” None of the informants I interviewed recalled incidents of SUNDS in Laos.

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As I have stated, my approach to the question of what causes SUNDS differed from that of other researchers in that I focused on the phenomenology of the Hmong nightmare; that is, the nocturnal spirit assault as it is experienced by the victims themselves. This methodology allowed me to learn the reason for the intense fear of the retribution of dab tsog from the Hmong perspective. As Chia eloquently explains, most Hmong perceive a direct causal relationship between failure to perform traditional Hmong rituals and Nightmare attacks. (Etiologies related to either traditional spirits or to the lack of traditional religious practice constituted 81 percent of all the nightmares causes suggested.)

At least once a year those evil spirits must be fed. If someone forgets to feed them, then they will come back and disturb you. If you have tog tsuam, the ancestor spirit is supposed to protect you. If you feed the ancestors regularly, then whenever you have tog tsuam, the ancestor spirits will protect you. Usually the father, the head-of-household, is responsible for feeding the evil spirits. Women have nightmares, too, but not as often as men. The evil spirit would first attack the head-of-household. Coming to this country, people tend to forget to do the rituals. A lot of people either ignore or forget to practice their religious beliefs. . . . Tog tsuam happens to both people who still believe in ancestors [spirits] and those who have been converted into Christianity. It happens to all . . . If you have a nightmare, and the spirit intends to make you die, it will simply take your soul away. . . . Men are the ones who are responsible for feeding both the evil spirits and the ancestor spirits. Since they are not doing their part, it is logical that their soul should be taken away.59

Chia’s explanation (reiterated by the majority of informants) clearly has great significance for my investigation of SUNDS etiology, in that it contains a matter-of-fact description of the precise manner in which a man’s failure to fulfill traditional religious obligations can result in his death.

Although such resettlement factors as language and employment problems may not be unique to Hmong immigrants, the particular combination of difficulties involving changing generational and gender roles,60 the conflict between Hmong traditional religion and Christianity, survivor guilt,61 and trauma-induced emotional and psychological disorders is unique to the Hmong refugee experience. These changes affect both Hmong men and women to varying degrees, but it is important to keep in mind the ways in which Hmong men and women might experience these difficulties differently. Many of the resettlement problems, particularly conflicts between traditional Hmong religious practice and American society, appear to affect Hmong men most severely given their role as spiritual caretakers of the family. This gender dichotomy is mirrored by the vast discrepancy in the ratio of male to female SUNDS. Interestingly, several informants hypothesized that the one woman who died of SUNDS must have been unmarried or widowed and hence, as the head of her household, the individual held accountable by the spirits.
The Nightmare as the Trigger for Hmong SUNDS

Since I had established that there were Nightmare assaults and other spirit-related problems in Laos but no informants were aware of SUNDS deaths in that country, it was important to learn the reason that so many Hmong refugees in the United States attributed SUNDS to traditional spirits. I believe that the differences between the Hmong way of life in pre-war Laos and their current situation in the United States are responsible for this phenomenon. Traditional Hmong culture has sustained a severe disruption. The Hmong have undergone a seemingly endless series of traumatic experiences: the war in Laos, the Pathet Lao takeover and subsequent Hmong persecution (including the threat of genocide), the harrowing nighttime escapes through jungles and across the Mekong River, the hardships of refugee camps in Thailand, and finally resettlement in the United States, with not only housing, income, language, and employment concerns, but the inability to practice traditional religion, and hasty conversions to Christianity. Additionally, in a shortsighted federal effort to avoid “overburdening” individual communities with new immigrants, refugee resettlement officials dispersed sections of Hmong clans through the country. This policy effectively shattered the clan and extended family structure that had been an important source of emotional and economic support in Laos. I believe that these recent changes account for the fact that SUNDS occurs in the United States while no informant I interviewed was aware of SUNDS in pre-migration Laos.

