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**From Farm to Table to Factory:
Paths of Cambodian American Foodways**

by

A. C. Smith

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in
History

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From Farm to Table to Factory: Paths of Cambodian American Foodways

A. C. Smith

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

Dr. Angela Jill Cooley, chairperson

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Dr. Tao Peng

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FROM FARM TO TABLE TO FACTORY:
PATHS OF CAMBODIAN AMERICAN FOODWAYS

A. C. Smith

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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MASTER OF ARTS IN HISTORY

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO
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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the history of Cambodian Americans using theoretical frameworks utilized by food studies scholars. Cambodian refugees and their families experienced a historical process that I describe as being “from farm to table to factory.” Many Cambodians maintained a self-sufficient agricultural lifestyle prior to the Cambodian Civil War. As Cambodian refugees resettled in the United States, they faced a slew of challenges in navigating urban infrastructures and governmental institutions, as well as in adjusting to hegemonic discourses. Such issues constitute a metaphorical table to which Cambodians needed to adjust as they made their lives in the US. Adaptation also included adopting the furnishings of modern US homes, such as kitchen appliances, tables, and chairs. As Cambodians settled into their new lives, they, like other Americans, had to learn to negotiate the consumer-based, industrial-commercial US food system: the factory. Younger Cambodian refugees and U.S. born children consumed a diet that was a *mélange* of Cambodian foods adapted to the U.S. system, and standard American fare. Cambodian women, who largely carried the responsibility of feeding their families, adapted as necessary. The American factory contributed to defining the contours of what Cambodian Americans could become. Literal factories also offered employment opportunities for many refugees, whose agricultural skillsets had little value in the modern, American economy. To show this historical process, I follow the paths of Cambodian foodways from their roots in Southeast Asia all the way to their new contexts in twenty-first-century United States.

Introduction

On the occasion of a family celebration or a blustery, winter day, the distinctive, fiery-floral scent of a Southeast Asian red chicken curry is a familiar one for many noses across the United States. Whether set to simmer outside on a propane burner in a giant stockpot as one dish among many, available at the leisure of partygoers, or ladled gingerly from the stovetop over cratered mounds of steamed jasmine rice to nourish a family of four, the first step in cooking the dish—preparing the curry paste—remains the same. To anyone with the right experience or perception to hear the pronouncement, the ingredients of a typical red curry boldly proclaim the intensely aromatic nature of the dish: lemongrass, chilis, garlic, shallots, galangal (a kind of cousin to ginger), cardamom, star anise, and more. All of this is fried in oil, ground to a paste in a blender or by hand with a mortar and pestle, combined with additional ingredients, cooked again, *et voila*, the paste is ready to be used in the preparation of the dish.

For convenience's sake, the preparation of the paste might be left to overseas commercial enterprises. Imported from Thailand, Maesri-brand red curry paste, a readily-available canned product, displays a list of ingredients offering near-complete fidelity to that given above. The same or similar products have been available in Minnesota—a state with, according to 2000 census, a Cambodian population of only 5,530—for decades, carried even by run-of-the-mill supermarkets. For anyone accustomed to living as a cultural insider, it may be unintuitive to think that the fresh ingredients were less accessible than their processed yield: even today, while lemongrass is now available in

some local supermarkets, ingredients like galangal and shrimp paste (in Cambodian cuisine, no more exotic than garlic or onions) might be carried only by specialty markets more than an hour away by car.¹

Structural factors, such as the geographic availability of specific ingredients, are part of the complex conversations that influence the development, adaptations, and extensions of foodways. As those factors change over time, and as new ideologies and social contexts inform expressions of culture among subsequent generations, foodways react in kind. Depending on the year and the cook, the exact form in which a red curry is prepared includes subtle revisions by each of its makers. A depiction of three versions of the dish, drawn from my experience as a Cambodian American, should serve to illustrate the point. The “original” form is a version prepared by Cambodian refugees who, post-flight from war-torn Southeast Asia, arrived in the United States as adults in the late 1970s. This version was prepared by an aunt—such as my aunt—wielding a large, Chinese cleaver. Her method made use of canned products like curry paste, coconut milk, and green beans, and involved breaking down whole chickens with a procession of menacing blows, each one punctuated by the sound of the cleaver coming down on the large, white, plastic cutting board, evident of confident knifework.²

¹ My family has used these canned curry pastes, purchased from the “ethnic foods” section of a micropolitan supermarket, for as long as I can recall. Census data referenced in Sucheng Chan, *Survivors: Cambodian Refugees in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 107.

² The word “aunt” provides an imperfect corollary for the Khmer word “oum,” which identifies the recipient of the honorific as older than the speaker’s parents (and, *ipso facto*, owed a measure of respect); notably, both men and women are addressed using the term.

A second iteration of the dish was made by an elder cousin—such as my cousin—who found refuge in the United States as a youth. His parents had not made the journey across the ocean, and so, in the United States, he was raised by his mother’s oldest sister—the aunt with the Chinese cleaver. There were a few things, demonstrating some form of “Americanization,” that distinguished a red chicken curry prepared in his kitchen compared to the one prepared in his aunt’s: first, he used only boneless, skinless, white-meat chicken breast. Second, the dish was milder, as he used a more delicate touch when determining the appropriate amount of curry paste. Third, the dish was served differently than its predecessor. Whereas my aunt’s version was served in a sizeable soup bowl, and emphasis was placed on taking ample amounts of broth, my elder cousin’s version was served on a standard Corelle plate, and eaten more like a gravy.³

The third version of the dish is the one I make. My method restores the practice of using the whole bird, which produces a more-flavorful broth. In general, it observes contemporary, popular, U.S.-American social trends towards using “whole foods” by substituting fresh, seasonal ingredients wherever possible. This change reflects—perhaps ironically, given that in the U.S., canned is king—my having been born and raised in the United States, which resulted in (compared to my relatives) a bigger purchase into the hegemonic discourse. It must also be mentioned, easier access to “culturally authentic” ingredients like shallots, lemongrass, and bird’s eye (Thai) chilis makes using fresh

³ Scholars refer to this group of refugees, who, like my cousin, spent some of their formative years in the United States, as “generation 1.5.” See, e.g., Sucheng Chan, ed., *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), xiv, ProQuest Ebrary.

ingredients a simpler task in 2022 than it was in 1982. In addition to starting with different ingredients, another variation in technique significantly reflected my Western matriculation—standard procedure in modern, western cuisine calls for skimming the rendered fat from the top of a soup or stock to achieve a clearer broth.⁴

As a culinary autodidact and bibliophile, adhering to this technique—affirmed by popular, culinary royalty like Jacques Pépin, and codified by the likes of the Culinary Institute of America—initially left me with the feeling that I had successfully married “professional,” Western culinary practices to the context of Cambodian cuisine. Scholars of the anticolonial tradition will, doubtless, bristle at the red flag that is the word “professional,” and, indeed, the implicit premise behind my alteration of the process—that Cambodian chefs had failed to skim the fat, rather than having explicitly chosen not to—proved comically Eurocentric. In her 1998 cookbook, *The Elephant Walk*, Cambodian professional chef Longteine de Monteiro wrote, “the look of a curry is important to Cambodians: we like to see lots of small dark spots of oil—dark red from the chili peppers—pooled on the surface of the sauce.”⁵ If there is not enough oil to produce these dark, red spots, says de Monteiro, add more. The presence of such spots indeed colored the curries from my childhood, giving them a distinct presentation;

⁴ The Culinary Institute of America, *The Professional Chef*, 7th ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002), 247; Jacques Pépin, *New Complete Techniques*, rev. 1st ed. (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2012), 40.

⁵ Longteine de Monteiro and Katherine Neustadt, *The Elephant Walk Cookbook* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 192.

skimming the fat from the top of a curry, a practice which I have since put away, makes it absolutely certain that such spots will not appear.



Figure 1 - A chicken curry from Heng Lay, a Cambodian restaurant in Lowell, MA. Note the pools of oil swimming on the surface—very much how my aunt used to make it. The camera angle fails to capture the size of the bowl, which is enormous—like a basketball cut in half. Photo credit Anthony C. Smith, August 2022.

These three variations of the same dish are the impetus for the questions asked and answered by this thesis. What role has food played in the Cambodian American experience? How have Cambodian refugees adapted their foodways to respond to their new, American environments? How do these adaptations differ from the paths of

Cambodian foodways associated with younger refugees and U.S. born Cambodian Americans? These questions demand a study of the cultural and social histories of Cambodians and Cambodian Americans and their foodways, both within and outside the borders of the United States. I argue that following the periods in and preceding the 1970s, which already caused significant disruptions to the traditional, self-sufficient agricultural foodways of Cambodian people, food patterns concomitant with asylum in the United States were first characterized by a period of substantial growing pains, followed by the emergence of diverging paths, with elder Cambodians retaining a preference for traditional foods (which needed to be adjusted to new contexts), and younger Cambodians finding their place somewhere between their elders and American peers.⁶ In other words, while adult Cambodian refugees found ways to eat meals that closely resembled those eaten in Cambodia (only, now they prepared them in indoor kitchens on a gas or electric range, rather than in an outdoor kitchen), their children learned at school to eat American sandwiches and pizzas, and these foods competed with “traditional” cuisine in the homeplace.

Despite the recency of the historical period under review, this research provides insight into a history that has been locked away—a link to the past that has been missing. In preparation for this work, I happened upon an article on the subject of Cambodian American identity, written by Cambodian American, Southeast Asian Studies scholar

⁶ In this thesis, for lack of a more precise word, I use the word “American” exclusively to refer to the United States of America.

Jonathan H. X. Lee, which, for the first time, profoundly articulated certain orientations I felt in my own life. “What does it mean to be Cambodian American,” asks Lee, “or even part Cambodian American?”

Traditional indicators of ethnicity like language, religion, cultural practices, and foodways that reinforce being Cambodian are foreign to me. (...)

Cambodian refugees who grew up in America occupy an in-between space among multiple worlds. Not fully American, yet not fully Asian, their identities are fraught with complications and uncertainties. Living as subjects without historical awareness, or knowledge of their heritage and ancestry, they grow up in America with shallow roots, and an incomplete sense of self.⁷

He adds that Cambodian elders have, understandably, often closed themselves off from their traumatic history, sharing, for example, that his father hadn’t spoken a single word in his native language, Khmer, since coming to the United States in 1981.⁸

This research represents not only an academic exercise, but a personal journey of sociocultural recovery; this journey of recovery underpins some of my biases and limitations. I was born in the United States to a Cambodian, refugee mother and a White, American father, the latter of whom passed away when I was ten. Our big, Cambodian household was a busy one: we shared living space with two older cousins, an older aunt and uncle, their two children, and, eventually, the wife and two children of one of the older cousins. I am at home in the State of Minnesota—and yet, although I have not had the opportunity to visit, I am linked, both indelibly and by choice, to Cambodia.

⁷ Jonathan Lee, “Cambodian American Ethics of Identity,” *Peace Review* 23, no. 4 (2011): 476-78. See also Socheata Poouv, “How You Understand Your Story: The Survival Story within Cambodian American Genocide Communities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, eds. Paula Hamilton and James B. Gardner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 492-504, Oxford Academic.

⁸ Lee, “Cambodian American Ethics of Identity,” 482.

But my siblings and I never learned to speak Khmer. Although I know how to prepare a handful of Cambodian foods, and have eaten Cambodian meals frequently and variously enough to have relied more than once on the question (asked in humility, not consternation), “how do I eat this,” I claim no authority over Cambodian cuisine beyond what I have learned through experience and through the research I’ve done for this project.

Terminology, and Other Hand-wringing

Social-group identifiers are often loose, imprecise, and/or tend to have both intentional and unintentional overlap in the people they nominally represent. For example, although the term “Asian American” is regularly used today, it is a relatively modern and contested term. Scholars, such as Lemuel F. Ignacio, author of *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (Is There Such an Ethnic Group?)*, question whether a group called “Asian Americans” exists, and if they exist, who is included?⁹ Scholars answer this question in different ways. The historian Sucheng Chan uses the term “Asian Americans” in her scholarship, although, as late as 1991, she states that it may be premature to suggest that “Asian American” serves as a meaningful

⁹ Lemuel F. Ignacio, *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders: (Is There Such an Ethnic Group?)* (San Jose: Pilipino Development Associates, Inc., 1976). The first course billing itself as “Asian American” Studies came out of UCLA in 1969, founded by Yuji Ichioka; to prepare to teach this course, Ichioka studied in isolation the classics of the field, which are works dedicated to specific migrant groups—Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese. Yuji Ichioka, “A Historian by Happenstance,” *Amerasia* 26, no. 1 (2000): 35-36. See also Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 70-75, ProQuest Ebrary.

category of analysis.¹⁰ Dorothy Fujita-Rony argues historical, geographic movement should be considered. Asian historiography demands a west-to-east gaze in contrast to the opposite used to study European-American movement. She also points out that Asian Americans continue to be viewed as recent migrants, despite the fact that many arrived well before turn-of-the-century migrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Comparatively, Erika Lee argues the ethnic and historical heterogeneity are counterbalanced by the shared experiences of racialization and monolithic orientalism Asians have faced in the United States as miscreants during the Yellow Peril at the turn of the last century, as model minorities more recently, and, more recently, as vectors for illness during the pandemic.¹¹

My thesis suggests the category of “Asian American” is valid although limited in function. While there is some benefit to thinking of Cambodian Americans as “Asian” (e.g., most Cambodian Americans associate with ethnic grocers that sell a variety of Asian foods, and themselves consume “Asian” foods), the category disregards the substantial differences among the myriad categories of Asian Americans. Categories such as “East Asian” and “Southeast Asian,” offer additional clarity, but still fail to capture particularities about the various subgroups contained therein.

¹⁰ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, Twayne’s Immigrant Heritage of America Series (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), xiii.

¹¹ Dorothy Fujita-Rony, “Water and Land: Asian Americans and the U.S. West,” *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no. 4 (November 2007): 565-66; Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schusters, 2015), 3-7.

The primary subjects of this thesis, diasporic Cambodians in the United States, endure the same ambiguities in nomenclature as any other defined population. Particularly messy in this thesis will be the terms “Cambodian,” “Cambodian American,” and “Cambodian refugee,” all of which could be used, for example, to refer to a naturalized citizen of the United States who was born in Cambodia but fled as a refugee. “Cambodian refugee” may seem straightforward, but can be used to refer both to (a) someone actively living in a refugee camp, as well as (b) someone who has become a citizen in and spent the better part of their life in a “host” country. “Cambodian” and “Cambodian American” can both be used in reference to the American-born offspring of Cambodian parents, though the former, but not the latter, can also be used in reference to Cambodian people living in the Southeast Asian country. All of these terms are further complicated by other axes of categorization—gender, sex, religion, ethnicity (e.g., Khmer, Cham, Sino, Viet), hometown/city in Cambodia or the United States, etc. I aim to leave as little ambiguity as possible in using these terms, but I encourage readers to remind themselves of the intricate and fluid nature of proposed or perceived identities. Owing to their dynamic and layered qualities, identities are often, paradoxically, both simpler and more complex than we tend to intuit.

Culture is also a key term appearing in the text that likewise eludes tidy definition. My understanding of this term is shaped in part by thoughts shared by Valerie J. Matsumoto, who rejects “simplistic, [Edenic] view[s]” of cultural change— notions of some kind of “Atlantis inevitably sinking”—in favor of dynamic, adaptive interpretations

of cultural expression. Sociologist Jeremy Hein suggests there is a growing consensus regarding the conception of culture (or “ethnic identity”) as something “emergent rather than primordial[,]” and that this is a natural consequence of the postmodern turn in the social sciences in the late twentieth century. Matsumoto and Hein articulate competing essentialist and social constructionist theories of culture, the former suggesting that culture (reductively, values and behaviors) is somehow fixed and capable of being “lost,” and the latter suggesting that culture is something less tangible, like a temporary set of behaviors adopted in negotiation with environmental circumstances.¹²

Both theories contribute to notions of culture in their own way. Changes to American values and mores in the twentieth century demonstrate how malleable human behaviors can be. Such social changes are hardly identifiable in terms of being more or less “culturally” American—and this permission for change reflects the social construction theory of culture. Still, there are some gauges used to “measure” culture, such as those Jonathan Lee alludes to above: language, religion, and foodways among them. This thesis accepts the validity of both frameworks for different purposes. Conceptualizing culture as essentialist is a sensible approach in the effort to track foodway changes in the Cambodian diaspora. That being said, culture necessarily responds to changes in social contexts. This is evident in the context of the migration of

¹² Valerie J. Matsumoto, *Farming the Home Place: A Japanese American Community in California, 1919-1982* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 6; Jeremy Hein, *Ethnic Origins: The Adaptation of Cambodian and Hmong Refugees in Four American Cities* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2006), 12. Hein’s book contains an interesting intellectual history of how ethnicity and culture have been defined redefined repeatedly in American academic scholarship in the twentieth century.

people, and it is also true in the context of globalization and the spread of plants. Ingredients such as peanuts, pumpkins, pineapples, sweet and regular potatoes, tomatoes, chili peppers, and corn, which were a part of Cambodian cuisine in the mid-twentieth century, are foods that originated in the Americas. Historians today conventionally discuss the global migration of such foods under the framework of the Columbian Exchange, so-called in reference to European contact with the Americas and Alfred W. Crosby's book of the same name.¹³

Scholarship Overview

I situate this thesis within a broader field of interdisciplinary food studies scholarship, and I apply this framework to the context of Cambodian migration to the U.S. Among the pioneering works in this scholarship is labor historian Harvey Levenstein's *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* emerging in the late 1980s to examine the foodways of Americans from 1880 to 1930. Inspired by reports in the 1950s about Korean War captives who "would die rather than eat certain kinds of [culturally repellent] food," as well as by the picky eating habits of his own children, Levenstein's intricately-tangled work asks two simple questions: why do people eat what they eat, and what factors contribute to changing food habits?¹⁴ These questions are at the heart of this project as well. Levenstein's research outlines a myriad of

¹³ Alfred W. Crosby Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, 30th anniv. ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 170; Rebecca Earle, "The Columbian Exchange," in *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*, ed. Jeffrey M. Pilcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 341.

¹⁴ Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), vii-viii.

trailheads from which subsequent scholars can launch their own investigations, touching on themes as such as welfare efforts among social reformers, the growth of the industrial food sector, changing cultural norms, nutritional science, immigration, and home economics. He also queries whether changes in food habits crossed picket lines and class divides. The broad sweep of Levenstein's study qualifies it as a solid introduction to the field, but it lacks depth. He, for example, dedicates only a few pages to diasporic group foodways, inviting further scholarly attention to this topic.¹⁵

Scholarly exploration of foodways has never been limited to food for its own sake. Many scholars follow Levenstien's path to produce a literature on an array of topics tied to any part of the chain linking agriculture to production to consumption. Central to this scholarship is how food production and consumption are regulated by public or private sectors. Nutrition scientist Marion Nestle follows this line of investigation in her pioneering work, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, by explaining the impetus for her critical inquiries into the relationship between politics and food. In 1986, Nestle worked for the Public Health Service and was tasked with the editorial production of the *Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health*, a manuscript meant to distill, as much as possible, the scientific consensus on dietary factors (such as fats, salt, sugar, and alcohol) and their connection to chronic illnesses. Day one, Nestle was presented with rule zero: "no matter what the research indicate[s],"

¹⁵ R. A. Burchell, [untitled], review of *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*, by Harvey Levenstein, *Journal of American Studies* 25, no. 1 (April 1991): 143.

the *Surgeon General's Report* was not to offer the advice to “eat less meat” or recommend reducing any category of food as a solution to help the public eliminate excess intake of saturated fats. Nestle’s work helps to unpack the variety of institutional forces that contribute to the American food system, in which Cambodian Americans participate every day.¹⁶

Social Science Professor Julie Guthman’s book, *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*, further reveals tacit government consent to the private sector’s influence on the politics of what foods are available to the American public. Conceived as a rebuttal to what she considers misguided public discourse about health and the epidemic of obesity in the United States, Guthman argues that—contrary to the boorish insistence of those who would recite an equation of “calories-in-calories-out” like a religious mantra—obesity, if it is going to be addressed, must be understood as an “ecological condition.”¹⁷ Using the analogy of climate change, the problem is not individual decision-making, but, rather, the social contexts “in which individual decisions (...) are made.”¹⁸ Insisting on a structural approach to the issue, Guthman is in opposition to Nestle’s lamentation over her preemptively-censored recommendation that people should eat less. Chief among Guthman’s foes is upper-middle-class “alternative foods”

¹⁶ Marion Nestle, *Food Politics*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁷ Julie Guthman, *Weighing In* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1, 9. Guthman also questions the efficacy of some embedded assumptions in obesity discourses. For example, she critically examines the association of thinness with healthfulness, argues that medical measurements like BMI fail to capture real health outcomes in a diverse population, and disputes the reductive explanation that mere government subsidies for agriculture are responsible for cheap, fattening foods in the U.S. (24-36, 138).

