

Thesis Title                    Mortality Patterns of "Laitai" (Sudden Unexplained  
Death Syndrome) In Khonkaen Province, Northeast  
Thailand.

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Degree                         Master of Arts (Population and Social Research)

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study's objective was to examine general characteristics of beliefs and risk behaviors associated with death from the Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome (SUDS), or Laitai, in Khon Kaen province, Northeast Thailand. Data collection entailed in-depth interviews with relatives of deceased persons who occupied the same household in Khon Kaen from 1989 to 1990. During this time, deaths believed to be caused by Laitai occurred in 18 households.

Results showed that the deceased were all married men, mainly aged 20-39 years (average age of 32 years), who possessed a primary level education. Their manner prior to death was viewed as normal in that they were healthy, cheerful, diligent and tolerant. Their main occupation was farming. The men lived within extended families with a family size averaging 1.8; the average age of their children was 3.4 years. Household were in the middle income category without any serious indebtedness. Laitai episodes occurred most frequently from January until March.

The deceased persons were laborers whose work aimed at raising family income through farming, though the latter was not adequate enough to cover expenditures. Secondary jobs were thus taken during the off-farming season in order to earn extra income. Rice cultivation served as the main economic activity as well as food source. Characteristics in common between the extended families and the deceased included health, tolerance and dedication towards income-generation.

Results also showed that household containing Laitai victims faced long periods of drought over a 2 to 4 year period. These households, moreover, were unable to store enough rice for consumption. This placed an added burden on familial income earners. Natural food sources, which could have served to offset food shortage, were difficult to obtain. Consequently, all of these households were under economic and food availability pressures, due to drought, which threatened their survival.

Risk behaviors associated with the Laitai victims included cigarette smoking and the drinking of alcoholic beverages to relieve work pressures. These same practices occurred during festival seasons in order to avoid sleepiness. Such practices also lead to relaxation, fainting spells, tiredness and headaches which are believed to be the first symptoms of Laitai.

Relatives of the deceased still believe that deaths were caused by supernatural forces. This belief, which fits within their cognitive system, serves to reduce worry about the cause at one level. Sleeplessness is also felt to be a health risk which can make people fatigued and lead to Laitai. In terms of curative

measures, relatives believe that placing chili peppers in the mouths of persons suffering from Laitai will hasten death.