As I have indicated, dab sog did torment sleepers in the Hmong homeland, but in that cultural and social context there existed a fundamental structure of support. Hmong shamans conducted prescribed rituals designed to ascertain the nature of the individual’s transgression and sought to appease the angry spirits in order to prevent the possibility of the sleeper’s death during a subsequent nocturnal encounter. In the United States, while the majority of Hmong retain many of their traditional beliefs, in many instances they have lost their religious leaders and ritual responses. The insular communities that characterized Hmong life in Laos appear to have fostered traditional cultural practices whose presence alleviated, but whose subsequent loss provokes, feelings of terror and impending death associated with negative supernatural encounters. The folk beliefs regarding Nightmare attacks and their causes are still very much a part of Hmong collective tradition. What has eroded are the means for dealing with the assaults. Therefore, although the dab sog attack in Laos was akin to the worldwide Nightmare tradition, the peculiar stresses of the recent Hmong experience have transformed its outcome.

The fact that SUNDS affects men almost exclusively has been one of its most perplexing aspects. The inability to fulfill roles and responsibilities with regard to religion (as well as in their lives generally) has had a calamitous impact on the psyche of many Hmong males. As many of the Hmong informants repeatedly explained, it is the male, as head-of-household, who is responsible for religious duties. Chief among these obligations is the care of the ancestor spirits and appeasement of evil spirits. When an evil spirit (primarily an untamed evil spirit, such as dab sog) is angered or offended, it is the Hmong man who is sought for retribution. In the event that the individual’s protective ancestor spirits have not been properly cared for and the ancestors desert him, he is particularly vulnerable to spirit attack and consciously aware of this vulnerability. Although Hmong women do experience Nightmare attacks and are aware of the roles of both spirits and the absence of traditional religious practices in SUNDS, they also know that dab sog will seek out their husbands, fathers, or brothers as the individuals held accountable. As one Hmong informant recalled of her own nightmare experience, “Even though I was very, very scared, I thought it was good my husband wasn’t there, so the spirit wouldn’t hurt him.”

Although both Hmong men and women have sustained enormous difficulties as a result of their disruptive relocation to the United States, it is the Hmong male who—faced with the breakdown of traditional gender and age hierarchies, and the sudden inability to provide for himself and his family both financially and spiritually—appears particularly susceptible to “stress related to the trauma of cultural dislocation.”

Since both traditional and Christian Hmong men have died of SUNDS, it was essential to learn whether Nightmare attacks and the interpretations of them were religion-specific. I discovered that, despite the fact that dab sog is a supernormal figure in traditional Hmong religion, both Nightmare attacks and the psychological stress they engender affect Hmong men and women irrespective of individuals’ religious convictions. Ninety-eight percent of the traditional Hmong and 67 percent of the Christian Hmong who suggested a cause for their Nightmare attacks attributed them either directly to traditional spirits or to the absence of traditional Hmong religious practice from their lives. Thus, Nightmare attacks exacerbate stress regarding religious practice for both Christian Hmong and traditional Hmong.

The subject of intense emotional stress as the cause of sudden death is a topic well-represented in world folklore throughout history and has also been a topic of serious biomedical investigation. A number of anthropological and biomedical studies suggest a link between psychological stress and sudden
death. In the medical anthropological and ethnomedical literature, the notion of beliefs playing a significant role in illness causation (nocebo effect) or its remedy (placebo effect) is widely held. Significantly, the concept of ethnomedico-geneic illness and healing, with its emphasis on the relationship between the mind/spirit and body, is compatible with the holistic traditional Hmong worldview regarding health.

The Hmong informants that I interviewed made it clear that in the context of recent and severe sociocultural change, dab tog attacks on Hmong men can result in cataclysmic psychological stress on the part of the victim. The analysis of the interview data confirms that the power of traditional belief in the Nightmare—compounded with factors such as the trauma of war, migration, rapid acculturation, and the inability to practice traditional healing and ritual—causes cataclysmic psychological stress that can result in the deaths of male Hmong refugees from SUNDS.

The incidence of SUNDS deaths peaked in 1981. Since that time the number of deaths and the crude death rate has more or less fallen steadily. This pattern appears to be directly affected by the stress of relocation and resettlement. The number of deaths of Hmong refugees in the United States rises and falls in response to the amount of time that individuals have been in this country. The various stresses I have discussed manifest most strongly during the initial arrival period, which is characterized by the greatest change and often the least amount of readily available support. Therefore, a likely reason for the decline in the number of deaths appears to be the fact that subsequent cohorts of new Hmong immigrants have many more possibilities to receive various forms of support (e.g., close-knit communities, restored clan ties, greater opportunity for traditional religious practice).