¹⁸ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 9.

movement guru Michael Pollan. Guthman stands Pollan (and his arguments) on his head, portraying him as a mildly fatphobic, snake-oil salesman whose banal prescriptions for a healthy lifestyle (e.g., “eat food, not too much, mostly plants”) border on contempt for anyone whose circumstances preclude an adjustment to their diet to, as Pollan puts it, eat “real food[s]” rather than “edible foodlike substances.”¹⁹ Guthman argues that forced modernization practices, such as factory farming, are complicit in the steadily growing size of the American population—both as a collective and as individuals. Responsible for the trend towards modernized overproduction, and its associated decline in the overall quality of widely-available foods, Guthman argues, are two things: capitalism and the politics of neoliberalism. Guthman’s indictment of industrialized, American foodways is significant to this study, as younger Cambodian Americans consume a diet that includes many “American” foods, and in consequence, suffer from diabetes, a food-related illness, at higher rates than their counterparts living in Cambodia.²⁰

If the imputation of capitalism and neoliberalism comes across as quasi conspiratorial, other scholars ask questions about the individuals who peopled such institutions. In her book, *Stir it Up: Home Economics in American Culture*, historian Megan J. Elias sketches the emergence of the professional home economists towards the end of the nineteenth century. Despite adversity to their proliferation at the institutional level, Elias shows how these women and their successors impacted social discourse on

¹⁹ Guthman, 145-46, 5. For Michael Pollan’s work, see *The Omnivores Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), and *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008).

²⁰ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 123-128, 138, 163-72.

expertise, nutrition, sanitation, and other practical studies. Particularly, Elias argues that home economists gained cultural currency as food experts during the crises of the first half of the twentieth century, a time when “food [would] win the war.” Home economists became trusted advisors in matters of food distribution and rationing because of their perceived understanding of nutrition and ability to reduce food waste through proper canning and preserving practices. However, Elias argues the opulence of the postwar period saw to a reorientation that undermined and ultimately de-legitimized the study of home economics, relegating its status to that of mere marriage training for girls. Elias is conscious of concepts like gender roles and autonomy within an androcentric society (which are never far from the surface in food studies). This work is useful in helping to consider the emergence of this professionalized view of foods, particularly to consider the kinds of things (e.g., nutrition, refrigeration) about which Cambodian refugees had very much to learn.²¹

According to Elias, the “most significant” victory achieved by home economists, was their contribution to school lunch programs that emerged during the Great Depression, of which home economists were often in charge. The historian Andrew R. Ruis further unpacks the dimensions of school lunch programs in his book, *Eating to Learn, Learning to Eat: The Origins of School Lunch in the United States*. Spurred on by

²¹ Megan J. Elias, *Stir it Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 2-4, 7, 15, 18-32, 64, 106-13, 127. Elias argues that, in the university setting, despite being rooted in “hard sciences” like chemistry, biology, and physics, home economists from their very start faced challenges in intellectual legitimation from outsiders, as their efforts to study nutrition, sanitation, and scientifically maximize household operations were crudely dismissed as so much bread baking, or, alternatively, not enough.

anecdotes of the dubious public-school lunches suffered by children today, as well as social discourse over childhood obesity, Ruis explores the development of school lunches as they exist in the United States. Methodologically, he approaches this topic by examining early programs maintained in New York City and Chicago, as well as less-formal systems implemented in rural schools in Wisconsin and elsewhere. Ruis and Elias both see school lunch programs as a response to malnutrition, a concept that had entered public discourse alongside developments in nutritional science. However, Ruis also articulates problems with reactionary resistance to school lunch programs, which postponed the installation of an indefinite, federal program until its existence was eventually tied to government subsidies in the agricultural sector, a detail that he implicates as a cause for the degradation of school lunches. As school lunches become an incredibly significant institution in the lives of Cambodian Americans, Ruis' study—as to why they serve grilled-cheese sandwiches instead of Cambodian soups—is very relevant.²²

Also significant to this study are scholars who use the history of foodways to call attention to issues of social justice. In the article “African American Farmers and Civil Rights,” southern historian Pete Daniel unearths the reason for the disproportionate

²² Elias, 127; Andrew R. Ruis, *Eating to Learn, Learning to Eat: The Origins of School Lunch in the United States* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 1-9, 17-22, 34, 57, 64, 141-55. Ruis points out that many less-formal school lunch programs emphasized nutrition and cultural compatibility, whereas the tie to the agricultural sector emphasized the elimination of crop surpluses and market crisis mitigation (42, 67-68, 72, 130). Susan Levine also discusses school lunch as a response to agricultural surpluses in the Great Depression. See Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

decline of Black farmers in the twentieth century, finding that systemic racism was a near-formalized component of the U.S. agricultural system even after federal Civil Rights legislation. Daniel begins with the claim that, since its founding during the Civil War, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) “presided over monumental changes” in the ecological and agricultural history of the United States, not least of which was the substitution of technology for human expertise and experience.²³ Daniel asserts that, because programs were facilitated at the local and county levels, the pervasiveness of racism in the USDA denied black farmers the same opportunities as white farmers, leading to their disproportionate “disappear[ance].”²⁴

Inequities in the agricultural history, brought to light by Daniel’s application of a racial lens, fit with research about the ways individuals and communities fought for social justice in foodways (thereby implementing the contemporary term “food justice”). In particular, scholars write about food—access to it, control of it, mastery over it—as an essential tool of the oppressed (and, conversely, the instrument of their oppression) in their struggle for autonomy. As this thesis evaluates changes in foodways throughout a period of intense strife (through the war period, as well as during time spent in holding centers), such themes are readily apparent in the Cambodian context.

²³ Pete Daniel, “African American Farmers and Civil Rights,” *The Journal of Southern History* 73, no. 1 (February 2007): 4. Daniel’s book-length work on this topic is *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

²⁴ Daniel, “African American Farmers and Civil Rights,” 3.

Both Elias and Ruis agree school lunch programs show that White society in the early twentieth century was in tune with evolving ideas about nutrition and its importance to health. The historian Laurie B. Green shows that such concerns did not always cross the color line. She finds that as late as the 1970s, a poor, African American community in South Memphis, Tennessee was inhabited by infants and children so malnourished that organized community workers had to carry them to the recently-founded St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Green argues this unusual encounter led to the formation of a formal collaboration that saved lives and ultimately changed both public policy and social discourse about the seriousness of malnutrition. Influenced by their work with members of the community, St. Jude doctors worked to recast malnutrition as the serious condition that it was, and in so doing, overturned existing, racist stereotypes about the failures of black motherhood. The War on Poverty's Office of Economic Opportunity funded a program for the poor citizens of Memphis that became a model for the later Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). By marshalling a coalition against the injustice of malnutrition, African American women resisted their second-class status and contributed to important policy change. Similar to impoverished Blacks in South Memphis, Cambodian refugees coming to the United States had different understandings of the nutritional value of foods, and also relied upon

social welfare, private or public, to feed themselves until such a time as they became more self-sufficient in their new, American contexts.²⁵

The historian Rachel L. Moran traces Obama-era efforts—to reframe food stamp programs as “economic stimulus” rather than “welfare”—to similar ideas about relief programs established during the New Deal.²⁶ She highlights competing visions of the state’s role in resolving food injustice and asks how differences in relief delivery impacted those who received it. For example, Moran argues the development of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s food stamp plan was the result of professional lobbying organizations and chain retailers protesting that bread line style relief programs hurt their bottom line by driving away potential customers. Compared to bread lines, Moran suggests food stamps were “*consumer-based*” programs that promised choice as well as decreased stigmatization for recipients. A final element of her argument is that, by camouflaging bread lines through a more discreet arrangement, and reconceptualizing recipients as consumers that need a little help, food stamps undermined the political exigency that poverty and hunger had previously commanded from politicians. Moran’s discussion of welfare programs is relevant to this study as Cambodians transitioned from a society where neither government welfare nor industrial consumerism played a role in their

²⁵ Laurie B. Green, “Saving Babies in Memphis: The Politics of Race, Health, and Hunger during the War on Poverty,” in *War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*, eds. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 133-134, ProQuest Ebrary. According to Green, high infant mortality rates among poor blacks had been assumed previously to be related to the immorality of the mothers (134).

²⁶ Rachel L. Moran, “Consuming Relief: Food Stamps and the New Welfare of the New Deal,” *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 1001, 1006-007,

subsistence to one which relied on both of those systems. Moran's work demonstrates how supplemental food programs have varied historically, and how changes to the program design affected users, suggesting that programs are not one-size-fits-all and would benefit from being tailored to suit participants.²⁷

In addition to scholarship on federal programs, food scholars also explore ways that individuals and communities relied on foodways to resist oppression and fight for social justice. African American and Africana Studies Professor Priscilla McCutcheon describes one reaction to the systemic injustice resulting from the lack of land as described by Pete Daniel. Black individuals—such as noted Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer—“acquired land as a means to grow food, but also grow the wealth of Black communities.”²⁸ Hamer's 640-acre cooperative farm benefited thousands of families who lived or farmed there, and monetarily supported students, high schools, and Black-owned businesses in the area. McCutcheon argues that farming represented an autonomous ideal for many southern Blacks who might have grown up on plantations, despite having endured harrowing, brutal experiences in such agrarian landscapes. McCutcheon's research on Hamer's efforts to achieve autonomy for African Americans through agriculture is echoed in this thesis, as many Cambodian refugees had, in Cambodia, led

²⁷ Moran, “Consuming Relief,” 1004, emphasis mine. Rather than suggesting whom the program favored, part of Moran's argument is that the food stamp plan was a signifier of the burgeoning consumer mentality.

²⁸ Priscilla McCutcheon, “Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farms and Black Agrarian Geographies,” *Antipod* 51, no. 1 (2019): 207.

lives that were intricately tied to agriculture, and many made efforts to grow foods in the U.S., even when circumstances worked against them.²⁹

Alongside these depictions of food as a for social justice in openly-racist circumstances, scholars also investigate systemic, racial inequity in the everyday access to healthy foods. Anthropology Professor Ashanté M. Reese writes a critical, racial analysis of foodways in her book *Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington D.C.* She identifies racial disparities in access to healthy foods based on field research conducted in the Deanwood neighborhood of Washington D.C. Using an ethnographic framework, Reese critiques conventional models of “food justice” commonly used by scholars to discuss contemporary issues in foodways, and encourages the application of the term “food apartheid” as particularly appropriate to describe the relationship that many Blacks endure in their relationships to supermarkets. The questions underlying her study are highly significant and outline the trajectory of food studies: how effective are terms like “food desert” and “food justice” in portraying the challenges faced by minority groups in the United States? As well, within these institutionalized, structural frameworks, from which vantage points can scholars observe expressions of agency from autonomous actors? Understanding the relationship that

²⁹ McCutcheon, “Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farms,” 208-210. McCutcheon also articulates a theoretical framework of Black Agrarian Geographies to argue that such agrarian spaces represented not just a utopian ideal, but also a site of historical trauma that dialectically informed the quotidian experience (210-211). Interestingly, the idea of a landscape operating with this duality has a corollary in Sirik Savina, *Everyday Experiences of Genocide Survivors in Landscapes of Violence in Cambodia*, Searching for the Truth: Memory & Justice (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2016).

minority populations have with supermarkets in the United States is an important component of understanding the foodways of Cambodian Americans.³⁰

Food scholars also show how people have adapted foods to new contexts. The historian Steven R. Hoffbeck's monograph, *The Haymakers: A Chronicle of Five Farm Families*, applies the concept of adaptation to technological development in agriculture, using diaries, photos, newspapers, and oral histories to recreate the sagas of five Minnesota families and their experiences. Hoffbeck finds continuity among the five tales—which, cumulatively, span a century's time—by interpreting each family's story through the lens of making hay. He argues that modernization for farmers often meant “harder work, less cash, and more debt,” ultimately observing the “cruel irony” that laborsaving methods could (both literally and figuratively) cost an arm and a leg, as new technologies proved incompatible with existing infrastructure, or industrial gains in efficiency proved only that a second field needed to be worked in order to compete with commercial operations.³¹ Hoffbeck's work plots a course of changes in family structure, showing how concepts of gender roles and childhood have changed alongside necessities of labor on the homestead. These concepts in Cambodian society differed from their Western counterparts for a variety of reasons, but demands of an agricultural lifestyle influenced Cambodians and Americans alike, and it seems likely that many of the U.S.-

³⁰ Ashanté Reese, *Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 3, 4-7. Reese's scholarship has been well received, though I do not find her arguments in this particular book compelling, e.g., her use of potentially nonrepresentative survey data (53-54) or her argument that the term “food desert” is racist (46).

³¹ Steven R. Hoffbeck, *The Haymakers: A Chronicle of Five Farm Families* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), 154.

bound, Cambodian refugees would have better understood and been better-understood-by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Americans than they were by those they met nearer to the turn of the next century.

Histories of immigrant communities in the United States, such as Valerie J. Matsumoto's *Farming the Home Place: A Japanese American Community in California, 1919-1982*, also touch on the ways that foodways both shaped and were shaped by contexts and material conditions. Matsumoto conducted extensive oral interviews among Japanese and Japanese Americans living in a rural county in central California to show active conversations between cultural "practices" and their environments. East Asian scholars are liable to recognize such firm-but-yielding thought patterns as effusive of the blend of religio-philosophical traditions fusing, among other systems, Daoism and Confucianism. Matsumoto shows how food acted as a status signifier among schoolchildren, providing examples of ethnic foods that second-generation Japanese Americans would never have brought to school (out of fear of being shamed by White peers) becoming foods that, a generation later, their children eagerly traded in school cafeterias. A central thesis is Matsumoto's claim that Japanese internment during World War II embiggened the rift between generations, as youth set aside their ethnic heritage to prove themselves loyal "Americans."³²

Whereas Matsumoto depicts change over a relatively narrow period of time, historian Jeffrey M. Pilcher writes about long-term transformations in the Mexican diet

³² Matsumoto, 179-80, 13, 159.

along with ties to national identity. In *¡Que vivan los tamales!*, Pilcher sketches the ancient food practices of the peoples inhabiting modern Mexico. He writes, “for thousands of years Indian women kneel[ed] for hours to grind up corn and pat[t]ed out tortillas.”³³ But Pilcher centers how these practices were disrupted by the encounter with Europeans, as well as social and political discourse about national identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His work tells the story of how “peasant food [was] raised to the high level of sophisticated art.”³⁴ My study mirrors Pilcher’s by applying his analytical framework to different contexts.

Donna Gabaccia takes a similar approach in *We Are What We Eat*, published the same year as Pilcher’s work on Mexican cuisine. Gabaccia turns her attention to the multifaceted “American” diet, and asks how it is that bagels can “sometimes be Jewish, sometimes be ‘New York,’ and sometimes be American,” even while being sold by Pakistanis in Houston to customers of varying ethnicity and nationality.³⁵ She plies this same question to ethnic foods of all varieties and shows that Americans tend to eat diets that blend the “foods of their ancestors with those of their many neighbors.”³⁶ This same kind of blending that Gabaccia observes among many ethnic communities similarly appears in my research on Cambodian Americans, who attempted to replicate traditional patterns but also, by choice or necessity, incorporated “American” foods into their diets.

³³ Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Que vivan los tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 10.

³⁴ Pilcher, *¡Que vivan los tamales!*, 25-28, 45-52, 5.

³⁵ Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

³⁶ Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 227.

Pilcher and Gabaccia's work is part of a surge of scholarship speaking to the adaption of immigrant foodways. A selection of that literature and a significant inspiration for my work is Hasia R. Diner's *Hungering for America*, in which Diner analyzes Italian, Irish, and Jewish food histories in the context of their respective migration to the United States. Diner writes about victuals spread across the dinner table in Italy and then in Italian-American homes, for example, and she also writes about the opening and operations of Italian-American delicatessens. Her central thesis is that hunger was a motivator that spurred substantial waves of immigration around the turn of the twentieth century.

She argues that widespread abundance in the United States "shaped the lure" that drew in migrants, as well as formed the structures in which migrants revised their foodways.³⁷ In addition to abundance, Diner also reveals how absence—particularly, the absence of culturally appropriate foods like Italian pastas, cheeses, and olive oils—compelled migrants to strike out as entrepreneurs to import or craft such delicacies for which they and their kinsmen were homesick. The dousing rods of abundance and absence offer cogent frameworks of analysis for interpreting how immigrants adapted to circumstances in the United States, and their potential applications to refugee contexts are readily apparent.³⁸

³⁷ Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish & Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 10, xvii.

³⁸ Diner, *Hungering for America*, 234, 65.

In this thesis, I similarly endeavor to write about the foods that graced Cambodian dinner tables (or the lack of dinner tables), as well as those that sustained Cambodian Americans in the United States, and I have also discussed institutional components that influenced how Cambodian Americans chose and choose to eat. The architecture of *Diner's* book serves as a practical model for my vision of the present research by sketching the foodways of the migrants' home country first and then describing adjustment to new American contexts.

This project emphasizes an examination of immigration, ethnicity, and food as applied to the Cambodian American context.³⁹ Cambodian Americans remain understudied.⁴⁰ Given the gap in the literature, this thesis is essential to forming a more nuanced understanding of the developments of Southeast Asian refugee communities inside the United States. It also emerges within a broader context of increasing attention paid to Cambodian Americans by scholars.⁴¹ Jonathan H. X. Lee, argues that the

³⁹ Migration and food studies is a particularly fertile subfield in the discipline, see, e.g., Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*; Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Que vivan los tamales!*; Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Andrew Coe, *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Krishnendu Ray, *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Yong Chen, "Food, Race, and Ethnicity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*, ed. Jeffrey M. Pilcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Oxford Reference Ebrary.

⁴⁰ Chia Youyee Vang, "Southeast Asian Americans," in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, eds. David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 97, Oxford Handbooks Online. Notwithstanding the dearth of the existing scholarship, a few promising works contemplate social components of Cambodian American life, see, e.g., Usha Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Daniel F. Detzner, *Elder Voices: Southeast Asian Families* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004); Chan, *Survivors*; Hein, *Ethnic Origins*; Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood, eds. *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁴¹ See, e.g., Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in*

inexorable trauma inflicted on Cambodians in the 1970s led to a general tendency among that population to withdraw from engaging with the past—and that this disconnect from history led to problems with identity formation among those refugees and their offspring. This research offers one site of recovery to restore that histo-cultural connection. By asking how Cambodian foodways evolved in American contexts, this research continues the work of scholars like Diner and Gabaccia. Moreover, by tracing continuing change through to the next generation of Cambodian Americans, the research reflects inquiries made by scholars across the field—what can the Cambodian American experience contribute to the discourses on food justice and the politics of food?⁴²

Sources and Chapters

This thesis is based on a variety of primary sources. During the course of this project, I worked with manuscript collections in university archives in Massachusetts. The proliferation of archival material in this part of the United States is no accident: Lowell, Massachusetts in particular is identified as a place where Southeast Asian refugees “built permanent communities.”⁴³ This status as an important enclave for Cambodians reminded me that, as a youth, my own family traveled to Lowell to visit the aunt and uncle would come to live with us, but who lived in Lowell for the better part of a decade. After I visited the city and accessed its archives, I shared details about my trip

Diaspora (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Cecilia M. Tsu, “Refugee Community Gardens and the Politics of Self-Help,” *Amerasia Journal* 47, no. 1 (September 2021): 96-111.

⁴² Lee, “Cambodian American Ethics of Identity,” 476-483.

