

# Liturgy of the Dispersed: Memory, Transnationalism, and Cambodian Cuisine in the American Diaspora

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## Research Question

What changes in cultural foods are present among people in the Cambodian diaspora in America?

## Abstract

This study addresses the Cambodian diaspora as it creates new imagined communities in the United States through transnational ties, strengthened by globalization. An aspect of diaspora that this study focuses on is Cambodian cultural cuisine. It is rooted in anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's theories on imagination, culturalism, and globalization. Using purposive sampling, this study compares 25 pre-diaspora to 25 diaspora recipes and uses focused coding to analyze the changes in cuisine. Major findings include more leniency in ingredients used, stricter instructions on cooking methods, and greater memory of the motherland.

## Introduction

*Diaspora* describes the mass exodus of living beings from their native and known cultural ecology to their resettlement in a new and unfamiliar setting where norms and values are largely unknown and fragmented. As migrants become nostalgic for stories of their distant past, they cultivate prototypes of their home in the unfamiliar place to sustain these cultural memories (Mannur, 2007). The migration of Cambodians beginning in the late 1970's and early 1980's gave rise to new imagined communities connected by displacement and nostalgia, with the quest to recreate the settings of the *motherland* in the *host land* in the domestic sphere where authenticity can be exercised in the kitchen through various food paraphernalia and practices (Duruz, 2001, 2010; Mannur, 2007; Parveen, 2016). The objective of this research is to identify changes in Cambodian cuisine as Cambodians undergo migratory displacement in the United States and utilize the kitchen to reminisce over their cultural history, sustain their Cambodianness, and reterritorialize their narratives.

## Theory

Arjun Appadurai (1996) describes globalization in the postmodern age as being prompted by mass-mediated thoughts, ideas, and concepts made readily assessable through electronic media (p. 4). Globalization is the "undoing of nation-states" as it uproots ideas once prescribed to geographical locations and is then displaced into imaginary spheres (p. 11). Where place-names are no longer the primary zones of interaction, group identity cannot be confined to the subscription of or allegiance to a nation-state, instead global flows that are more efficient begin to outline the primary aspects of culture. Rather than relying on border acknowledgments and physical space, culture must be defined by the imagined world that is constantly in flux and shape shifting in response to interactions with other embodied differences. The diasporic sphere or the borderlands, diffuse culture more readily, spreading the gift of imagination where memory and desire intersect (pp. 5-6). It is in these borderlands, where physical space is unapparent but ideological space is heightened, that transnationalism is cultivated and prompted by nostalgia (p. 30). Nostalgia and transnationalism disrupt patronizing primordial ideologies and colonial social order.

## Literature Review

A diasporic or dispersed community may include those who occupy the borderlands, those who cross borders on occasion or as needed for occupational needs, or those who cross borders permanently (Ferguson, 1992). Cross-border connectedness simultaneously intensifies and has been intensified by the emergence and rapid growth of global circuits, disrupting the notion of belongingness being limited to physical geography, forcing anthropologists to assess the constraints of institutional boundaries and nation-states (Kearney, 1995; Saw, 2018). In the modern and post-modern era, accessibility

and advancements in science and technology has increased human correspondence, allowing knowledges, values, and beliefs to diffuse more readily.

Through the lens of territoriality, relocation creates a "borderland" or a space of "in-betweenness" that prompts the shifting of cultural practices to accommodate existing cultural, political, and economic attributes in the new landscape (Kearney, 1995; Saw, 2018). The mark of transnationalism, or "the multiple associations and interactions connecting people across the borders of nation-states", fulfills the quest for authenticity, often prompted by nostalgia (Saw, 2018). One exercise of transnationalism common among various diasporic communities is the consumption of cultural foods as a method of "embodied remembering, with its geographies of tastes, smells, colours, and textures" (Duruz, 2001, p. 47). The act of modifying recipes "provide a link to the homeland and the past, as well as being part of creating an identity for a diasporic community" (Parveen, 2016, p. 55).

## Methodology

### Data Collection

- I utilized purposive sampling and collected 50 recipes from two cookbooks: 25 pre-diaspora recipes from *The Culinary Art of Cambodia*, published in the Royal Family Bulletin by Princess Norodom Rasmi Sobhanna in 1970 and reprinted in 2021 in Cambodia; as well as 25 diaspora recipes from *The Elephant Walk Cookbook*, written by Katherine Neustadt and Longteine De Monteiro in 1998 in Los Angeles, CA, USA.
- I chose recipes based on the categories of food or specific dish present in both cookbooks, resulting in 4 Vermicelli noodle (*Nom Banchoek*) recipes, 3 rice recipes, 4 meat recipes, 2 curry recipes, 7 soup recipes, 1 fish recipe, and 4 snack foods recipes from each cookbook.

### Content Analysis

- With the help of my bilingual family members and *Google Translate*, I was able to translate the 25 pre-diaspora recipes from Khmer to English.
- I created 7 code sheets, one per category, with three codes to analyze each recipe. The code "ingredients" includes measurements, food choices, quantity, and adjectives. The code "methods" includes kitchen gadgets, procedure, verbiage, and adverbs. The code "cultural and historical notes" considers any background information about the dish or the sociocultural environment surrounding the dish.



Figure 1. *The Culinary Art of Cambodia*, published in 1970 and reprinted in 2021 (left) and *The Elephant Walk Cookbook*, published in 1998 (right). These cookbooks were used to locate pre-diasporic and diasporic recipes, respectively.