Through the phenomenon of “secondary migration,” the majority of Hmong families have moved from their initial cities of resettlement to reunite as clans and extended families in large rural communities, such as those of California’s Central Valley. Just as the disruption of traditional Hmong culture appears to have created the context for the devastation of Hmong SUNDS through dab tog attacks in the United States, the rebuilding of many traditional Hmong sociocultural supports has apparently formed the remedy.

Acknowledgments

A version of this chapter with a more medical focus has been published under the title “Ethnomedical Pathogenesis and Hmong Immigrants’ Sudden Nocturnal Deaths,” in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 18 (1994): 23–59.

Endnotes

4. Ibid.
9. Hmong was an exclusively oral language until the 1950s when Christian missionaries in Laos developed a written form using the Roman alphabet. In this essay, terms in the Hmong language are written in the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA). For ease of pronunciation, I provide an English transliteration in parentheses.
10. The word *mar*, from which *nightmare* is derived, can be traced to a proto-Indo-European root that most likely referred to a nocturnal pressing spirit; see Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1960). The Old English *nihtmar*, which is the antecedent to the modern English word, and the German *Mahr* (masculine) or *Mahr* (feminine) (Old High German *Mara*) are related examples of this root; see Johannes Hoops, ed., *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* (Strassburg: Karl J. Trubner, 1916), 172; Kluge, 454.
12. I am indebted to David J. Hufford for his characterization of the nightmare in *The Terror That Comes in the Night*. Although I have altered his configuration slightly (based on the results of my own fieldwork in Jerusalem [1987–88] and Los Angeles [1986–87]). Hufford’s criteria, which are unique in the literature on the subject, remain the foundation of the minimal requirements for the nightmare experience as I present them.
deaths indicates that individuals of both groups perceive a connection between Nightmare spirit attacks and the fatal outcomes. Interviews with Khu men indicated that the Khuu Nightmare regarding SUNDs reveal the presence of the belief that the Khuu Nightmare spirit, khmum khhrum, is responsible for the deaths. Thai laborers in Singapore and spirit, hoom hrior, is responsible for the deaths. Thais have also been victims of what appears to be SUNDs. Suffering from tremendous physical exhaustion and psychological stress, they have taken steps to thwart the succubus-like spirit they believe is responsible for the attacks. Blaming female spirits for the killings, the men have begun wearing dresses and red nail polish—apparently to fool the spirits into thinking they’re women. A few have also posted wooden replicas of male genitalia in front of their homes (Steve Johnson, “Strange Malady Killing Asian Men,” San Jose Mercury News, February 20, 1991). Any definitive statement regarding these Nightmare spirits and sudden deaths, however, requires an in-depth study of the type presented here.

35. The disorder is also known by the acronym SUDEP, Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome. I feel both the unpredictable nature of the syndrome and the fact that 98 percent of the deaths occurred between 10:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. (R. Gibson Pritts et al., “Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome in Southeast Asian Refugees: A Review of CDC Surveillance,” Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Review 36 [1987]: 43–53) warrant the inclusion of both the words unexpected and nocturnal in the label. Thus, Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome is a more accurate description of the disorder. My use of the term SUDEP is consistent with that of the SUNDS Planning Project at St. Paul-Ramsey Medical Center.


38. Ibid.


43. Hufford, The Terror, xvi.

44. Hufford, The Terror.

45. Neng Her, personal communication with the author, Stockton, California, 1990.

46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
50. Male Hmong social worker from Stockton, California, personal communication with the author, Stockton, California, 1990.
52. Ibid., 91.
53. Tong Yee Xiong, personal communication with the author, Stockton, California, 1990.
54. Cheng Her, personal communication with the author, Stockton, California, 1990.
55. Cha Xiong, personal communication with the author, Stockton, California, 1990.
57. Cha Xiong, previously cited.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.