⁴³ Chia Youyee Vang, “Southeast Asian Americans,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, eds. David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 96.

with my family; my uncle excitedly referred to Lowell as “my town,” and asked if I visited the Cambodian market just a few blocks away from the house where he’d lived. I did, and also had the opportunity to eat at several Cambodian restaurants he recognized as remnants from his time there nearly quarter-century ago.

The University of Massachusetts at Lowell’s Center for Lowell History maintains a Southeast Asian Archive that houses a myriad of photographs, but most exciting among the collections here was a collection of drawings and letters made by local Cambodian refugee schoolchildren. These pieces helped to color the varying paths that Cambodian refugees traveled, revealing the typical quickness with which children are able to react to new circumstances compared to their parents. The Khmer markets and restaurants in the Little Cambodia sector of Lowell were particularly rewarding places. In the latter, I tasted, for the first time in a restaurant, something shockingly similar to my mother’s home cooking, and heard the Khmer language—previously a feature of “the adults and guests” tables at parties—spoken casually, by strangers, in a public place.

Oral histories offer exciting opportunities to engage with the voices of Cambodian Americans. Mostly autobiographical, many collections of oral histories are digitized and are available to the public. These voices helped shape my understanding of the contexts Cambodians fled before finding asylum in the United States. They also reflect on the foodways of Cambodians in their native country. Further, these sources reveal some of the challenges faced by Cambodian refugees when they came to the United States. As with other memory sources, historians understand the need for circumspection when

working with oral histories, but their incorporation into the scholarship has substantial pedigree.⁴⁴ The Cambodian American Women and Youth Oral History Project, maintained by the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, contains interviews with Cambodian women and Cambodian American youth that cover topics ranging from “survival experiences” to “acculturation experiences” to “inter-generational relationships.”

Like Lowell the Special Collections & University Archives Research Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst also holds numerous collections that reflect the lives of Cambodian refugees, including photos, event programs, posters, and circulars from resettlement agencies. The collections at Amherst were surprisingly forthcoming, and I might have spent a year in the archive if I had no other commitments. It was here, paging through a disorganized box of papers, that I stumbled upon a newspaper clipping that featured a picture of my elder cousins as children, taken in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp; as far as my family can tell, the earliest photograph of them ever taken.

This research is also rooted in published primary sources, especially autobiographical books and anthropological fieldwork. These sources offer windows into the lives of Cambodian refugees both in their native countries and in their new environments in the United States. Official government to deal with the influx of refugees

⁴⁴ For a historiography of oral history as a practice in the field of Women’s History in the North American West, see Susan Armitage, “Here’s to the Women: Western Women Speak Up,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (September 1996): 551-59.

helps us to understand some of the underlying forces that directed the flow of resettlement.

Finally, cookbooks offer an “idealistic” view into the foodways of their subjects; while scholars accept that cookbooks usually represent something other than the actual quotidian dietary habits of their creators, their value as historical documents is well-established.⁴⁵ Additionally, as some of the Cambodian cookbooks used here were penned by refugee women, their personal commentary on Cambodian foods provided an additional resource for understanding the foodways of Cambodia in the prewar era.

There are a number of issues this thesis does not address. For one, I do not delve into the significance of mental health effects on eating habits given that given that they almost certainly knew somebody, personally, who was starving on the other side of the world.⁴⁶ Another omission is the impact that gang culture may have had in (most likely)

⁴⁵ Ken Albala, “Cookbooks as Historical Documents,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*, ed. Jeffrey M. Pilcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 229, Oxford Reference Ebrary; Anne Bower, ed. *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁴⁶ See Status Reports Folders, no box number, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records, Special Collections and University Archives, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA (hereinafter referred to as “Cambodian Crisis Committee Records”). Social stigmatization related to mental health has dramatically shifted in the US even in the last couple of decades, with the conversation becoming increasingly more acceptable; frankly, combined with the fact that Cambodians generally did not pursue mental health as a category of wellbeing, it is unsurprising that refugees did not receive sufficient help for their mental health upon coming to the US, even though Cambodian respondents to one early study conducted in San Diego ranked “war memories and departure from home” and “separation from family members” as their two foremost problems out of twenty (above even English language problems) in adjusting to life in the U.S. The trauma of starvation and scarcity may have imprinted a “survival mode” mentality; Ronnie Yimsut recalled hiding foods in the school cafeteria to take home, for example. Joan Criddle’s narrators observed that they set food aside on airplanes to share with others, only to have it trashed at the airport by customs agents. I remember from my childhood, my uncle bringing my siblings to a buffet-style restaurant and being adamant that we eat multiple plates of the most expensive foods. Pu Ma, for example, mentioned this about herself in an interview. See Paul J. Strand and

reinforcing particular cultural identities, probably including through the consumption of culturally appropriate foods. Many Cambodian American youths, particularly males, and especially those living in urban areas with dense populations, participate in gang culture for a variety of reasons, such as protection and mutual assistance.⁴⁷ A further absence is my lack of insight into the medicinal properties of foods, both in the standard “Western” sense and in the more esoteric sense: that that foods play a role in heating or cooling the body, which is not used conventionally in the United States.⁴⁸ Lastly, and most significantly, I am not writing about the relatively small number of refugees who arrived from Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, many of whom, as compared to Cambodians

Woodrow Jones Jr., *Indochinese Refugees in America: Problems of Adaptation and Assimilation*, Duke Press Policy Studies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 134-35; Ronnie Yimsut, *Facing the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Journey* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 147, ProQuest Ebrary; Joan D. Criddle, *Bamboo & Butterflies: From Refugee to Citizen* (Auke Bay, AK.: East/West Bridge Publishing House, 1992), 17, 94. See also “Pu Ma: A Welfare Mother,” *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, ed. Usha Welaratna (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 115.

⁴⁷ Chan, *Survivors*, 217-226. See also Vichet Chhuon, “‘I’m Khmer and I’m not a Gangster!’: the Problematization of Cambodian Male Youth in US Schools,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 27, no. 2 (2014): 233-250. Intuitively, I am sympathetic towards Russel Jeung’s argument that perpetuation of cultural patterns among youth—gangsters included—are at least as symbolic as they are substantive. That is to say, although the expression of culture is important, its performance is more of a mimicry than a replication with deep understanding. See Russel Jeung, “Southeast Asians in the House: Multiple Layers of Identity,” in *Contemporary Asian American Communities: Intersections and Divergences*, eds. Linda Trinh Vo and Rick Bonus (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 60-74; see also the cookout in “Cambodian Bloods in Lowell, MA [Ft. East Movement],” China Mac TV, September 30, 2021, YouTube, 04:38-13:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtBx7KxdBbg>; cf. Sody Lay, “Lost in the Fray: Cambodian American Youth in Providence, Rhode Island,” in *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity*, eds. Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (New York: Routledge University Press, 2004), 228-29. See also Xiaojian Zhao, “The Study of Asian American Families,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, 286.

⁴⁸ Cambodian American Narin Seng Jameson briefly discusses the benefits of certain foods and alludes to the heating and cooling properties; anthropologist Lucie Germer reproduces highlights from a discussion (with Cambodian refugees in Utah) about healing and cooling properties in her dissertation. See Narin Seng Jameson, *Cooking the Cambodian Way: The Intertwined Story of Cooking and Culture in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Narin Seng Jameson, 2010), 6; Lucie Germer, “The Food Their Families Eat: Cuisine as Communication Among Cambodian Refugees” (PhD diss., University of Utah, 1986), 165-67.

who arrived later, came from backgrounds of higher education and status and having more experience with modernity and entrepreneurialism.⁴⁹ It is not my intention to deny anyone's Cambodian identity, or to devalue their or their family's journey; I have only been selective in my own way in order to elevate particular voices that are more absent in the literature, and which are of more interest to me on account of my family.

This thesis has five chronological chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The approach mirrors the existing literature related to Cambodian refugee resettlement patterns: there are the “pre-war” years, the “war” years, and the “post-war” years. In this case, the pre-war and the war years are presented as one chapter, with the subsequent chapters dedicated to the post-war period in holding centers, and then ultimately in the United States. In chapter one, I outline the ancient history of Khmer people to include the rich history of Cambodia and highlight cultural features that fed its foodways. Other topics covered include the emergence of the Cambodian kingdom and early agricultural practices, cultural development including Indianization, the Angkorean civilization and

⁴⁹ Among these migrants was the famous “Donut King,” Bun Tek Ngoy, who has been credited with creating a small empire of donut shops in California. As has been noted by Aihwa Ong, an underemphasized aspect of Ngoy's story is that he is an ethnically Chinese Cambodian. This fact gives Ngoy a distinctive cultural background compared to ethnic Khmers, as Sino-Cambodians often operated as entrepreneurs in prewar Cambodian society. Sucheng Chan observes that as many as two-thirds of Cambodian businesses located in Southern California are run by ethnic-Chinese Cambodians, and as many as eighty-five percent in the greater Boston area—despite making up only six percent of the Cambodian population in the latter locale. See David S. North, Lawrence S. Lewin, and Jennifer R. Wagner, *Kaleidoscope: The Resettlement of Refugees in the United States by Voluntary Agencies*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: New TransCentury Foundation, Lewin and Associates, and National Opinion Research Center, 1982), 5; Chan, *Survivors*, 93, 149-50; Alice Gu, dir., *The Donut King* (Los Angeles, CA: Logan Industry, 2020); Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 208-210, ProQuest Ebrary; Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 128, ProQuest Ebrary.

the period that followed, French colonialism and urban reform, alongside the traditional, rural, the traditional, agricultural lifeways, their use of food a mode of exchange, and traditional gender roles associated with food.

Chapter two details the cataclysm of the Democratic Kampuchea government. In this chapter, I explore how Cambodians experienced food after the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975. This retelling of the autogenocide centers the discussion of how and what Cambodians ate in order to survive the Khmer Rouge regime. The hunger and starvation of Cambodians in the second half of the 1970s is not ignored in the literature, but I present it in partial isolation from the violence associated with the killing fields to highlight the centrality of food to the experience under Pol Pot.

In chapter three, I analyze the holding centers along the Cambodian-Thai border, where Cambodians encountered an outpouring of international aid. Although not all inhabitants of the camps ultimately resettled in countries of third asylum like the United States, the camps served as a partial bridge to the societies in which Cambodians would eventually find themselves. The Thai government and the United Nations, along with a bevy of international volunteer agencies, distributed foods to the Cambodian people, restoring some semblance of normalcy to a people who had been ravaged by war, and sponsored “cultural orientation” programs to acclimate Cambodian refugees experiences they could anticipate upon resettlement.

Chapter four describes this resettlement in the United States, with attention to international and domestic policies as well as ecclesiastical efforts to accommodate the

flow of refugees. This chapter illustrates some of the challenges Cambodians navigated in the United States in adapting their foodways to the American context, as they transitioned from a self-sufficient, agrarian lifestyle and towards U.S. consumerism, including their use of relief programs. This chapter, as well as the next, begins to examine how youngsters, following acculturation and assimilation trends evident among other immigrant and refugee groups, developed along separate paths from their parents.

Chapter five reevaluates the diasporic Cambodian community in the United States. It discusses how Cambodian Americans have (and have not) changed their diets, exploring the circumstances through which they obtain their foods, their preparation (cooking) methods, their kitchens, as well as other habits associated with foodways. In brief, it will discuss the “Americanization” of diasporic Cambodians. It will also touch on alarming medical research indicating that Cambodian American communities suffer from disproportionately high rates of diabetes, a topic connected to socio-anthropological components of the food studies discipline.

Chapter 1

A traditional Khmer proverb says: “Don’t reject the crooked road and don’t take the straight one; instead, take the road traveled by the ancestors.” A problem for U.S. readers, however, is knowing which roads have been “traveled by the ancestors.” Cambodian history in the United States almost exclusively begins and ends with Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and the anti-war movement. But a look into Cambodia’s history is necessary to establish historical context for this work and to reclaim lost history. To start, let’s dispel a common misconception. In the mid-nineteenth century, Henri Mouhot, a French naturalist and traveler who toured Southeast Asia, reported that, in Cambodia, he observed “ruins of such grandeur (...) temples [to] rival that of Solomon, and erected by some ancient Michael Angelo [sic] (...) grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome. He was, of course, talking about Angkor Wat. Mouhot went on to state that, beyond fantastic oral traditions that the temple had been constructed by “giants,” a “leprous king,” or some divine figure, the Cambodian people were not sensitive to the historical connection they had with the temple.⁵⁰

A century later, historians like David J. Steinberg accepted Mouhot’s account as an indicator of broader historical fact.⁵¹ More recent scholarship, however, indicates that, since its construction in the twelfth century, Angkor Wat has always been “an important

⁵⁰ Karen Fisher-Nguyen, “Khmer Proverbs: Images and Rules,” in *Cambodian Culture Since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, eds. May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 97; Henri Mouhot, *Travels in the Central Parts of Indo-china (Siam), Cambodia, and Laos, During the Years 1858, 1859, and 1860*, vol. 1 (London: 1864), 276-79, Archive.org.

⁵¹ David J. Steinberg, *Cambodia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture*, rev. for 1959 by Herbert H. Vreeland, Survey of World Cultures (New Haven: Hraf Press, 1959), 8.

pilgrimage site,” or—running counter to the theory that it had been completely abandoned when the French “rediscovered” it—it had always been occupied as a Buddhist monastery.⁵² Although it is not true that French explorers encountered something in the Cambodian forests that had been totally lost, the scholar Ian Mabbett gives the following characterization of earlier periods of Cambodian History: “the misremembered Cambodia of centuries long past, whose history was lost, and which was built by the gods.”⁵³ Misremembered and lost is an inaccurate description of Angkor Wat but may be more accurate related to other aspects of Cambodian history. As Milton Osborne points out, the Western paradigms of history—classical, antiquity, medieval, and so on—do not translate gracefully onto the Cambodian past. Instead, the historian David Chandler proposes six distinguishable shifts: a period of prehistory, followed by the emergence of Indianized polities, which eventually consolidated into a dominant regional state power that, while remaining integral, experienced at least two significant transformations before collapsing, after which there was a period of regional vassalage

⁵² M. C. Ricklefs, Bruce Lockhart, Albert Lau, Portia Reyes, and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *A New History of Southeast Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 40-45; David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 42, Archive.org, unpaginated electronic version, page numbers refer to digital navigation of the file via Zotero version 6.0.23.

⁵³ Ian Mabbett, and David Chandler, *The Khmers*, *The Peoples of South-East Asia and the Pacific*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996), 2. Michael Vickery criticizes *The Khmers* on a number of points, and the authors offer a riposte. Vickery alleges that Mabbett and Chandler privilege accessibility above scholarly rigor; in their reply, the authors demonstrate that at least a few of Vickery’s allegations are specious. While Mabbett and Chandler concede they may have over-simplified certain issues in the historiography, they argue their conclusions were carefully considered, rather than, as Vickery seems to imply, stumbled upon in any slipshod sort of way. See Michael Vickery, “What to Do about ‘The Khmers,’” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27, no. 2 (September 1996): 389-404; Ian W. Mabbett and David P. Chandler, “Response to Dr. Michael Vickery’s Review of ‘The Khmers.’ (Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, September 1996, 389-404),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (September 1997): 389-391. As this section only broadly depicts the classical background, I have elected to include *The Khmers* alongside other scholarly sources.

that lasted until the establishment of the French Protectorate. I sketch this history to emphasize what we can know about the development of Khmer foodways.⁵⁴

Early records indicate the Khmer ethnic group migrated along the Mekong River into Southeast Asia sometime around the third century BCE, either from southwestern China or northeastern India. Although we can say very little about the day-to-day experiences of Khmers during this era, we can be confident that fish was a regular part of their diet. Archaeologists have unearthed artifacts at sites along the Tonle Sap River, and have identified fish hooks and weights used for nets, as well as the remnants of turtles and shellfish. Chandler suggests that the Khmer lived with domesticated animals including pigs, water buffalo, and dogs.⁵⁵

Regional geography provided an anvil against which Khmer people shaped themselves. The scarcity of grasslands quashed the opportunity for the emergence of a pastoral tradition, diminishing the importance of dairy products and animal flesh. Seasonal floods carved out a tentative division between upland and lowland people, regulated by the occupation of lands that were either submerged or remained dry, which determined the range of available living patterns. The Khmer practiced swidden agriculture, and cultivated and harvested varieties of rice, millet, and tubers. These practices may have developed locally, or they may have been introduced through

⁵⁴ Milton Osborne, *Southeast Asia: An Illustrated History*, 5th ed. (North Sydney, AU: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 16; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 13-15.

⁵⁵ D. R. SarDesai, *Southeast Asia: Past & Present*, 5th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003), 11. Carbon dating finds that pot-making peoples occupied a cave in what is today western Cambodia by 4200 BCE, but we can say very little about them; see Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 21-22; Mabbett and Chandler, *The Khmers*, 50.

interaction with the inhabitants of southern China. In addition to a limited culture of agriculture, the Khmer practiced hunting, fishing, and foraging, and the land was ripe with wild cereals, game, fruits, nuts, and fowl.⁵⁶

For the cultivation of rice, there are “wet-rice” practices and “dry.” Wet-rice farming involves flooding rice paddies (fields) during part of the growing season, which ties people to a specific location on account of the necessary irrigation infrastructure; it also demands intensive labor. Consequently, historian Mary Heidhues writes that with wet-rice practices, “control of people becomes as important as control of land.”⁵⁷

Swidden agriculture, also known as slash-and-burn, requires lower orders of organization. Mabbett and Chandler argue that wet-rice farming probably came before the alternative in Cambodia, though not necessarily at scale; rather, Cambodians practiced primitive irrigation and selectively weeded naturally-growing wild rice that grew in flood of swamp water. Irrespective of “wet” or “dry,” Khmer people of the period did not need to settle into large, sedentary communities, and instead preferred simple dwellings that could be left behind as needed, though “fortified villages” may have been occupied starting after 1000 BCE.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Kenneth R. Hall, “Economic History of Early Southeast Asia,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 1, *From Early Times to c. 1800*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 187-88; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* 22; Mabbett and Chandler, *The Khmers*, 46-51; Peter Bellwood, “Southeast Asia Before History,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, 90-91.

⁵⁷ Mary S. Heidhues, *Southeast Asia: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 35. Chandler echoes the assertion: “people, rather than land per se, are needed to cultivate wet rice.” Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 29.

⁵⁸ Mabbett and Chandler, *The Khmers*, 46-47; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 22.

Somewhere near the turn of the millennium, the Khmer people underwent a process of Indianization, not as the result of conquest, but as cultural transfusion probably due to Cambodian rulers looking to elevate their own prestige. Even after Indianization, however, many traditional ways of life endured, such as the absence of a dairy culture and the use of a barter system. Cambodians adopted a variety of cultural practices from their Indian neighbors, although such changes were more impactful at the elite level of society, and diffused only to a lesser extent to rice-farming Khmer peasants. This process led to the development of language, religion, politics, science, and foodways in Cambodia, influenced by India.⁵⁹

An archaeological site called Óc-Eo, near the border between present-day Vietnam and Cambodia, offers evidence that a major trading depot, Funan, operated along the coast, and one scholar describes Funan as “the most important maritime intermediary in the Sino-Indian trade.”⁶⁰ In the fourth or fifth centuries, the “Funanese” developed more sophisticated agricultural practices and implemented wet-rice technology at limited scale; a low population density meant that the majority of the area’s inhabitants likely continued cultivating dry rice. By the seventh and eight centuries, Funan fades

⁵⁹ Ricklefs, et al., *A New History of Southeast Asia*, 20-23, 40-45; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 23-26, 32-33; Heidhues, *Southeast Asia*, 22-23; Milton Osborne, *Southeast Asia: An Illustrated Introductory History*, 5th ed. (North Sydney, AU: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 20-22; Mabbett and Chandler, *The Khmers*, 52-65; Judith M. Jacob, *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia: A Preliminary Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15; Fisher-Nguyen, “Khmer Proverbs: Images and Rules,” 92. Scholars consider whether Indianization would be better classified as “Sanskritization” or “Hinduization.”