## Analysis

### Ingredients

- Diaspora recipes include exact and non-negotiation quantities and volume written in standard form. Pre-diaspora recipes lack specificity and precision in quantity and volume and was written in metric form, although it is rare that the recipes include measurements at all.
- Pre-diaspora recipes have a strict ingredients list, with little room for interpretation or modification. Diaspora recipes includes the choice of kosher and free-range meats, offers more than one cut of meat or type of fish, encourages canned or pre-packaged goods if fresh ingredients are futile, and presents the option of an Asian or European variety of produce.

- While *prohok* is required in pre-diaspora recipes, it is optional in diaspora recipes.
- Pre-diaspora recipes list *kroeung*, an essential Cambodian spice mix, as one ingredient that is already pre-made and stocked. Diaspora recipes that include *kroeung* mention all the ingredients that composes this spice blend but does not mention its name. Instead, it lists the steps to make *kroeung*, assuming that it is not already pre-made and stocked.

### Methods

- Pre-diaspora recipes includes subjective words such as "good" and "well done" to communicate completion or readiness to move on to the next step. Diaspora recipes are objective with their communication, mentioning exact cooking times and temperatures.
- While pre-diaspora recipes mention the exact kitchen gadget(s) required to make the dish, diaspora recipes offer a few gadget suggestions for the same procedure. Gadget choices include mortar and pestle or mini-chop, stockpot or boiler, stockpot or broiler, skillet or wok, and blender and mortar and pestle.
- Diaspora recipes includes instructions on how to assemble dishes with multiple components, as well as instructions on the best form and method for eating. Pre-diaspora recipes assume construction and ingestion are intuitive.

### Cultural and Historical Notes

- Both pre-diaspora and diaspora recipes mention accompaniments to the main dish such as rice.
- Recipes from both cookbooks exhibit mild French influence. Diaspora recipes also mention Indian and Chinese influence on dishes.
- Diaspora recipes recall memories of daily life in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, including familiar landscapes and human postures.
- While pre-diaspora recipes make no comparison, diaspora recipes often compare the taste or texture of the main dish to a universally known or Western-influenced dish.

## Discussion

### Transnationalism in the Era of Mounting Globalization

Appadurai (1996) writes that "globalization is not the story of cultural hegemonization" (p. 11). Although there are negative implications of globalization as gathered from his later works, in this current study diasporas intermingling with the works of globalization creates strong transnational ties and a great sense of cultural plurality. This, however, does not justify any romanticization of globalization.

### Memory and Nostalgia

Nostalgia with memory enables diasporic communities to replicate the settings of their distant past to maintain cultural affinities. Culture is imagined and mobile and can be appropriated in any physical location that the dispersed resettles in.

Nostalgia without memory can be frightening as it creates group desire for someone else's past. Romanticizing what was never present may lead to harmful romanticization of another culture and neglect of the native culture. This, however, is not a poetry for nativism.

### Cultural Reproduction Through Kitchen Spaces

The editing of cultural recipes as humans undergo migratory displacement is for the purpose of recreating a cultural home within the constraints of the new land. Culture is imagined and so long as culture can be replicated to evoke the same feeling of home, it is authentic.

### Celebrating Small Numbers

In 2006, Arjun Appadurai published *Fear of Small Numbers* where he recognizes globalization as leading to racially motivated violence, ethnic terrors, and large-scale genocides. He refers to subaltern groups that are subjected to modern powers as *small numbers* and insists on their resilience in resisting global hegemony. As part of my tenure as a work-

Study student at Messiah University's Office of Sustainability, I was able to publish a cookbook in 2022 featuring recipes and stories from students, alum, and staff and faculty members. This cookbook is titled *Stories from Small Numbers* with the latter part of the title inspired by Appadurai's stillness and hope in subaltern voices, who I realize are the contributors of this cookbook. This cookbook is an applied project that neatly ties into the heart of my undergraduate thesis as it honors, celebrates, and memorializes diverse stories, strengthening imagined communities in the era of mass globalization. This cookbook is what Appadurai would call the "plurality of the imagined world" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 5).

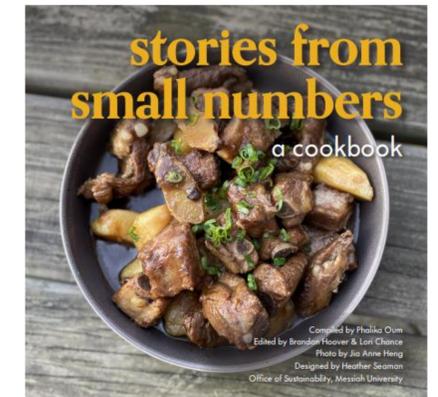


Figure 2. *Stories from Small Numbers*, published in 2022. A Messiah University cookbook published under the Office of Sustainability and Messiah Press. A time capsule and memorial piece. A love letter to food and all the zones that it occupies.

## Conclusions

- Understanding the role of the kitchen in maintaining cultural affinities while living in the relocated place sustains a story.
- Many of the Khmer words were unfamiliar to my family, the primary translators of the pre-diasporic recipes, as the vernacular in 1970 have become obsolete during their time. With more time and access to translators or translation programs, the process could be improved and further strengthen the research.
- Future studies should explore the place of Cambodian restaurants in the American diaspora and their existence as a borderland zone.

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