⁶⁰ SarDesai, *Southeast Asia*, 24; Ricklefs, et al., *A New History of Southeast Asia*, 29. The entrepot was so connected that third- and fourth-century Roman coins have been uncovered at the site. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 26.

from the historical record, replaced by Chenla, which emerged from smaller polities that gradually consolidated, accompanied by population increases that enabled to flourish a more thorough implementation of wet-rice agriculture.⁶¹

Beginning in the ninth century—and lasting midway through the first half of the fifteenth—the Angkorean civilization is typically viewed as the zenith of Khmer civilization. King Jayavarman II established the kingdom by decree, participating in a ritual that enthroned him as a “universal monarch.” During this six-centuries-long period, Angkor, at times, eclipsed all rivals in Southeast Asia. King Suryavarman II, who ruled during the twelfth century, commissioned the construction of what is today called Angkor Wat. Part of the success of the Angkorean Empire flowed from agricultural public works. The cosmological purpose of the Cambodian kingship has historically been linked to serving as an earthly stand-in for an ancestral spirit connected to rain and to fertilization of the soil.⁶²

A significant turn in historical continuity occurred in the twelfth century. King Jayavarman VII, who practiced Buddhism (unlike his predecessors, who practiced Hinduism), built public works, including the establishment of hospitals, rest houses along major roads, and, like other Khmer kings, a large water reservoir; these projects

⁶¹ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 29-31, 54, 40-41; Mabbett and Chandler, *The Khmers*, 79-81; Keith W. Taylor, “The Early Kingdoms,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, 158-59.

⁶² Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 42-63. The extensive practice of the kings of Angkor to command the development of hydraulic works has been written about by historian Steven Mithen. Steven Mithen, “The Hydraulic City: Water Management by the Kings of Angkor, AD 802-1327,” in *Thirst: Water and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 176-199, ProQuest Ebrary.

demanded mass mobilization. Although the exact processes which framed its happening are unknown, during the centuries following the reign of Jayavarman VII, the people of Cambodia converted to *Therevada* Buddhism, which had also become popular elsewhere in the region.⁶³

One particularly fascinating account of the late Angkor period comes from Chinese traveler Zhou Dagan, who sailed to Cambodia from the port of Mingzhou in 1295. His account provides insight into the culture, tradition, and foodways of the Khmer near the close of the thirteenth century.⁶⁴ Zhou observed that Buddhist monks ate just one meal a day, that meal being collected from the homes of almsgivers, and made no qualms about consuming fish or other animal flesh, though the monks did not drink alcohol. The monks also made offerings of food to the Buddha, including burning new rice. On the occasion of a death, Zhou observed the practice of a funerary procession in which, along with other accoutrements of a parade, fried rice was tossed on the route along which the body of the deceased would be taken on the way outside of town.⁶⁵ Whether through religious offerings or funeral traditions, for Cambodian people in the thirteenth century, food was essential in satisfying their spiritual devotion. In contrast with Buddhists,

⁶³ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 71-85. Theravada Buddhism is a sort of conservative doctrine that rejects advents in theology accepted by Mahayana traditions. "Mahayana" is an umbrella term used to cover a loose consortium of schools that can be radically contradictory; the uniting principle is, when compared with Theravada Buddhism, a broader incorporation of the laity. Mahayana literally means "greater vehicle," suggesting that the path to enlightenment, outlined by their precepts, has been made more inclusive and accessible. See Carl Olson, *The Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 143-149, ProQuest Ebrary.

⁶⁴ Peter Harris, "Introduction," in Zhou Dagan, *A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People* [ca. 1300], trans. by Peter Harris, 1, 28-30; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 85-86.

⁶⁵ Zhou, *A Record of Cambodia*, 53, 63-67.

however, Zhou recorded that Hindus, called *baiswei*, and far fewer in number, neither accepted foods from the lay people nor made offerings to an idol.⁶⁶

In terms of agriculture, according to Zhou's account, owing to the tropical climate, crops in Angkor were harvested as often as four times per year. The monsoon season, which causes the Tonle Sap Lake to flood, dictated the pace of life for those who lived in the vicinity, and those who lived along its banks kept a yearly rhythm that included relocating. As the flood abated, families determined when and where to sow their seeds and worked the land by hand (not relying on beasts of burden). Unlike Zhou's Chinese, Cambodians did not use any kind of manure for fertilizer, finding it to be "unclean," a difference of opinion that was a matter of contention between the Cambodians and the ethnic Chinese who came to live in the area.⁶⁷ Women carried out trade from the early morning through midday at a wet market; small purchases were paid for with foods—namely, rice or other grains—or with Chinese goods; bigger purchases involved the exchange of textiles. They paid for large transactions in gold and silver. Zhou counted iron pots and copper dishes, as well as beans and wheat, among the items that commanded a substantial value in the market.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Zhou, 53. Peter Harris notes in his translation that Zhou, demonstrating his familiarity with Chinese, uses language that misidentifies Hindus as Daoists and scholars as Confucians (*ru zhe*), while correctly identifying Buddhists. Peter Harris, "Notes," in Zhou, *A Record of Cambodia*, 104.

⁶⁷ Zhou, 67-68.

⁶⁸ Zhou, 71, 70; Peter Harris, "Notes," 120.

Zhou recorded an exciting list of some of the fruits, vegetables, and animal life he encountered on his travels.⁶⁹ Although Zhou is not explicit about the comestible viability of each animal for which he has given an account, there are some inferences that seem fair to make. For instance, Zhou writes about chickens ducks, cows, horses, pigs, and goats separately from other animals, and introduces their inclusion with the preposition “of course,” and I think it reasonable to suspect that these animals served as domesticated livestock during that time. Zhou specifically mentions that cows, crabs, and frogs were not eaten.⁷⁰ He consumed razor clams. He also discusses shellfish suggesting Cambodians likely ate clams, mud clams, pond snails, and other shellfish. The many varieties of fish were consumed as-is or processed for fish sauce or *prahok*.

⁶⁹ For fruits, Cambodia had “pomegranates, sugarcane, lotus flowers, lotus roots, Chinese gooseberries, and bananas. (...) lychees and oranges,” but not “peaches, plums, apricots, flowering apricots, pines, cypresses, firs, junipers, pears, jujubes, poplars, willows, cassias, orchis, chrysanthemums, and angelica.” For vegetables, they had “onions, mustard, chives, eggplants, watermelons, winter gourds, snake gourds, and amaranth (...) and many kinds of vegetables that grow in water,” but not “radishes, lettuce, chicory, or spinach.” For birds Cambodia had “peacocks, kingfishers, and parrots (...) vultures, crows, egrets, sparrows, great cormorants, storks, cranes, wild ducks, siskins, etc.,” but not “magpies, wild geese, orioles, cuckoos, swallows, or pigeons.” For other animals, Cambodia had “rhinos, elephants, wild buffalo, and mountain horses (...) tigers, leopards, different kinds of bear, wild boar, elk, deer, water deer, muntjaks, apes, foxes, and gibbons. (...) And of course there are chickens, ducks, cows, horses, pigs, and goats.” Of freshwater fish, Cambodia had “black carp (...) common carp, goldfish, and grass carp[,] (...) gudgeons, [and] very many fish whose names [Zhou] [didn’t] know, all of them coming from the Freshwater Sea [the Tonle Sap].” Of saltwater fish and other aquatic creatures, Cambodia had “every different kind (...) also swamp eels and the freshwater eels from the lakes[;] the local people do not eat frogs (...) [t]here are giant soft-shell turtles and alligators as big as large pillars. The turtles are served up offal and all. Prawns from Zhanan weigh a pound a half or more each. The goose-necked barnacles from Zhenpu may be eight or nine inches long. There are crocodiles as big as boats. (...) The razor clams look very fine and are very crisp-tasting. They get clams, mud clams, and pond snails by just scooping them out of the Freshwater Sea. The only things that I did not see were crabs. They do have crabs, I believe, but people don’t eat them.” Zhou, *A Record of Cambodia*, 71-74.

⁷⁰ I surmise, as does Harris, that the special status of cows could be indicative of an artifact from the Hindu tradition, widely practiced among Cambodians prior to the rise of Buddhism. Harris, “Notes;” Zhou, *A Record of Cambodia*, 121.

Zhou also identified five varieties of alcohol—a honey wine, a rice wine, a sugar wine, and a palm wine—and a drink made from the *pengyasi* leaf, not yet identified by modern scholars. Wine was often served from pewter pots, although a clay pot would substitute among the poor, and among the rich, gold or silver. The production of alcohol from honey, palm, and sugar cane identifies three more ingredients that locals could use as part of their diets. According to Zhou, the people of Cambodia procured salt by heating seawater. He also observed no practice of producing or using vinegar, though noted that tamarind was sufficient for infusing foods with a sour taste. Angkoreans did not know how to make soy sauce—which is understandable since they produced neither the wheat nor the soybeans needed to make it. By the time of Zhou’s expedition, soy sauce had been in use in China for more than a thousand years. Yet, he claims Angkoreans “[had] never made a fermenting agent,” an additional barrier to making soy sauce. Still, between the Sino-Indian trade route that flourished during the first millennium CE, and the Cambodian kingdoms’ proximity to Sinicized Vietnam, it seems reasonable that the cuisine of the Khmer court imported soy sauce for use among elites.⁷¹

In terms of the physical components of eating, Zhou wrote that commoners had houses, but no furniture inside. They used earthenware pots were to cook rice and make sauces; stones raised around a fire served as a heating element; and the people used palm leaves or pieces of a coconut husk as spoons. He observed the use of earthenware and

⁷¹ Zhou, 75, 77; “Soy Sauce,” in Alan Davidson and Tom Jaine, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Food*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), Oxford Reference Ebrary.

copperware for dishes, as well as small bowls made from tree leaves, which could hold liquids without spilling. He also noted Cambodians ate rice with their right hands; since the rice would stick to the hand, they kept a container of water nearby to dip their hands in to remove the rice. The practice of using the right hand was associated with reserving the right hand for food consumption, while the left was used for hygienic maintenance following the use of the lavatory. Finally, though of considerable importance given how integral rice was to the society, Zhou recorded that Cambodians did not husk their rice using millstones, but just mortar and pestle.⁷²

The Angkorean civilization declined by the mid fifteenth century, and regional power shifted in favor of rival, neighboring states, such as Thailand and Vietnam.⁷³ In the first half of the nineteenth century, Vietnamese Emperor Minh Mang viewed Cambodia as a backwards state in need of guidance. Minh criticized the Khmer for their subsistence-based agricultural practices: “I have heard (...) the land is plentiful and fertile, and that there are plenty of oxen (...) but the people have no knowledge of [advanced] agriculture, using picks and hoes, rather than oxen. They grow enough rice for two meals a day, but they don’t store any surplus.”⁷⁴ Despite the unbridled opulence

⁷² Zhou, *A Record of Cambodia*, 76-77, 68.

⁷³ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 95, 96, 115-16; Osborne, *Southeast Asia*, 69-71; John Tully, *France on the Mekong: A History of the Protectorate in Cambodia, 1863-1953* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), xxi.

⁷⁴ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 152. When anthropologist May Ebihara conducted field research in a relatively rural Cambodian village (population 800), Svay, between 1959 and 1960, she found that farmers used oxen as draft animals to pull a plow, although poorer families would not have been able to afford such a luxury. In Ruth Tooze’s book about her experiences in Cambodia around the same time as Ebihara, she features a photograph of a Cambodian farmer driving two water buffalo who are pulling a wooden plow. These accounts suggest that the practice of hitching cattle to pull a plow had not become ubiquitous, per se, but certainly pervasive. Notably, Ebihara found that these animals “receive[d] better

of the Cambodian monarch, much of the Cambodian kingdom existed in the nineteenth century at a subsistence level.⁷⁵

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Cambodian kingdom was a part of a burgeoning French empire in Southeast Asia. When the French arrived, the state organization was such that all land was “owned” by the king, and working a piece of land was the necessary claim that one could make in establishing a right to use, with any lands left unused for more than three years subject to being claimed by anyone willing to work them.⁷⁶ Norodom I derailed reforms proposed by the French, including their plan to introduce a system of private property.⁷⁷ More than forty years after the arrival of the French, when Norodom I died in 1904, as John Tully notes, “most of traditional Khmer society remained intact.”⁷⁸ Although Norodom stymied French legislative theory on Cambodian society, he was a noted Francophile and had a French chef to oversee the royal kitchen—a practice probably emulated by other elites. French influences penetrated

care than any other domestic animals”; for example, when the oxen were worked in the fields, they were frequently rested, and “always thoroughly bathed and rubbed down after any labors on a hot day.” To have proliferated to the extent that it had by 1960, we can surmise Cambodians likely accepted the practice, at the latest, in the previous generation. May Mayko Ebihara, *Svay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia* [1968], ed. by Andrew Mertha and with an intro. by Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 131, 8-9, 101; Ruth Tooze, *Cambodia: Land of Contrasts* (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), 16.

⁷⁵ Tully, *France on the Mekong*, 64.

⁷⁶ Tully, 36.

⁷⁷ Norodom’s success caused the French governor, Charles Thomson, to storm the royal palace in 1883, whereupon he forced Norodom I to sign a treaty that effectively gave the French colonial authorities *carte blanche*; yet subsequent reforms pushed through by the French were met by military rebellion in 1885. Tully, 59, 70-71, 74-75, 83-93.

⁷⁸ Tully, 121. Although the peasant class proved highly resistant to the “advances” of the West, ground was certainly gained among elite society. The French began a process under Norodom I that unfurled across the lifetimes three Cambodian kings, resulting in, as Penny Edwards has put it, the propagation of “a secular literati (...) [that] mirrored the gradual consolidation of a bureaucratic apparatus linked to the concept of a nation-state as opposed to individual dynasties.” Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 91-94.

into Cambodian foodways through elite society. By the time Milton Osborne traveled to Phnom Penh in the 1960s, the French-style baguette had a staple of Cambodian food in the capital city. My uncle, who lived on the outskirts of the city, recalled that one could buy bread all over, which they might eat with sweetened condensed milk, or with onions, fish, and soy sauce. As my aunt recalled, if one lived near the city and went to visit friends or family in more rural areas, they sometimes brought loaves of bread as gifts, as the rural population did not have access to bread.⁷⁹

The French installed Norodom's half-brother, Sisowath, to the Cambodian throne, where he gained a reputation as a French puppet, and meted out reforms to the legal code that began (at least in theory) to transition Cambodia away from their traditional systems and towards Western practices, including the privatization of land. They attempted to improve sanitation, access to potable water, and education, although these programs largely failed. Under the French, the first Cambodian rice mills began operating in 1917, and modern, scientific agricultural techniques were introduced, although some heavy machinery, like tractors, were unfit for use with the irregularities of most rice paddies. Additionally, many peasants remained skeptical about the use of fertilizer. One anecdote found that, in the 1950s, when an American aid worker demonstrated how farmers could realize a one hundred percent increase on the yield of their rice crop, they found that the implementation of the technology was accompanied by peasants reducing the acreage of

⁷⁹ Tully, *France on the Mekong*, 60-61; Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, 7; Chin Sakhan and Bun Thon, interview by author, January 1, 2023, transcript, 26-27.

their farms. Such an action signaled the disparity between the goals of capitalist, Western accumulators, and the traditional, subsistence agriculture practiced by many Cambodian peasants.⁸⁰

Land reforms enacted by the puppet government did not necessarily convert popular understanding of the tiller's right to the land. When a French company tried to open a rubber plantation in eastern Cambodia, they encountered a tribe of traditional swidden farmers still working the land; after arbitration, the Phnom Penh government ruled in favor of the French business, but required that the tribe be remunerated by the company for their losses. Similarly, many Cambodians refused to leave their villages to work on French plantations for wage labor; consequently, the plantations were worked largely by imported Tonkinese.⁸¹

Even after France's surrender to Germany in the Second World War, Vichy-French colonial officials retained much of their influence in Indochina, including Cambodia, despite the presence of eight-thousand Japanese troops in Cambodia by the time of Sihanouk's coronation in 1941. Official Japanese policy for Southeast Asia was to strive for economic self-sufficiency among their occupying forces while allowing the

⁸⁰ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 183-88, 236; Tully, *France on the Mekong*, 135-47, 215-18, 220, 227, 257. It would be misleading to portray Cambodian peasants as somehow totally passive, subservient, or hapless. As Chandler shows, in 1916, as many as one-hundred thousand peasants (cumulatively) marched to Phnom Penh and voiced their displeasure directly to King Sisowath, sometimes in groups as numerous as three thousand, in the so-called "1916 Affair." In 1925, a high-ranking colonial official, Felix Louis Bardez, along with a small company of his men, were beaten to death by a crowd of villagers in Krang Laav, after Bardez threatened to jail taxpayers who were in arrears, and left several such taxpayers in handcuffs while leisurely taking his own lunch in a show of power.

⁸¹ Tully, *France on the Mekong*, 313-14.

existing governmental structures to operate as usual—except that they should divert strategic resources to Japan. Given such insularism and strategic nature of the occupation, it seems unlikely that the Japanese occupiers introduced their cuisine to the local population. On March 9, 1945, Japanese forces disarmed and deposed French officials, and that summer, street names in Phnom Penh that honored French colonial officials received new names honoring Cambodians—but French officials reverted these changes in 1946 as they reasserted tenuous control over their holdings in Southeast Asia. In the context of global decolonization and French failures in Vietnam, in 1954, French officials capitulated to the demands of a campaign for Cambodian Independence led by King Norodom Sihanouk.⁸²

Census statistics from 1962, gathered in compliance with international standards of the time, placed the population of Phnom Penh at just over four hundred thousand. In 1962, census estimates suggest that approximately ninety percent of the population still lived rurally. That number would change dramatically through the late 1960s and first half of the 1970s, as the escalating civil war and U.S. bombing contributed to as many as two million refugees heading for the shelter of the capital city.⁸³ Based on field research conducted for her dissertation, May Ebihara, an American anthropologist, produced an indispensable snapshot of a small Cambodian village—Svay—around the late 1950s and

⁸² Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 196-206, 221; Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, 114-18; W. G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism, 1894-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 234-35, ProQuest Ebrary.

⁸³ Margaret Slocomb, *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2010), 86, 143-44, ProQuest Ebrary; Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, 126.

early 1960s. Crucial in Ebihara's record is her instructive depiction of dietary aspects of foodways and a kind of annual "cycle of rice" lived by rural Cambodians, the latter of which "determine[s] much of the rhythm of village life" for the much of the year.⁸⁴

Svay presents an important snapshot into rural Cambodian life. Starting in May, when signs appear of the impending rainy season, the villagers used simple tools to build or repair fences and dikes around their paddies. They built these structures to control the movement of cattle and water, but villagers also used fish traps in the flooded fields to supplement their diet. In some cases, they fertilized the soil by burning weeds and spreading ash or with cattle manure. They started small rice paddies close to the village. After rain dampened the soil enough that it yielded to the villagers' efforts, the inhabitants of Svay used oxen to make shallow burrows because not far below the topsoil is a relatively infertile layer of clay. If a family did not own a pair of oxen, they shared with or borrowed from a neighbor. They saved rice from the previous year's harvest to resow their paddies or borrowed or purchased seed. Before sowing the seeds, they baked the rice in the sun, then left it to germinate in water, then dried it once again. Then, the women spread handfuls of rice along the nursery beds. They drained the paddy until the rice took root at which point they flooded the fields once again.⁸⁵

The most intense phase of the work took place in late June when the rice was ready to be transplanted to other paddies. The village men plowed, harrowed, and

⁸⁴ Ebihara, *Svay*, 100, 6-7.

⁸⁵ Ebihara, 100-05

repaired the new fields to transplant the seedlings. They worked in the mornings and late in the afternoons to avoid the intense heat and humidity of the midday sun. They worked cooperatively to meet the narrow window determined by the status of the seedlings and weather conditions. The men work in the fields while the women pulled seedlings from the nursery, tying them into bundles, drying them overnight, and cutting off several inches from their tops as food for the oxen and to prevent the transplanted rice from being bowled over by heavy winds.⁸⁶ As Ebihara beautifully described it: As Ebihara beautifully described it:

The village becomes strangely silent during the peak of the transplanting season as all able females spend most of the day in the fields. Holding bundles of rice in one arm, a woman bends, stands, and steps backward in an even, graceful rhythm as she plunges small bunches of seedlings into the mud. (...) The older women, made skillful by years of practice, race ahead of the adolescent girls who are just learning [to transplant], and tease the latter about their slowness. Despite the heat and arduous work, the women (and occasional males) chat, the girls may sing, and there is frequent laughter at jokes or as someone breaks into a mock dance. The workers also take numerous breaks (especially when the field is not one's own) to rest in the shade on the dikes and have some water, betel [an addictive, mild narcotic, which is chewed], or cigarettes supplied by the owner of the field; occasionally, some rice gruel may also be provided as a snack if the group is not too large.⁸⁷

After the transplant, which peaked in late July and concluded in August, villagers relaxed until the harvest season began in late November. Because Svay is located close enough to the capital city, some men worked in Phnom Penh to support their family during the

⁸⁶ Ebihara, 102-06. Such cooperative efforts are not unlike arrangements among pre-industrialized farmers in Minnesota, as depicted by Hoffbeck in *The Haymakers*.

⁸⁷ Ebihara, *Svay*, 106.

growing season. More fortunate members of the community sojourned to visit with family living elsewhere.⁸⁸

Starting in late November and December, women harvested the rice with a handheld sickle. Although this was sometimes a cooperative affair, the window for success was broader than it was for transplanting, so it more frequently became daily routine; women left for the fields in the morning and spent much of the day at work, before returning around suppertime. If the fields were sufficiently dry, the men set to work threshing by smashing bundles of rice against a wooden board on the ground, which freed the rice kernels onto mats lying on the ground. They fed the empty stalks to cattle.⁸⁹

Women then removed the detritus by allowing the wind to blow away the chaff. They set aside the next year's seed and stored the rice in woven containers kept in the house or on raised platforms beneath. A local Chinese miller generally milled the rice for its bran, which was used as pig feed.⁹⁰

After the harvest, the villagers cleared and fertilized their fields. Then they relaxed, visited kin, held weddings, and celebrated the Cambodian New Year, and then in May, the cycle of rice began anew. Although this depiction presents a picture of a kind of idyllic, egalitarian peasantism, the subsistence lifestyle practiced by the villagers was rife with its own share of worry. Some people struggled throughout the year to guarantee

⁸⁸ Ebihara, 106-08.

⁸⁹ Ebihara, 112-13.

⁹⁰ Ebihara, 113-14.

their stores lasted until the next harvest. As Ebihara noted, “a surplus of food or money [was] by no means assured.”⁹¹

Rural Cambodians supplemented their diet of rice by cultivating gardens, fishing, and foraging. Cooking, as well as access to the markets, was almost exclusively the domain of women, although men cooked if necessary and handled any sale or purchase of cattle. Girls learned to cook by watching their mothers; by the age of ten, they held simple responsibilities related to readying meals, such as preparing rice. Cooking was often done outdoors, though some houses might have had a kitchen. Cambodians cooked and ate close to the ground, squatting and/or sitting on the floor rather than sitting at tables, just as they had during the time of Zhou’s travels. In Svay, villagers accessed water for cooking or drinking at one of three wells inside the village. For heat, they used a short, wood-burning, clay stove, an open fire, or propane burners. They supplemented metalware pots, which could boil rice, simmer soups, or fry fish, with makeshift items such as bamboo to skewer or to enmesh fish for roasting.⁹²

Villagers cultivated basil, mint, peppers, potatoes, gourds, beans, cucumbers, mangoes, bananas, papayas, guavas, oranges and more. They also used sugar palm and coconuts for drinking and boiling into sugar (in the case of sugar palm). Villagers used

⁹¹ Ebihara, 114-15, 95.

⁹² Ebihara, 95, 287-88, 188-89, 41; Chin and Bun, interview, 12, 22, 10. Im Sopheah remembered learning how to cook from her parents, as did Ang Bunthy and Hun Leng. Im Sopheahp, interview by Nhem Sokunthea, August 18, 2016, transcript, 12, Cambodian Oral History Project, Brigham Young University (hereinafter referred to as “BYU Cambodian Oral History Project”); Ang Bunthy, interview by Nhem Sokunthea, September 1, 2016, transcript, 11; BYU Cambodian Oral History Project; Hun Leng, interview by Nhem Sokunthea, August 13, 2016, transcript, 5-6, BYU Cambodian Oral History Project.

both trees, as well as banana trees for a variety of other purposes: sugar palm leaves were used for thatched roofs, mats, containers, rope, and brooms. They also used coconut husks in the kitchen as scoops, dishes, or spoons; and they used banana leaves to wrap foods for both carrying and cooking. Bamboo trees were cut for all manner of construction purposes, such as making frames for baskets, fishing poles, or traps. They also ate young bamboo shoots.⁹³

In terms of proteins, fish remained essential to the diet, eaten in a variety of ways including “fresh, dried, or smoked; grilled, stewed, or boiled in soup; mashed into a paste or refined into oil.”⁹⁴ Villagers often purchased fish from the market throughout the year, but also caught fish in their rice paddies from August until the harvest in January. Men, women, and children caught fish using simple bamboo rods, several kinds of fish traps, nets, or, in some cases, temporarily draining paddies or whole watering holes to catch fish by hand. If not consumed right away, some fish were turned into *prahok* by being cut into small pieces, heavily salted, dried in the sun, pounded in a mortar with more salt, and sealed in earthenware jars to ferment in the sun for two days. The liquid drained off

⁹³ Ebihara observed cultivation of the following plants: lemongrass, red pepper, another pepper, turmeric, basil, mint, galangal, loufa gouard, two other kinds of gourds, sweet potatoes, yams, white potatoes, cucumber, summer squash, beans, eggplant, celery, tomato, sugar palm or lontar, coconut, banana, papaya, guava, oranges, grapefruit, sweet sop, mangoes, sapodilla, ebony, tamarind, jackfruit, gooseberry, eggfruit, betel, areca, kapok, and bamboo. C.L. (initials), who was born in 1928, recalled her parents farmed (alongside rice, of course) the following foods: kapok, papaya, lime trees, beans, corn, watermelons, pumpkins, potatoes, tapioca, sweet potatoes, and other vegetables. Ebihara, *Svay*, 120-121, 284-85; C.L., interview by Richard Mollica, [1991], transcript, 1-3, Cambodian American Women: An Oral History Project, Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, Arthur & Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (collection is hereafter referred to as “Cambodian American Women: An Oral History Project”), https://www.harvardcambodianwomen.com/_files/ugd/bce909_8cb05074d9a0449ab819ecd7a8a7db02.pdf.

⁹⁴ Ebihara, *Svay*, 121.

during the salting process became *tuk Trey* or fish sauce. Villagers collected it to be used as seasoning.⁹⁵

Ebihara noted that the villagers ate crabs, and, if necessary, they ate snails, frogs, and snakes as well. They could buy seasonings such as salt and vinegar, or onions and corn at the village markets. On special occasions, a family might purchase soy sauce, garlic, or curry ingredients; fruits such as durian and pineapple; or processed food items such as noodles, flour, and meat.⁹⁶ For religious reasons, the villagers never slaughtered cattle for their meat (although they butchered cattle in cases where the animals died by accident or old age), but old cattle they sold to Muslim Chams who butchered the animals and sold the meat on the market.⁹⁷

Ruth Tooze, who was in Cambodia around the same time as Ebihara, described a Cambodian market as “the lively center of village life.”⁹⁸ Early in the morning, people arrived with grains, fruits, or vegetables grown in or nearby their homes; some brought fish, chickens, and/or pigs as well or instead. They carried their produce in woven baskets balanced on their heads or transported it via oxcart. While some sellers had stalls, others simply sat on the ground, surrounded with their baskets. “Many a merchant (if such a

⁹⁵ Ebihara, 121-23. Since *prahok* was essential to the diet throughout the year, Ebihara notes that in some regions, people left their villages to head to the Mekong in “caravans,” particularly during December, January, or February, from where they would have a better chance to trade for, purchase, or simply catch the quantity of fish needed for the year’s supply; however, access to modern technologies diminished the necessity of such excursions, as Vietnamese and Cham fishermen used trucks to bring fish directly to rural markets. For an example of how to catch fish in the fields or watering holes by draining off water, see Home KH, “Home KH – SOTHEANY Catch 8 fish,” August 13, 2020, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOFURHomjG4>.

⁹⁶ Ebihara, *Svay*, 136-37.

⁹⁷ Ebihara, 123, 132.

⁹⁸ Tooze, *Cambodia*, 29-31.

grand title can be used for the seller of a very few pieces of sugar cane, or a few fish, or a couple of roasted sparrows, or fried tarantulas),” wrote Tooth, “[sat] on his haunches in his allotted space in the open area.” By the time the sun appeared in the sky, the whole market was packed full, and the whole village stopped through, creating a cacophony of life as buyers, typically women, bargained and negotiated for the best prices. The markets offered not just raw foods, but also textiles, and food vendors sold soup, rice, or fish, from small carts. By midmorning, with very little food left, people headed home, sometimes with meat—pork, crab, or shrimp—in one hand, and fruits or vegetables in the other. Sellers wrapped small items, like shrimp, peas, or bean sprouts, in little containers made up of palm or banana leaf, tied with a palm-leaf string. They strung fish and chunks of meat strung onto a cord and carried without wrapping. Sanitary conditions were held to a low standard, and flies and mosquitos had to be swatted away from the foods in the market as well as along the journey back home.⁹⁹

Villagers earned cash by harvesting and processing palm sugar and raising pigs or chickens; some also sold prepared foods in the street. Women looked after the pigs and chicken. The animals mostly roamed the village to feed on scraps of food or ate leftovers. As with cattle, the villagers did not slaughter the pigs themselves; rather, the animals were purchased from and eventually sold back to Chinese merchants, a mutually profitable arrangement.¹⁰⁰ Cambodians ate such animals sparingly—on special occasions.

⁹⁹ Tooze, *Cambodia*, 29-31.

¹⁰⁰ Ebihara, *Svay*, 95, 118, 286, 132-33. Eav Sareoun remembered helping his aunt with selling cabbage and with her noodle cart when he was still very young, between the ages of four and six. Eav

They mostly raised them for market. Even eggs went uneaten and were instead incubated to be hatched. When an occasion called for preparing a special meal with chicken, it was best to purchase a live fowl to ensure freshness. Due to a Buddhist precept against killing, villagers asked an ethnic Chinese or Cham to slaughter the animal, or had their children perform the butchering, assuming that youth would prevent them from incurring the full karmic debt entailed in taking life.¹⁰¹

While a substantial portion of the population did live rurally, urban Cambodians, particularly the elites, lived very different lives. A small portion of residents in Phnom Penh had access to running water, which was piped in from the Mekong River. Others purchased water from “water boys” who worked city corners with giant water kegs embedded on wheeled carts, which they filled as necessary at a central station. Children arrived throughout the day with gallon-capacity receptacles and purchased water from the water boys.¹⁰² There were restaurants on just about every street corner of Phnom Penh; though these “restaurants” could be anything from just a single person carrying their wares in a basket, to a full-scale Chinese or French restaurants. According to Tooze, the best restaurant was located in the hotel Rajah, where diners could enjoy “cheese soufflé, shrimp, lobster, or a pepper steak (...) and have baked Alaska for dessert.” The restaurant mostly served foreigners, however, so few Cambodians ate there, or would even know

Sareoun, interview by Leng Thearty, March 20, 2019, transcript, 3-4, BYU Cambodian Oral History Project.

¹⁰¹ Ebihara, *Svay*, 133.

¹⁰² Tooze, *Cambodia*, 93.

much about such foreign foods.¹⁰³ Narin Seng Jameson, an urban elite, stated Cambodians almost exclusively cooked for themselves and for family and friends, and only on rare occasions went out to eat at restaurants.¹⁰⁴

Urban and semi-urban Cambodians had access to some of the same, but also some different experiences compared to those Cambodians in the countryside. My aunt, who lived just outside the capital city, raised ducks and pigs on the homestead with her sisters. During the day her mother worked as an intermediary who bought (live) fish from fishermen at the river, then carried the fish to be sold at the market in the city for cash; according to my aunt, in the city, they always traded cash, and did not barter, as they sometimes did in the countryside. Particularly rich people living inside the city had electricity to run appliances, such as a stove. The most affluent employed servants, almost always women, who washed clothes, cleaned the house, and prepared meals.¹⁰⁵

Tooze conceived of Cambodia as a “land of contrasts” and offered a brief but captivating description of the dissimilar paths that could be trod:

Cambodia is a land of great contrasts. Its central region, a wide basin lying almost at sea level, is surrounded by mountains. Its weather changes sharply from a bleak, dry season to a steaming moist season. And its days begin with pale red sunrises and end with gorgeous coppery sunsets. Oxcarts on the roads haul produce to market while jets fly overhead to land at a modern airport. In Phnom Penh, the capital city, unpaved packed mud streets, with gutters on either side full of waste and rubbish, meander alongside a modern paved street with traffic lights. In the same city, a royal palace stands among thousands of *paillottes*, one- or two-room wooden houses on stilts. Wooden plows exactly like those used centuries ago turn the soil in fields bordering roads where automobiles speed by. Old men

¹⁰³ Tooze, 99-100.

¹⁰⁴ Jameson, *Cooking the Cambodian Way*, 5-6.

¹⁰⁵ Chin and Bun, interview, 13-14, 17.

dressed as their ancestors dressed mingle with young men in modern Western clothes.¹⁰⁶

These were the roads taken by the ancestors. For about fifteen years after obtaining national sovereignty, Norodom Sihanouk successfully stewarded the Cambodian state through decolonization and regional turmoil. The intensification of the American war in Vietnam and indigenous Cambodian politics led to Sihanouk's eventual ouster from public office in 1970 by way a of a *coup*. Between 1970 and 1975, a civil war wracked the nation, fought between the regime that had usurped Sihanouk, led by Lon Nol, and Communist forces led by a then-unknown Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), who had come to power following the 1962 government assassination of Tou Samouth. The civil war drove peasants to seek refuge in Phnom Penh, rebalancing the distribution of urban-rural populations. On April 17, 1975, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge (Red Khmers) pushed into the capital city and established the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime, seeking to radically transform Cambodia into a socialist Utopia.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Tooze, *Cambodia*, 13-14.

¹⁰⁷ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 227-42, 248-49.

Chapter 2

The abject horror of the 1970s has no shortage of documentarians.¹⁰⁸ War and genocide killed an estimated one-and-a-half to two million Cambodians.¹⁰⁹ These deaths, which constituted approximately one quarter of the nation's then-estimated population of about eight million, came as the result of forced labor, untreated illness, starvation, malnourishment, torture, execution, and/or exposure.¹¹⁰

Violence was the most defining feature of the Cambodian experience of the 1970s, but food, too, was central to the experience. Under the Communist regime, access to the management and distribution of food became synonymous with hierarchical power. As such, it was a tool wielded by captors and an instrument of torture. But it was also a

¹⁰⁸ See François Ponchaud, *Cambodia: Year Zero*, trans. Nancy Amphoux (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978); Karl D. Jackson, ed., *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); David A. Albin and Marlowe Hood, eds., *The Cambodian Agony* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990); David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution Since 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, 2nd ed. (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkwork Books, 2005); and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). See also David P. Chandler's bibliographic essay, Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 347-49. Michael Vickery raises concerns about the appeal of sensationalism as regards accounts of the DK era, arguing that experiences should not be understood as monolithic; see Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975-1982* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 36-63. See also Dith Pranm, Ben Kiernan, and Kim DePaul, eds., *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), ProQuest Ebrary.

¹⁰⁹ Scholars debate whether this was an ethnic cleansing or genocide. Ben Kiernan and Patrick Heuveline offer analyses of the Cambodian population and some relevant claims about the precise death tolls. Chan, *Survivors*, 13-15; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 252-53; Ben Kiernan, "The Demography of Genocide in Southeast Asia: The Death Tolls in Cambodia, 1975-79, and East Timor, 1975-80," *Critical Asian Studies* 35, no. 4 (2003): 585-90; Patrick Heuveline, "The Boundaries of Genocide: Quantifying the Uncertainty of the Death Toll During the Pol Pot Regime in Cambodia (1975-79)," *Population Studies* 69, no. 2 (July 2015): 201-218.

¹¹⁰ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 252; Sucheng Chan, "Cambodians in the United States: Refugees, Immigrants, American Ethnic Minority," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, 6, September 3, 2015, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-317>.

core part of the daily routine, as Cambodians had been ejected from their homes, in part, so that they could be put to work on the land to accelerate food production that, nominally, could produce agricultural surpluses to export and jumpstart industrialization. Food was also an object of desire, and therefore a bargaining tool. And when access to food was limited or altogether prohibited, which it almost always was during this period, food changed diets and bodies.¹¹¹

People who had lived in or had fled to the capital city prior to the Khmer Rouge victory were called “new people” or “April 17 people.”¹¹² Uprooted urban dwellers left with few provisions, though there was not enough rice in Phnom Penh to feed them for long. The months-long siege of the capital impeded deliveries of much-needed American aid to the imperiled government, and the internal refugee crisis caused by war had caused the city’s population to swell beyond its means. When U.S. aid ended for good, a report by the U.S. Agency for International Development asserted, “if ever a country needed to beat its swords into plowshares in a race to save itself from hunger, it is Cambodia.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 250.

¹¹² Chandler, 250.

¹¹³ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 246-47; U.S. Agency for International Development, draft Termination Report for Cambodia, April 1975, Part Six, “Cambodias Food and Fibre Needs: The PL 480 Assistance Program to Cambodia For Rice and Other Commodities,” 16-17, quoted in Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 62-63. Gareth Porter and G.C. Hildebrand provide an early, interesting analysis of the food and population situation in Phnom Penh leading up to April 1975; although they build a problematic narrative that is dismissive of Ponchaud’s firsthand accounts and reports from refugees (essentially, they dispute wrongdoing by the DK), many problems they highlight about the management of the city are legitimate. The Lon Nol government substantially failed to provide food for Cambodians. As Margaret Slocomb notes, despite two billion dollars in foreign aid from the U.S. alone, “most Western observers agreed that all but a tiny fraction was diverted to support purchase of military equipment or to pay military salaries.” Some of it was diverted by corrupt officials to be sold in the private sector. Children starved to death in the streets of the capital. In 1968, Cambodia had exported 230,000 tons of rice, but, in 1974, imported 282,000 tons, having lost substantial control of the rice-producing countryside. In 1971, the market for rice was approximately ten riels per kilo; by 1973, the price was ten times higher. See Gareth

Survivors recalled food as paramount to their concerns during the period. One such survivor is Svang Tor, who eventually resettled in Massachusetts, where she shared her experiences across a series of interviews. Svang was born September 12, 1940, northwest of Phnom Penh in Battambang province, where her grandfather owned a rice mill. As a teenager, she moved to the capital where she lived with an aunt, and studied to become a teacher. When the DK regime took power, Svang was married and had two sons. Following the evacuation of the cities, Svang and her family lived alongside the Mekong River with some cousins, whereupon food quickly became an issue. Almost immediately, someone stole much of whatever provender the family had carried with them during their exodus, leaving them with just some rice and dried vegetables—but no meat, and no fish.¹¹⁴

Communists began to dictate the movement of Svang’s family, forcing them to cross the Mekong River against their wishes. For the next four or five months, Svang and her family moved from the countryside into small villages, then invariably back into the countryside, almost aimlessly, with no sure source of food or shelter. Svang’s husband traded the shirt off his back in exchange for rice, and “old people,” or peasants who

Porter and G.C. Hildebrand, *The Politics of Food: Starvation and Agricultural Revolution in Cambodia* (Washington, DC: Indochina Resource Center, 1975), box 13, Indochina Resource Center, Southeast Asia Collection, MS 407, Special Collections and University Archives, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA (collection hereinafter referred to as “Southeast Asia Collection”); Slocumb, *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century*, 155, 149-64.

¹¹⁴ Svang Tor, interview by Richard Mollica, December 1988 through February 1989, transcript, 5, 10, 13, 26, 39, 35. Cambodian American Women: An Oral History Project, https://www.harvardcambodianwomen.com/_files/ugd/bce909_8cb05074d9a0449ab819ecd7a8a7db02.pdf; “Sv.T,” Cambodian American Women: An Oral History Project, <https://www.harvardcambodianwomen.com/sv-t>.

supported the DK before the fall of Phnom Penh, stripped them of their few remaining visible luxuries: two bicycles and two raincoats.¹¹⁵

After the long period of wandering, the old people instructed Svang and her family to construct a hut and build a farm, where they were made to grow corn and other vegetables. At first, they had rations of a cup of rice per person in each family, along with a spoonful of salt, but that ration was quickly cut in half; with little food, Svang and her family foraged for wild mushrooms, a hunt with which, as former city dwellers, they were lucky to have had help.¹¹⁶

Svang found that her light skin affiliated her with the middle class in the eyes of the old people, who gave her lesser shares of the rations compared to those who were more darkly complected. If they had been certain of her petty-bourgeois background, or if they knew she'd been a teacher and spoke French, they might have preserved for themselves the entire ration instead. They sent her husband to dig a canal with nothing but four cups of rice with salt to eat for seven days. A few months later, they reassigned her sons to special children's camps. There was too little food available, and Svang's mother exchanged everything she could to obtain some, including a gold watch for ten or twenty pounds of rice, after which the communists came and confiscated the haul, stating that, from that point forward, everyone had to eat as a group. To that end, communists

¹¹⁵ Svang, interview, 41, 37.

¹¹⁶ Svang, 43-44.

took away everyone's pots, pans, forks, spoons, and permitted each person to have just a single plate and bowl.¹¹⁷

For food, they cooked virtually inedible tree trunks and roots. Svang suffered serious stomach problems for months on end, at which point a sympathetic communist provided her with glutinous rice, beans, and sugar. By this point, malnourishment had diminished Svang to little more than a bag of bones, but she recovered from her ailment and was set to work cooking for the children—just rice with salt. In the kitchen, she asked a man she worked with to cut down some banana leaves for her, as they were too high from the ground for her to reach, and the request landed her in a re-education camp: “capitalist[s] always want to have [a] maid to do something for you,” came the accusation from the camp's director, threatening to relocate her if she did it again.¹¹⁸ Svang learned from old people how to hunt for wild potatoes. When they couldn't find food, they ate leaves and the wild fruits passed over by the old people. Svang recalled one incident where a thirteen-year-old boy stole a potato from the farm and was subsequently arrested, publicly shamed, beaten, and then paraded from village to village as an example of what would happen to those who followed in his footsteps. The younger of her two sons, Sothea, died from a horrible infection that spread across his body, probably caught from working day in and day out in the flooded rice paddies, which were fertilized with nightsoil.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Svang, 44-48, 61.

¹¹⁸ Svang, 49, 47-49.

¹¹⁹ Svang, 50-52, 63.

In the process of recording the oral history, Richard Mollica asked, “What was the main way that [the communists] controlled people? Was it with weapons? How did they make the people do what they wanted the people to do?” Svang replied:

The people had to go to work. The first time they collected everything. Before from the city we got something like from home with us. After that they took everything we had put in the group (like pots and pans, rice). They took the rice and put it in the group and cooked it for the group. If people didn’t go to work, they didn’t get the food too. They had to go to work to get the food. If not, no food.¹²⁰

Other narrators shared Svang’s experiences with food. Vik Huong Taing and his wife, Samoeun, were Cambodian nationals serving in Phnom Penh as staff members with Campus Crusade for Christ when the Khmer Rouge captured the city. The sudden, nationwide displacement of two million Cambodians included Taing and Samoeun among their numbers, as well as their two-month-old son, Xiphosuran. After two weeks, Taing, his family, and the other beleaguered travelers arrived in the small village of Pey. There, Taing remembered, they were fed a weak gruel—too much water, too little rice. At a meeting organized to weed out the newcomers, Taing recalled a heated exchange between the village chief and a man who had been ordered to work separately from his children at some other location. His children, the man said, “desperately need salt to go with the rice.”¹²¹ The chief angrily accused the group of being coddled by their city upbringing, and thundered back, “why do you think we have salt? For years we have had to use ashes for *our* ‘salt!’”¹²²

¹²⁰ Svang, 72.

¹²¹ Taing and Fisher, *Ordeal in Cambodia*, 28, 26-28.

¹²² Taing and Fisher, 28, emphasis in original.

The Khmer Rouge put Taing to work tilling the soil and planting vegetables. The village leader “strictly and meagerly” meted out aliments for the new people—“not nearly enough to satisfy hunger,” while those who were favored were ensured plenty.¹²³ Taing remembered that he and his family, in whom the village leader had taken a special interest, were frequently invited to the leader’s house after dark, where the leader fed them a little bit of extra rice, a clandestine kindness that, Taing suggested, could cost everyone their lives.¹²⁴ About four months after Taing’s family had arrived, the recent inhabitants of Pey were required to relocate, and they walked about six miles to meet a truck, which would divide and deposit the group among three different destinations. Taing’s family came to the village of Kok Trom, in Prey Veng province, east of Phnom Penh; there, workers ate from a communal kitchen. At first, Taing recalled, they were fed as much rice per day “as could be contained in a small milk carton[;]” but, just weeks later, when not denied altogether, the ration dwindled to what could be “[held by] a soup ladle.”¹²⁵ Workers enriched their diets with boiled leaves and grass. Taing recalled sneaking away from the village to a road, where he traded “[his] gold wedding band for eight oranges.”¹²⁶

In Kok Trom, Taing and the other villagers planted rice, an effort that occupied the majority of each day. Unique among all who tried, Taing remembered catching from the rice paddies, every day during a two-month period, a single, sizeable fish (between

¹²³ Taing and Fisher, 29.

¹²⁴ Taing and Fisher, 29-30.

¹²⁵ Taing and Fisher, 32, 42.

¹²⁶ Taing and Fisher, 43.

eight and ten inches long), a boon that he credited to his Christian faith. On October 15, 1975, a short while after the fish dried up, Taing's family stole away from Kok Trom in the early morning, accompanied by a co-conspirator, a young man named Kheang, who had helped to lay plans for their escape. With the aid of a few sympathizers in the communist ranks, the small group eventually came to Battambang, from where they were directed to the village of Norea. For two months, Taing remembered, the entire village "was fed well" and people even "[had] the privilege" of being allowed to cook their rations of rice individually in their own huts, rather than in a communal kitchen.¹²⁷ When the arrangement changed, DK soldiers "went from shelter to shelter and hut to hut," seizing every grain of rice; anyone found to be unforthcoming with their supply was "severely beaten."¹²⁸

Under the new system, just as it had in Kok Trom, starvation continued to claim the lives of the extremely malnourished. Rations in the village of Norea—which had at first seemed plentiful—were measured at about one soup-ladle of rice per day. Workers shelled rice by hand at night, the DK having "destroyed all the machinery formerly used for such basic procedures."¹²⁹ By some providence, Taing was once again able to barely supplement his family's limited diet. The leader allowed him to keep one coconut out of the many he collected on the leader's behalf. In addition to providing desperately needed

¹²⁷ Taing and Fisher, 55, 44-55.

¹²⁸ Taing and Fisher, 56.

¹²⁹ Taing and Fisher, 56.

nutrition, Taing recalled the coconuts were regarded as “valuable currency,” and, on occasion, he was able to trade them—in secret—for “medicines and fish.”¹³⁰

After eleven months, the Taing family relocated again, first to Watt Kor, where Taing and Samoeun, respectively, harvested bamboo and milled rice, and two months later to Cheng Kdar. As elsewhere, the food situation in Watt Kor was desperate. In Cheng Kdar, it was somehow worse: villagers would be killed for hiding extra food of any kind—foraged, scavenged, or otherwise. But, once again, Taing found himself abetted by someone in a position of authority. In Cheng Kdar, where villagers worked from sunrise to sunset, the group leader secretly allowed Taing’s family some small measure of palm juice and palm sugar, products of the village operations. At Cheng Kdar, Samoeun cleared swaths of jungle to prepare the land for rice cultivation; after a stint as an “accountant” at the sugar mill, Taing’s next job was to collect villagers’ excrement on a board in order to repurpose it as fertilizer. After a year, Taing worked as a “teacher,” although his students only had five hours per week to receive instruction, and then a village leadership position. In this post, he leveraged his influence to reallocate stores of food to an acquaintance in need. Not long after this, in December of 1978, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia; Taing and his family, along with other Cambodian workers, used the occasion to escape from Cheng Kdar. The Taings eventually found their way to a Taphraya, a refugee camp on the Thai border.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Taing and Fisher, 58-59.

¹³¹ Taing and Fisher, 66, 74-78, 82-110.

The narratives of Taing and Svang illustrate a daily rhythm in which displaced Cambodians were embroiled in an almost constant negotiation over subsistence. They struggled with the land, to cultivate and process foods, yet such products of their labor were controlled by agents of the DK regime. Their daily comestibles came to them through starvation-level rations of rice, which they supplemented, as possible, with *anything* the land had to offer—inedible, unfamiliar, or both. Food became the most valuable commodity and traded favorably with non-consumable goods. Local leaders conscripted foods, and offered or withheld it from workers as a form of control.

These experiences are supported by accounts given by other survivors. In 1992, Channy Som, who was interviewed in Minnesota about her experiences under the Khmer Rouge, remembered that, in the village where she worked, people were permitted only “two spoons of soup rice,” and “[no] salt [or] any meat to eat with it.”¹³² Som stated that, same as other Cambodians, seven days a week, she labored, hungry and without rest, to cultivate rice. Choup Lat, another survivor interviewed in Minnesota, stated his experience was difficult to share because “[Cambodians] lacked everything, food, no medication, no nothing.”¹³³ Choup was separated from his wife and children, working to produce rice. As with others, meals where Choup stayed were prepared communally under the direction of DK agents. He recalled eating rice soup, sometimes with fish and

¹³² Channy Som, interview by Leigh Bristol-Kagan, August 11, 1992, transcript, 4, Khmer Oral History Project.

¹³³ Channy, interview, 5; Choup Lat, interview by Sharon Jacks, July 31, 1992, transcript, 2, Khmer Oral History Project.

vegetables, but added that sometimes there was nothing to eat, and sometimes his group ate just rice soup and salt.¹³⁴

Y Nor, another narrator, stated that four of his children died during the Khmer Rouge era, two from starvation. He also recalled communal meals: “(...) we [didn’t] have enough food to eat. They put in a big pot and there’s only one can of rice for us to eat.”¹³⁵ Y pointed to the lack of food, including, specifically, a lack of salt, as the reason he and his daughters became sick while laboring in Battambang, where he worked the rice fields, including chasing out rats and birds; dug canals; helped to construct a dam; and, after falling sick, looked after cattle. Later, Y worked as a sugarcane farmer in Sisophon in northwest Cambodia. His wife worked to produce fertilizer. Y Nor stated that working as a sugar cane farmer was an improvement on his lot at Battambang, as he was able to “steal” sugar cane to eat.¹³⁶

Thaly Chhour, another survivor, said in an interview that her father and two of her brothers died of starvation under the DK regime. She recalled an instance where her eldest brother visited her and brought her some food, and insisted that she must eat it immediately, as they would steal it from her if she tried to keep it overnight. Like Svang’s son, she was forced to work ceaselessly in the flooded rice paddies, where leeches and fertilizer contributed to the development an infection that hospitalized her.

¹³⁴ Choup, interview, 3-4.

¹³⁵ Y Nor, interview by Steve Smith, August 10, 1992, transcript, 1, Khmer Oral History Project.

¹³⁶ Y Nor, interview, 2-8.

Thaly's older sister became so malnourished as to induce amenorrhea. Her younger sister, twelve years old at the time, worked carrying cow dung for fertilizer.¹³⁷

Sok Yorm and Phorm Phrong, farmers from Battambang Province when the DK took power in 1975, recalled that, for them, for the first three months, the Khmer Rouge "didn't change anything."¹³⁸ After the initial period of transition, DK cadres divided people into groups and communalized foods, then set the people to work. Sok worked with a group of men to plow fields, care for cattle, and dig canals; Phorm planted rice. They stated that, "for three years and eight months there is no holiday. It is for seven days a week of work," during which time the DK provided them with nothing but "salt and a can of rice for ten people," a ration they received twice daily.¹³⁹ Following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, Phorm and Sok fled to the border, where a lack of food compelled them to take a bus to the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp.¹⁴⁰

According to Henry Nelson, who was evacuated from Phnom Penh by the DK in April 1975, after exhausting the limited provisions they had been allowed to travel with, his family traded good clothes and a watch for rice from farmers, whom "[t]he Khmer Rouge love[d]," and whom were "given (...) enough food to eat."¹⁴¹ Nelson contrasts the situation of farmers, or old people, with that of "town people," who "[were] going to get

¹³⁷ Thaly Chhour, interview by Cheryl A. Thomas, August 14, 1992, transcript, 1-7, Khmer Oral History Project; Barry S. Levy, "Special Report: Working in a Camp for Cambodian Refugees," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 304, no. 23 (Jun 1981): 1443.

¹³⁸ Sok Yorm and Phorm Phrong, interview by Al Zdrazil, July 31, 1992, transcript, 1-2, Khmer Oral History Project.

¹³⁹ Sok and Phorm, interview, 2-5.

¹⁴⁰ Sok and Phorm, 8-9.

¹⁴¹ Nelson, interview, 4.

nothing to eat” from DK agents.¹⁴² When his family was sent to work on a farm, Nelson recalled, two of his brothers were worked like beasts of burden—whipped while plowing fields with a yoke around their necks. Nelson himself was also put to work in agriculture: cultivating wheat and rice, digging a well, constructing a primitive dam; his work crew ate just a small dinner each day. Like others, Nelson specifically mentioned not having enough food, and not having enough salt. He also explained one of his older brothers was executed for complaining about a lack of food.¹⁴³

Like Nelson, Chamreun Tan, who was a police officer in Phnom Penh in April of 1975, remembered that there was an intentional separation between old people and those who were evacuated from cities. According to Chamreun, the Khmer Rouge provided old people with shelter and food. Chamreun, who was separated from his family, was put to work digging irrigation ditches for three months, and then worked to cultivate rice. Later, according to Chamreun, while working to build a dam in north Cambodia, his he and his co-laborers were instructed to divide swaths of land amongst themselves, so that faster workers could finish their tasks early and, in theory, return to camp while there was still food available. “Almost every day,” Chamreun insisted, people died on account of starvation. Like Phorm and Sok, after the Vietnamese invasion, a lack of food compelled Chamreun to escape to a refugee camp in Thailand.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Nelson, 4.

¹⁴³ Nelson, 4-7.

¹⁴⁴ Chamreun Tan, interview by Mark Frey, July 30, 1992, transcript, 10, 1-10, Khmer Oral History Project.

Ven Yem described the monotony of eating of living under the Khmer Rouge: “[f]or three years the Khmer people ate only boiled rice. Into one big pan they would put just one can of rice to feed twenty or thirty people.”¹⁴⁵ The consequent malnutrition led to disease. His job under the DK regime was to dig irrigation canals and cultivate food. Despite the provender of the land, cultivated by their labor—“cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes and also sugar cane”—Ven and his group were provided, twice a day, nothing but “one cup of water with some rice in it.”¹⁴⁶

Monorom Sok Hang and his brother, Mony, remembered hiding in the jungle with a family friend, during which time the group “ate any kind of living organism [they] ran into,” including “leaves, grasshoppers, crabs, snails, snakes, and lizards.”¹⁴⁷ “We watched for things to eat at each step[,]” recalled Monorom, “every animal we could catch we grabbed, killed, and put in our pockets. We collected them along the way until we stopped to rest, when we would make a little fire and cook and eat them.”¹⁴⁸ After four or five months, soldiers apprehended the group and put the brothers, aged seven and six to work using their bare hands to “flatten a two-hundred-foot-high hill” in order to

¹⁴⁵ Ven Yem, “All the People of Khmer Were Very Troubled [1986],” in *Indochina’s Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam*, ed. Joanna C. Scott (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1989), 110.

¹⁴⁶ Yem, “All the People of Khmer Were Very Troubled,” 110.

¹⁴⁷ Biloine W. Young, *My Heart is Delicious: Setting the Course for Cross-Cultural Health Care; the Story of the Center for International Health* (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2008), 97-99.

¹⁴⁸ Young, *My Heart is Delicious*, 99.

make the land viable for rice cultivation.¹⁴⁹ Eventually, they weeded rice paddies and survived by eating snails and crabs from the water.¹⁵⁰

Chanda Khiev, who penned, in 1988, an account of her family's escape from Cambodia in a fifth-grade classroom at J.G. Pyne School in Lowell, MA, remembered eating leaves, vines, and roots under the guidance of the family patriarch. She also remembered catching large rats, as well as a tiger—both of which her mother prepared for the family to eat. Chanda said she liked the taste of tiger; it was delicious, she said, “like steak.”¹⁵¹

These accounts suggest a range of experiences during the Khmer Rouge era. The most obvious disparities exist between “new” and “old” people, the former group disempowered, the latter at least somewhat better off on account of their status with the DK regime and their greater familiarity with living in the countryside. This disparity sometimes manifested in less-than-equal distribution of food. And yet, everyone was expected to do agricultural work and supplemented their diets, as much as as possible, through foraging. If the scarcity of food, and its correlated, inflated value, meant something different among Cambodians under the DK, the difference can be assigned to whether or not a person was in a position to trade surplus foods for non-consumable goods, a position that could fluctuate depending on circumstances. Disrupted

¹⁴⁹ Young, 100.

¹⁵⁰ Young, 100.

¹⁵¹ Chanda Khiev, “Escape from Cambodia,” 1-3, Memories of Cambodia Tsapatsaris (George) Collection, Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts, Lowell, MA (hereinafter referred to as “Memories of Cambodia Tsapatsaris Collection”).

relationships with traditional foodways, and a landscape in which a significant portion of the population suffered from starvation, resulting in death or severe malnutrition—to the point that Luong Ung reportedly observed that the already waifish actors of *The Killing Fields* were still “too fat”—are observable realities. Furthermore, although the work of agriculture had traditionally been a total effort from the family unit, including men, women, and children, the role of feeding the family in the prewar period had been the domain of women and, as such, the communalization of kitchens had a distinct significance in terms of disempowering women compared to men.¹⁵²

Taing recalled hearing, on more than one occasion, last words to the effect of: “[i]f I have rice, I will not die! Just give me one bowl and I will live!’ The dying’s last thoughts,” he observed, “were not of family and friends—only of the wish for one life-saving bowl of rice.”¹⁵³ George Chigas, a senior, American scholar involved in

¹⁵² Socheata Poouv, “How You Understand Your Story: The Survival Story within Cambodian American Genocide Communities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, eds. Paula Hamilton and James B. Gardner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 497, Oxford Academic. The reader should be careful here not to apply a contemporary Western, middle-class, individualistic framework when analyzing control over household management. Although it would certainly be inaccurate to suggest total power parity between the sexes, the subsistence—rather than capitalistic—mode of production precludes, or at least impedes, the emergence of excessive economic distinction (i.e., power dynamics are not unduly imbalanced as they have been in societies bent on accumulation, in which women perform unremunerated domestic labor, while men’s occupations draw wages or salaries). In addition to being a source of influence, feeding one’s family can be a source of pride, pleasure, and satisfaction, as well as a vehicle to display social prominence on special occasions. Plus, as demonstrated by the literature, although androcentric, political histories prevail, scholars are increasingly sensitive to women’s contributions to history, including through the significance of food and housework. My thinking here is based on Kyung Ae Park’s analysis of sociological literature, Zhou Dagan’s writing about as well as Khmer proverbs alluding to women’s significance over household affairs, Ebihara’s analysis of the gendered power budget, and my own experience when my family home was shared. See, e.g., Kyung Ae Park, “Women and Development: The Case of South Korea,” *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 2 (January 1993): 127-131; Zhou, *A Record of Cambodia*, 70; Ebihara, *Svay*, 53-54, Karen Fisher-Nguyen, “Khmer Proverbs: Images and Rules,” 97.

¹⁵³ Taing and Fisher, *Ordeal in Cambodia*, 124.

Cambodian studies, wrote a collection of poems based on the experiences of his wife, a Cambodian refugee. In one poem, “What They Ate,” Chigas outlined a portfolio of the Cambodian tongue:

We ate everything!
 crickets, grasshoppers
 lizards,
 big frogs, little frogs,
 eels, toads,
 snakes, snails, crabs,
 black spiders from underground,
 rats, mice, banana root,
 leaves, seeds,
 roots from the forest,
 grass roots from rice fields,
 flying ants, bugs,
 big bugs caught in buckets of water,
 dog with mint leaves to hide the smell,
 cats, cow blood,
 ear, tongue, brain,
 stomach, intestine,
 heart, liver,
 tails for special parties.
 Chinese have good recipe for pig ears.¹⁵⁴

He left out the rice and the salt.

¹⁵⁴ George Chigas, “What They Ate,” in *Chantry’s Garden* (Lowell: Loom Press, 1988), sixteenth poem, box 20, Indochina Resource Center, Southeast Asia Collection.

Chapter 3

In early 1980, Someth May arrived in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp as part of a recently-formed Cambodian dance troupe. Someth was the son of a doctor in Phnom Penh. Prior the war, he was at the university, so in his younger years, he had been an urbanite, familiar with the nation's capital city. When he reflected on the camp in his autobiography, published in 1986, Someth described the camp as like "a little Phnom Penh."¹⁵⁵ His description of the camp belies the image that springs to mind when thinking of refugee camps; "the city," as Someth called it, was a "neatly built and laid out (...) checkerboard" of red gravel roads, which intersected row after row of bamboo huts built with palm-leaf walls.¹⁵⁶ Haing Ngor, who also lived in the camp, similarly referred to Khao-I-Dang as "like a city[:]" besides hospitals it had schools, workshops, soccer fields, quasi-legal markets, cafes, tailor shops, a temple and a tracing center where people went to look at notices and photographs of missing relatives."¹⁵⁷

The Thai government gave international relief agencies ten days in late 1979 to build Khao-I-Dang; W. Courtland Robinson notes that the construction crew worked intensively enough that it opened after only four. In early December of the same year, Danish foreign minister Lise Oestergaard toured the camp, and video footage captured by the *Associated Press* showed the kind of dwellings that flourished in the compound: bamboo huts with thatched roofs, and later footage of the camp shows that the bamboo

¹⁵⁵ Someth May, *Cambodian Witness: The Autobiography of Someth May*, ed. and with an intr. by James Fenton (New York: Random House, 1986), 269, 266-69.

¹⁵⁶ Someth, *Cambodian Witness*, 269.

¹⁵⁷ Haing Ngor and Roger Warner, *A Cambodian Odyssey* (New York: Warner Books, 1987), 419.

structures were the norm. According to Mason and Brown, by January 1980, months after its construction, Khao-I-Dang had a refugee population of 150,000 making it—true to Someth May and Haing Ngor’s appellation—indeed, “the largest Khmer city in the world” other than Phnom Penh.¹⁵⁸

More than just the organizational structure of the homes and boulevards, Someth alluded to a vibrancy about the camp. Tanker trucks delivered water every day. Their drivers brought textiles and cigarettes, which refugees eagerly purchased, for resale or for personal use. Informal markets sold whatever they could, including cooked foods such as homemade noodles and fresh bread. Tailor shops permeated the camp, and there was at least one coffee shop; Cambodians could purchase alcohol if they had the means and desire. Some played cards and gambled or spent time in “discreet little brothels” made known by word of mouth.¹⁵⁹ In another camp, as anthropologist Lindsay Cole French describes, in a zone outside the purview of Western observers, a “Khmer space,” they had “video parlors and cock-fighting rings, as well as goldsmiths, tailors, watch repairmen, cassette tape-tubbers [and] all manner of entrepreneurs,” who paid a fee to some leader who had de facto control over the section.¹⁶⁰ Except for activities carried out at the craft

¹⁵⁸ Linda Mason and Roger Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics: Managing Cambodian Relief* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 35; W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1998), 70; “SYND 7 12 79 Khao I Dang Refugee Camp,” Associated Press Archive, video, 1:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAmoe10oW7I>; “Camp de Kao I Dang,” INA Politique, video, 00:00-06:38, July 4, 1980, <https://youtu.be/aTwnuJTBgas>.

¹⁵⁹ Someth, *Cambodian Witness*, 269-270.

¹⁶⁰ Lindsay Cole French, “Enduring Holocaust, Surviving History: Displaced Cambodians on the Thai-Cambodian Border, 1989-1991” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1994), 116.

center, these pursuits—even the sale of foods—were against the rules. Thai authorities who policed the grounds ran a strict camp. The presence of internationals guaranteed refugees a modicum of safety during the day, but no such guarantee existed at night, when Thai soldiers patrolled the camp in search of contraband, which they repurposed for their own use or resold to well-connected refugees.¹⁶¹

The camp system was part of the puissant international response to the Cambodian plight, spearheaded by the Thai government (which closed its border, then reopened it under pressure from and with tacit agreement for more assistance from the international community, only to close it off again) and later joined by the UNHCR. According to Michael Vickery, by 1980 there were at least a dozen camps, each of varying size, and each serviced by a myriad of voluntary agencies that provided for the basic needs of camp residents, such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care, as well as services such as education and vocational training. Historians like Vickery use the term “volag archipelago”—volag being a portmanteau of “voluntary agencies”—to describe the conglomeration of camps, drawing a comparison with the Soviet Union’s “gulag archipelago” for at least the following reasons: (a) while—unlike the Soviet example—

¹⁶¹ Someth, *Cambodian Witness*, 269-70. Other camp residents corroborate Someth’s assessment of the danger of nighttime in the camps. As Darina Siv recalled, “shootings, robberies, and smuggling happened every night. Criminals hid out in my shelter. Rapes occurred repeatedly. At night I could not sleep. I heard the cries of rape victims constantly.” Haing Ngor remembered much the same: “at night the camp was unsafe. There were revenge killings, robberies and rapes. Thai villagers came over the fence at night to sell goods, and Thai soldiers fired at those who wouldn’t give them *bonjour*. Under the dirt floors of the shacks were storage holes and tunnels. Most of the families in camp had something or someone to hide.” See Darina Siv, *Never Come Back: A Cambodian Woman’s Journey* (St. Paul: The Writer’s Press, 2000), 151; Ngor and Warner, *A Cambodian Odyssey*, 419.

one could freely choose to *enter* the refugee camps, they needed permission to leave; (b) authorities could impose arbitrary rule upon camp residents, including proscribing the right to earn a living, and meted out ad hoc punishment to rulebreakers; (c) communication with the outside world was limited, if not completely restricted; official channels were untrustworthy; and (d) terms of stay were indefinite and determined by camp officials. Residents could be transferred to another camp or repatriated to Cambodia with little notice. In short, the refugee camps were authoritarian in nature, but Cambodians fleeing war and genocide had little choice but to comply.¹⁶²

Although both terms were used, camps such as Khao-I-Dang were sometimes referred to as “holding centers,” and not “refugee camps,” because the Thai government refused to acknowledge displaced Cambodians as refugees. In early 1979, a pro-Vietnamese Communist government, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) replaced the DK regime in Phnom Penh; in theory, this turn of events meant that only Khmer Rouge should fear persecution if returned to Cambodia, a qualifying criterion for refugee status. Additionally, as Thailand was neither a signatory at the 1951 convention on refugees, nor in 1967 when the UN updated its protocol, the Thai government could, and sometimes did, act autocratically in response to the unfolding crisis.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Michael Vickery, “Refugee Politics: The Khmer Camp System in Thailand,” in *The Cambodian Agony*, 294-97, 327. See also Chan, *Survivors*, 44.

¹⁶³ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, 34; Chan, *Survivors*, 40; UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article I, “Definition of the Term ‘Refugee,’” <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>. According to the charter drafted at the 1951 UN Convention and modified in 1967, a refugee refers to a person who has “a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or

Irrespective of the technical definition of refugees, there were a slew of reasons that Cambodians chose life in the holding centers/refugee camps in place of attempting to restore some semblance of the lives they had prior to 1975. For one, Cambodia was wracked by famine in 1979, caused in part by the disorder that followed the ousting of the government. Many survivors *did* travel around the country to return to their homes or in search of surviving family, and consequently did not see the season's fields through to harvest. What remained of Cambodia's educated class was wary of returning to live under another Communist regime; on top of such concerns, active military operations had not ceased with the capture of Phnom Penh.

Although some camps, such as Khao-I-Dang, were situated well across the border, clearly inside Thai sovereign territory, other camps straddled the border in an indeterminate sort of way and were vulnerable to being attacked by Vietnamese soldiers. Camps were inhabited not just by Cambodians who wished to be resettled in a third country (not all of whom found success in their desire), but also by Cambodians who intended to repatriate when it became possible. Camps also attracted Cambodians who traveled to take advantage of the resources available from development-aid programs, particularly the seed distribution program, which helped peasants sow new paddies or fields and start their lives over. Later, when the borders closed and no one else could enter the camps, large numbers of illegal refugees lived in or near the camps, unable to

political opinion,” and therefore “(...) is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

access the rations provided by the international agencies. The camps did not exist as discrete entities, insulated from their surroundings, but were hotbeds for black-market economies, and smugglers routinely snuck in and out, at great risk to their lives.¹⁶⁴

The so-called volag archipelago resists uniform characterization, but as a span of time in the lives of the refugees, the camps represented a reprieve from the upheaval of the previous years, as well as, for many, a first encounter with the outside world. For those who ultimately found resettlement in a country of third asylum, the camp system served as an attempt to prepare Cambodian refugees for their lives in the United States or elsewhere. But camp life, despite supporting limited agriculture for some, was a far cry from their accustomed agrarian lifestyle. Compared to the ways Cambodians had been forced to scrounge in secret to survive the previous years, however, the camps were often bountiful. Volunteers from around the globe poured into the camps to provide succor for the Cambodian people, and basic services were later expanded to include cultural-orientation programs designed to ameliorate the shock of being thrust into a “modern”

¹⁶⁴ Vickery, “Refugee Politics,” 294-96, 300-11; Robinson, *Terms of Refuge*, 89-91; see also “Status Reports-Border,” “Status Reports-Undocumented/No Food [I, II, and III],” no box number, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records; Someth, *Cambodian Witness*, 262-68. The national circumstances at the end of the decade resulted in Khmer Rouge soldiers fulfilling criteria that at least partially qualified them as refugees, and, owing to the regional and international political situation, neither Bangkok, nor Beijing, nor Washington was particularly perturbed by programs that fed Khmer Rouge soldiers, as Khmer Rouge soldiers were enemies of the Hanoi-backed PRK. Foreign correspondent T. D. Allman wrote in a cable to the *Pacific News Service* from Siem Reap in 1982: “in spite of President Reagan’s anti-communist rhetoric, Washington is one of the Khmer Rouge’s main supporters: under the guise of U.S. ‘refugee relief,’ American food and medicines go directly to Pol Pot’s forces.” See T. D. Allman, “International Law of the Jungle Threatens Cambodian Future,” 2, *Pacific News Service* [1982], Cambodia: Sihanouk Other Letters [Packet], box 2: Cambodia (1969-2000), T. D. Allman papers. See also, Warren I. Cohen, *America’s Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, 5th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 217-27.

and “advanced” society. Although, depending on their socioeconomic backgrounds and other factors, refugees had a range of different experiences in the camps, many were able to reestablish a level of control over their own lives that had been completely lost in the preceding years.¹⁶⁵

Water was essential in the camps, required for cooking, drinking, and cleaning. In some cases, water was trucked into the camps by international organizations. In 1987, within one month, a hundred million liters of water arrived by tanker truck to Site II camp, with more than two hundred deliveries a day.¹⁶⁶ Smaller camps, such as Kamput, may have been more dependent on a system of wells. A photograph collection from international volunteer Anne Ripley, who spent time in both Kamput and Khao-I-Dang, showed that residents of Kamput accessing water through a local pump, it was (according to Ripley’s caption on the back side of one photo) “usually dry by afternoon,” and so refugees also relied on a nearby river, located about one mile outside the camp.¹⁶⁷ In another photo, a crew of about twenty men pose for the camera, nametags on shirts (though not all the men wear shirts), standing on mound of dirt outside a building; on the

¹⁶⁵ Cambodia scholar Michael Vickery criticizes the international efforts and their selective deployment as a geopolitical tactic on behalf of the US and Thai governments, to siphon away human and financial capital from the regime in Phnom Penh. The Thai government seemed to acknowledge as early as February of 1981 that the camps had caused a “magnet effect.” Mason and Brown are also critical of the camp system, finding that the aid programs caused a great deal of harm by protracting the war over Cambodia by serving as an inexhaustible resource for the various military factions operating near the border. See Vickery, “Refugee Politics,” quote on 295, 293-331; Astri Suhrke, “Indochinese Refugees and American Policy,” *The World Today* 37, no. 2 (February 1981): 54-62; Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, 184.

¹⁶⁶ W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1998), 92.

¹⁶⁷ Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [water—premium product people on water route], ca. 1980, and untitled photograph [local pump], ca. 1979, including writing on back, box 2, Ripley Collection.

reverse of the photo, Ripley describes the men as a “public works crew—at the pump house,” and notes that a pipeline fed into the camp as much as fifty-five thousand gallons of water a day.¹⁶⁸ Although ground wells “honeycombed” the extensive networks of gardens in Kamput, they had to be drilled ten to twenty feet deep due to a thick layer of clay on the surface, which made the water bad for drinking though terrific for irrigation.¹⁶⁹

Water moved through the camps by manual labor, sometimes on the shoulders of children. They carried two buckets of water at a time, the buckets attached by some kind of thread to a flexible wooden pole, draped over a preferred shoulder. The same kind of manpower moved water from tanker trucks in larger camps like Khao-I-Dang. As French notes, proximity to water tanks increased the value of particular tracts of land and often assigned to agency buildings or small businesses.¹⁷⁰ Even still, water available in the camps was described by a visitor, Elaine Kenseth-Abel, as “polluted (...) many people got sick from it. Sometimes you had to put your shirt between the bucket and your mouth

¹⁶⁸ Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [Kim’s Public Works Crew], ca. 1980, including writing on back, box 2, Ripley Collection.

¹⁶⁹ Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [wells honeycombed the gardens], ca. 1980, including writing on back, box 2, Ripley Collection.

¹⁷⁰ Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [girl carries two buckets of water], ca. 1980, untitled photograph [water—premium product people on water route]; and untitled photograph [local pump], including writing on the back; box 2, Ripley Collection; “Camp de Kao I Dang,” INA Politique, video, 01:06-01:16, July 4, 1980, <https://youtu.be/aTwnuJTBgas>; French, “Enduring Holocaust, Surviving History,” 115-16. We can see this kind of carriage system in Khao-I-Dang in the video footage. See also Elaine Kenseth-Abel, untitled photograph [Cambodian carries water with a yoke], box 1, Elaine Kenseth-Abel Photos Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, W. E. B. DuBois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Amherst, MA (hereinafter referred to as “Elaine Kenseth-Abel Photos Collection”).

to screen out the filth.”¹⁷¹ Carol Milardo Floriani, a volunteer nurse, wrote that the refugees often invited volunteers into their homes to offer tea and/or food, and that “one cannot refuse an offer (...) but we ask that the tea be boiled and that the food be thoroughly cooked.”¹⁷²

Ostensibly, control over their kitchens, which had been lost under the Khmer Rouge, had been returned to the refugees in the camps. They received food and cookware from the volags, although some cases of communal cooking existed in the camps as well. “Huge caldrons of rice were prepared each day in a central kitchen,” Teeda Butt Mam recalled, “The food was bland and filling.”¹⁷³ Not all accounts were so disappointed. Kiev Samo, a refugee in Khao-I-Dang, recalled the camp as a second chance, stating, “[it] was a rebirth for my family (...) when I first arrived, American people (...) provided us rice, dishes, pots, blankets, oil, and some other food.”¹⁷⁴ Darina Siv, who arrived in Khao-I-Dang in January 1980, wrote that her camp-section’s group leader “distributed a container to carry water, bags of rice, sardines, and a cooking pot to each family.”¹⁷⁵ Someth wrote that, in another camp, 007, a beautiful woman, who earned money as a smuggler, shared a meal with him consisting of lean pork cooked with garlic and

¹⁷¹ Elaine Kenseth-Abel, description of photographs, point 53, box 1, Elaine Kenseth-Abel Photos Collection.

¹⁷² Carol Milardo Floriani, “Life in a Camp,” *The American Journal of Nursing* 80, no. 11 (November 1980): 2030; see also Khon Tep, interview by Donna M. Rottier, June 28, 1994, transcript, 4-5, Oral History Interviews: Asian and African American Residents of Holland, https://digitalcommons.hope.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=min_res.

¹⁷³ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, 45-46; Joan D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), 275.

¹⁷⁴ Kiev Samo, Cambodians in California Project, Kiev interview 1989, 14:9, quoted in Chan, *Survivors*, 51.

¹⁷⁵ Darina Siv, *Never Come Back*, 147-48.

lemongrass and a glass of ice water—the first glass of ice water he’d had in five years, to say nothing of the meat.¹⁷⁶ In the camp’s black markets, it was possible to find just about anything. Teeda’s family enriched their diets through regularly purchasing food and supplies on the black market to feed themselves. Student volunteers who served in the camps, recalled seeing for sale “fruit, cooking oil, ducklings, (...) fish, (...) vegetables, Coca Cola, Chinese noodles, soy sauce, fish sauce.”¹⁷⁷

Ripley also remembered that small, illegal markets were quite common inside Kamput. One of her photographs captures one such market and shows a young boy, about ten years old, standing behind a small, simple table of machined wood, a slew of wares spread out over the top, including two silver bowls with contents overflowing. In the photo, the boy’s “customers” are three girls, probably in the same age bracket as the seller, and one carries a toddler (who is half the size of the carrier) on her hip. Beneath the table are bunches of greens, although whatever was grown at the root is indistinguishable in the picture. On the reverse of the photograph, Ripley writes the boy was selling pineapples. The image suggests that children in the camps—as they had in the past—played an important role in the household economy and were sometimes responsible for buying, selling, or trading foods at the market. The markets, however,

¹⁷⁶ Someth, *Cambodian Witness*, 261.

¹⁷⁷ Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [small time market], ca. 1980, including writing on back, box 2, Ripley Collection; Criddle and Teeda, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 275; Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, 40.

were against camp rules. Ripley notes they were closed down after “Col. Nissae came back” to the camp.¹⁷⁸

Another photo shows what a meal might look like with black market goods; in the picture, we see a woman preparing a group meal, four large dishes already filled with plump chunks of fresh pineapple, and a meal that included some kind of meat to be served with a rice salad. The woman smiles vibrantly for the camera. One hand clutches a dish, the other wields an oversized metal ladle or spatula with a wooden handle, similar in style to utensils available in Asian markets in the United States, the implement hovering above several large, silver cooking pots with rounded bottoms and black handles on the sides at the top.¹⁷⁹ Ripley’s photos also depict cooking technology in the camp. One shows a woman working what could be rice or beans with a bamboo winnow, crouching in front of one of the “little stoves” used in the camps. According to Ripley, a “usual meal” was “rice and some greens and protein.”¹⁸⁰ The little stoves were a simple, yet ingenious design; they stand no higher than a foot off the ground, with an opening on for wood or other fuel, and a gradually convex platform on top that supports the cooking vessel without sealing off the interior to promote airflow and even heat distribution. The little stoves appear to be the kind of clay stoves that many Cambodians would have used and that are still in use in Cambodia today. In addition to the clay stoves, Cambodians

¹⁷⁸ Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [small time market], box 2, Ripley Collection.

¹⁷⁹ Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [Sati’s wife preparing a festive lunch], ca. 1979, including writing on back, box 2, Ripley Collection.

¹⁸⁰ Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [the usual meal], ca. 1980, including writing on back, box 2, Ripley Collection.

likely cooked over open fires, as “traditional” Cambodian modes of cooking were flexible to the shifting environment.¹⁸¹

But if one couldn’t afford to buy from the black market, even the most destitute could typically access food through the international organizations. Someth, described food in Khao-I-Dang as so plentiful that families could even grow tired of their regular diet of [canned] “sardines and rice”—the same sardines and rice distributed to Darina Siv. Many refugees opted not to take up work on behalf of international aid agencies or with the camp construction crew or the administration because, among other things, payment came in the form of extra rations, and “nobody really needed extra rations.”¹⁸² In terms of availability of food, life in the camps was not only tolerable, but even provided a standard of living that exceeded pre-war conditions.¹⁸³ According to Linda Mason and Roger Brown, who served the camps as student volunteers, rations per person distributed by the volags may include two cups of rice, a couple tablespoons of vegetable oil, thirty grams of dried fish and fifty grams of legumes, and a bit of salt.

Although the plentitude of foods offered an overture towards normalcy, the cycle of rice did not exist in the refugee camps as it had historically in villages. The camps did support limited agriculture. In Kamput, refugees worked garden beds on the outskirts of the camp and woven throughout the camp. Ripley’s photos show Chinese mustard and radishes, as well as two types of greens. But one Cambodian man who lived in Site II

¹⁸¹ Ripley, untitled photograph [the usual meal], including writing on back, box 2, Ripley Collection.

¹⁸² Someth May, *Cambodian Witness*, 269.

¹⁸³ Vickery, “Refugee Politics,” 298, 310-13, 320-21.

stated he couldn't find satisfaction in growing fruits and vegetables because his life situation remained in flux: "when we go away, we must leave everything behind."¹⁸⁴ So even though he was able to hold onto traditional agrarian practices, uncertainty denied him the pleasure of working the land.

In the camps, refugees dug gardens either by hand or with machinery. One of Ripley's photographs shows a piece of heavy machinery, perhaps a bulldozer, which appears to be actively reshaping the land, certainly for infrastructure, or perhaps to help level off garden beds. A later photograph shows a woman carrying produce from the camp gardens: captured in the late morning or early afternoon, the photo shows a woman walking along a well-leveled, dirt boulevard, the path adjoined by small, white-walled structures; a bounty of leafy, green vegetables occupies a cloth bag, bloated to the size of a pair of car tires standing side-by-side, bundled and resting dutifully atop the woman's head, totally hiding her face in shadow, shielding her from the harsh sun, balanced with just one hand, her other hand occupied with securing a naked baby against her chest.¹⁸⁵

A schedule of working in the gardens during the early morning makes the most sense: Khmer people structured their days so as to beat the sun, and were often at work by six o'clock in the morning or earlier, with a rest period scheduled around ten. Rady, a

¹⁸⁴ Various photos, including writing on the reverse, Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [gardens], ca. 1980, box 2, Ripley Collection; French, "Enduring Holocaust, Surviving History," 111.

¹⁸⁵ See, e.g., Anne Ripley, untitled photograph [gardens within the living compounds], ca. 1980; untitled photograph [Kamput '80 more gardens]; untitled photograph [Water- the premium product]; and untitled photograph [girl carries two buckets of water], untitled photograph [female w/ child carrying produce from garden], ca. 1981, box 2, Ripley Collection. Bulldozer appears in [girl carries two buckets of water] picture.

twenty-year-old Khmer woman who lived in Kamput in March of 1980, explained her work day began at five o'clock in the morning, when she rose to cook a meal for the family with which she was staying.¹⁸⁶

In addition to the produce of these gardens, inhabitants of the volag archipelago ate imported foods, not all of which were to their taste. After years of eating thin gruel, many refugees were undoubtedly happy to be eating rice *at all*; but rather than rice that had been grown in their own fields and paddies, or purchased from familiar faces in the local market, the refugees ate rice grown in Thailand, the Philippines, and occasionally India; as Mason and Brown noted during their tenure in the camps, refugees often remarked on the particularities of each type of rice, and always arrived to the same conclusion: they preferred Cambodian rice.¹⁸⁷

For a people who ate rice with every meal, they could tell the difference in taste, quality, and texture. In the prewar years, farmers in Svay listed more than “twenty-five varieties of rice, each with certain distinctions in form (e.g., length, shape), color (white or dark), taste, or other attributes.”¹⁸⁸ In addition to imported rice, relief programs imported fish: at first, canned fish from Japan, but later dried, salted—and cheaper—fish

¹⁸⁶ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, 63; *Refugee Women in First Asylum Camps: The Indochinese in Thailand and Hong Kong*, prepared by the Equity Policy Center (Washington, DC: 1981), 45.

¹⁸⁷ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, 46; The World Federation For Mental Health Committee on Refugees and Migrants, “The Mental Health Crisis in Site Two,” February 1989, research Materials Re: Mental Health in the Site Two Refugee Camp (1 of 4) folder, box 1, Cambodian American Women and Youth Oral History Projects Collection, MC 814, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Harvard, MA.

¹⁸⁸ May Mayko Ebihara, *Svay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia*, ed. Andrew C. Mertha and with an intr. by Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 103, ProQuest Ebrary.

from Thailand; the latter of which, refugees complained, “caused sore throats and spoiled the taste of good rice.”¹⁸⁹

International organizations trucked food and water into the camps, but refugees received their fare in ever-changing and often inequitable ways. A UNICEF report in 1980 claimed that “89 percent of the rice and 80 percent of the oil” that made its way into Mak Mun camp “never reached households,” but was instead diverted for resale on a secondary market; similarly, administrators in Mak Mun and elsewhere were known to falsify numbers to bolster the quantity of aid sent to their camp.¹⁹⁰ Someth May described a similar practice among both corrupt officials and also the camp’s inhabitants. Families might register children as orphans because they received the best rations (tinned chicken curry, for example), but also in the hopes that these children would be adopted by sponsors overseas and that parents could later “stage a dramatic and touching reunion.”¹⁹¹

International actors tried to stop corruption by varying their methods of delivery. At several of the smaller camps, they distributed directly to refugees; not long after distribution began, any sense of order broke down and the refugees made a mad rush for the supplies. At another camp, they tried a “women only” ration system, where every woman and girl above the age of eight received close to three times the normal ration (the multiplier having been selected in response to the ratio of girls and women to non-military men and boys in camp). A typical approach was to route supplies through camp

¹⁸⁹ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, 46.

¹⁹⁰ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, 55, 52-55, 69.

¹⁹¹ Someth, *Cambodian Witness*, 270-71.

elites, almost exclusively men, as they were more likely to possess foreign language skills or to have held public positions in the past; such a distribution system meant that women had to rely on men to secure their provisions. In some cases, the Thai military carried out the final leg of food distribution unilaterally, with no oversight, and in other cases the UN kept a watchful eye on the entire process.¹⁹²

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1978, only those Cambodians who had managed to get placed into an UNHCR holding center during a three-month window, from October 1979 to January 1980, were eligible for resettlement as refugees. At the time, the eligible population numbered about 160,000, although thousands more managed to subsequently sneak into the camps. In 1980, U.S. President Jimmy Carter signed the Refugee Act of 1980, amending provisions that had been enacted in 1962. The new Refugee Act addressed the cultural and financial needs of refugees expected to be resettled in the United States.¹⁹³

To achieve “effective resettlement and absorption,” the law launched cultural orientation programs at staging camps in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.¹⁹⁴ Officials enrolled Indochinese refugees ages sixteen to fifty-five in programs to learn English and become familiar with American patterns of living. One resource manual used

¹⁹² Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, 78-83; French, “Enduring Holocaust, Surviving History,” 127, 127n; *Refugee Women in First Asylum Camps: The Indochinese in Thailand and Hong Kong*, prepared by the Equity Policy Center (Washington, DC: 1981), 14.

¹⁹³ Chan, *Survivors*, 60-67; Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 102 (1980), 1.

¹⁹⁴ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” Washington DC: Southeast Asia Regional Service Center, [1982], 5, page numbers refer to digital navigation, https://archive.org/details/ERIC_ED221070/page/n1/mode/2up.

in such camps described the purpose of the programs as being “to facilitate their achieving self-sufficiency.”¹⁹⁵

Between March and May 1981, a team of researchers reported on conditions across the various refugee camps, inquiring as to whether camp programs were successful in mitigating some of the major issues in resettlement. Reflecting the neoliberalism of the new administration under President Ronald Reagan, the report’s first conclusion was that camp life, particularly in Thailand, encouraged dependence and welfare habits. The report claimed that men in particular were resistant to accept work and could get away with refusal of international aid because their wives worked instead. Astutely, the report advised that men shouldn’t be characterized as “lazy or less adaptable than women,” but rather that the types of work available in the camps were ill-matched to the traditional gendered work carried out by the men. The opposite was true for women, who could carry out more traditional tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or taking care of children; by contrast, men were expected to haul garbage or clean latrines.¹⁹⁶

A second conclusion criticized the efficacy of the cultural orientation programs, which “tend[ed] to be too abstract and general. (...) The language and orientation programs, despite their use to the refugees, probably serve the Americans more than anyone else by making them feel more ‘comfortable’ with their new compatriots.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 5-6.

¹⁹⁶ *Refugee Women in First Asylum Camps*, first page of front matter, I, 1-2, 18-26. The researchers were Astri Suhrke, Ratchanaeekorn Dibbayawan, Nguyen Kimchi, Boon Song Klausner, Amara Pongsapich, Carol Rice, and Bertha Romero.

¹⁹⁷ *Refugee Women in First Asylum Camps*, 2.

Researchers also reported that refugees felt the classes were more of “an obligation” rather than “an enjoyable and enriching experience,” even though under less formal circumstances, refugees were “eager to learn about life in the U.S.”¹⁹⁸ In other words, the cultural orientation programs were designed in a way that failed to consider the refugee’s unique cultural and historical traditions. Lessons in the program failed to take a refugee’s perspective: rather than teaching them how to prepare ethnic meals with foods available in an American supermarket, for example, the lesson might instead teach refugees how to use a knife and fork; while the former could have aided in adjustment, the latter served only to make Americans more comfortable.¹⁹⁹

In early 1980, only one person per family could enroll in the classes due to an insufficient number of teachers.²⁰⁰ The most definitive work on the cultural orientation camps is James W. Tollefson’s *Alien Winds: The Reeducation of America’s Indochinese Refugees*. Over the course of three years in the mid-1980s, Tollefson served as a teacher in several facilities, primarily at the camp in the Philippines.²⁰¹ In *Alien Winds*, Tollefson interrogates what he defines as “the process of becoming an American,” starting by questioning the identities and cultural values of Indochinese refugees, and subsequently to questioning the blueprint of the American character towards which Indochinese refugees were told to strive.²⁰² Tollefson derives a list of thirteen underlying assumptions

¹⁹⁸ *Refugee Women in First Asylum Camps*, 26.

¹⁹⁹ *Refugee Women in First Asylum Camps*, 26.

²⁰⁰ Chan, *Survivors*, 77, 182.

²⁰¹ James W. Tollefson, *Alien Winds: The Reeducation of America’s Indochinese Refugees* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), xi.

²⁰² Tollefson, *Alien Winds*, xvi.

about the program's curriculum.²⁰³ They are all suggestive of the *zeitgeist* espoused by the New Right of the 1980s. For example, one lesson involved a role-play where students were split into two groups: one that receives work for pay, another that receives welfare checks; teachers were instructed to treat welfare recipients rudely—even hostilely—whilst students who received paychecks were to be “treated generously by beneficent employers, who grant a raise and a Christmas bonus during the game.”²⁰⁴ Tollefson also argues the program failed to equip students with the language to perform in supervisory capacities, as refugees were not taught how to “produce supervisors’ language,” but instead how to listen and respond as mere workers; they were taught “how to ask for permission, but not how to give orders; how to apologize, but not how to disagree; how to comply, but not how to complain; and how to ask about American customs, but not how to explain their own.”²⁰⁵ The cultural orientation program disparaged reliance on welfare, favoring immediate entry into the workforce. It also made clear that the refugee skillset qualified them for little else than positions of minimal value, did not encourage them to think in a managerial capacity, while projecting the fantasy that due diligence and hard work would ensure “rapid upward mobility.”²⁰⁶

One of Tollefson's most insightful findings relates to the cultural orientation program's subordination of nativistic refugee cultures to the hegemonic American values.

²⁰³ Tollefson, 70-83.

²⁰⁴ Tollefson, 72; Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 382.

²⁰⁵ Tollefson, *Alien Winds*, 75.

²⁰⁶ Tollefson, 80-82.

Students were taught that Americans would be “offended” if refugees “[wore] Asian clothing, [ate] ‘strong smelling’ food, share[d] food from a single plate, ‘[squatted] or [sat] cross-legged on a chair, or [spoke] their own language to Asian Americans.”²⁰⁷ The orientation program discouraged refugees from outwardly exhibiting elements of their cultural heritage; the warning about “strong-smelling” foods is particularly barbed, as the major protein in the Cambodian diet was fish. Two common Cambodian ingredients, *prahok*, or fermented fish paste, and *tuk trey*, or fish sauce, have a strong smell.²⁰⁸

Lesson plans from the cultural orientation manuals reveal the deep disparities between Americans and Cambodians, indicative of the steep learning curve ahead for many. The potential for misapprehension was vast. When Robert Chau recalled his experiences to his daughter, one lesson he remembered clearly was that refugees were admonished not to drink water from toilets: “it’s clean and clear, but that’s not drinking water.”²⁰⁹ For a people unfamiliar with American-style bathrooms—running water, indoor plumbing, sit-down toilets—that was a pertinent lesson.

A special video report by Jim Laurie shows how these programs could play out in real-time: in one scene, a group of women (there are at least eight in-frame, but there are more outside of it) stand in a small, model American kitchen. There is a plain, white

²⁰⁷ Tollefson, *Alien Winds*, 78.

²⁰⁸ See, e.g., Christine M. Su, “Editor’s Note,” in “Food & Identity,” *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>.

²⁰⁹ Robert Chau, “Preparation for America,” January 16, 2022, in *Death in Cambodia, Life in America*, produced by Dorothy Chow, podcast, audio, 05:30-6:45. <https://www.deathincambodiapodcast.com/episodes/episode/4bee013a/episode-27-season-finale-reborn-america-here-i-come>.

refrigerator, a fire extinguisher, a garbage can, a single-basin sink under a faucet with two knobs, cupboards both above and below a limited amount of countertop space, and a gas range. “This, is, my, kitchen,” the women recite in unison; another woman, who leads the group, though she herself has strong accent, prompts them again: “what is this?” The choir: “This is my kitchen.” The woman: “Yeah, my kitchen.” The woman leading the group demonstrates what it looks like to open the freezer and places inside what appears to be a prop of a roasted chicken. Later, the women crowd around the gas stovetop and take turns practicing the movement of pushing food around in a Western-style skillet, although there appears to be nothing in the pan, and the burner unlit.²¹⁰

According to the manuals, the curriculum developed out of discussions between resettlement personnel, the reorientation teachers and refugees. The manuals included lessons on kitchen appliances. Recalling that, in Svay, any dinner scraps could be fed to livestock foraging through the village, refugees were instructed on how to use garbage disposals: “do not let food scraps (...) go down the drain,” except in some cases, where “sinks have built in garbage disposals—*DO NOT* put your hand in it while in operation. While in operation, water must be running to wash down the chopped up food.”²¹¹ Other

²¹⁰ Jim Laurie, “Cambodia Refugees in Thailand October 1979,” [1984?], April 14, 2014, streaming, 0:00-0:055 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6H8d3gnSws>. Although the title given to the post asserts a date of 1979, that is undoubtedly inaccurate, as the news anchor introducing the clip states that “in the past ten years, nearly a hundred and fifteen thousand Cambodians have left their homeland to come to this country;” for 1979, that count would be inaccurate, and would instead have been closer to thirteen thousand; a more likely date would be ’84 or ’85. Since the date is inaccurate, in order to avoid confusion, subsequent citations will exclude the erroneous date from the title. My estimates of the numbers are based on unpublished data from Linda Gordon, Immigration and Naturalization Service, which are recorded in Chan, *Survivors*, 80.

²¹¹ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 100, 6, emphasis in original.

lessons included the use of a gas stove, both self-lighting and those requiring matches; how the hot-water heater works, the use of electric stoves, the use of the oven, the use of indoor ventilation in the kitchen, the use of a dishwasher, where to dispose of oil, bones, paper, or plastic; how to clean the range, and to defrost the freezer, and much more. Just one manual runs in excess of seven hundred pages.²¹²

Another significant difference involved shopping for groceries. “In America, most people shop on a weekly basis for food,” the manual explained, “(...) foods can be kept fresh in a refrigerator for up to a week.”²¹³ Rural Cambodians, who visited markets and tended to their gardens on a daily basis, would need to adjust. Two sample roleplay scenarios included in the manual are highly revealing:

[#1]

Cashier: Oh, are you here shopping again today?

Refugee: I want to buy fresh food every day.

(...)

Cashier: Most of our customers shop once a week because their food will stay fresh in the refrigerator for that long. Anyway, the store only restocks the shelves once or twice a week.

Refugee: That sounds like a good idea, because it costs me a lot of money in bus fare everyday to come to the grocery store.²¹⁴

[#2]

Husband: Look chicken is on sale for 79 cents a pound!

Wife: Let's buy 10 lbs. as its [sic] so cheap.

Husband: 10 lbs! We can't eat 10lbs of chicekn [sic].

Wife: Oh, we can wrap it up carefully and store it in the freezer.

Husband: That sounds like an economical way of buying meat.²¹⁵

16. ²¹² Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 103-10, 115-

²¹³ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 126.

²¹⁴ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 127-28.

²¹⁵ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 128.

Refugees learned about different types of markets in the United States: supermarkets (where almost any item for the home could be purchased), grocery stores and convenience stores (trafficking in small-volume essentials, convenient but more expensive), specialty stores (bakeries and butcheries, but also “stores that sell special ethnic foods, like Vietnamese or Chinese food (...) these stores are generally found in urban areas only; don’t expect to find them everywhere[,]”) and food co-ops.²¹⁶ “Farmers markets,” declared a similar lesson, “are probably the closest thing to the Southeast Asian market.”²¹⁷

Course materials also taught students how to shop around, or buy generic brands, use coupons and circulars to save money, and about sales taxes. Students learned, contrary to their experiences in village markets, that the prices of foods in the United States were fixed and non-negotiable.²¹⁸ Village markets differed from u.S. supermarkets in other ways too. The village market had been a place to “exchange news and information,” and haggling had been a source of amusement and satisfaction; shoppers built relationships with vendors so as to obtain special items for special occasions.²¹⁹ These were not experiences refugees could expect at an American supermarket. Refugees

²¹⁶ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 279-80, 291.

²¹⁷ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 300.

²¹⁸ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 30, 279-95.

²¹⁹ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 2,” Washington DC: Southeast Asia Regional Service Center, [1982], 373, page number refers to digital navigation, https://archive.org/details/ERIC_ED221071.

also learned about nutrition and hunting license and were warned not to hunt or trap in public places such as the park.²²⁰

The value of the cultural orientation programs was probably more limited than robust. It was impossible for teachers to convey the full contents of these materials to their students in only six months. Refugees took English-language classes at the same time, further limiting the amount of time for cultural training.²²¹ Nevertheless, understanding the cultural orientation programs is valuable in understanding the Cambodian adaptation to the American environment. The training risked patronizing refugees and echoed “civilizing” narratives of the U.S. past.²²² But this history illustrates just how *alien* the systems, gadgets, and life practices of Americans must have seemed to the refugees.

When leaving the camps, refugees needed to streamline their possessions. It was a long and difficult trip to get to the U.S. from Galang camp in Indonesia. Refugees took a truck from their camp to the harbor and, after a five-hour-long boat ride, stayed at Hawkin’s Road Transit Camp. At Hawkins, officials provided no shelter. They told refugees to dress to keep the bugs out and to bring something to keep dry if it rained. They were given money in Singapore to buy food, which they could do during the day when they were allowed off campus. They received important travel documents, and when all was in order, they made final preparations. Officials told them to pack light:

²²⁰ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 482, 503.

²²¹ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 2;” Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 3.”

²²² *Refugee Women in First Asylum Camps*, 26.

“rice cookers, pots and pans, beddings, fans, etc.,” were too bulky.²²³ With their papers in hand and their material lives in order, officials took the refugees to Changi Airport, where they boarded a flight to the United States.²²⁴

Refugees were both optimistic and nervous about the future in the U.S. The video footage of the woman and the group—laughing as they are shown how to use an American-style toilet—captures their spirit, striving towards the future. They had survived war, genocide, and life in the camps. After that, they connected with someone in the United States willing to sponsor them. Adjusting to a new culture would be uncomfortable, challenging, and frightening; but after everything the refugees had endured, they could at least sometimes meet such feelings with laughter. When I spoke with my aunt about this research, she laughed as well and said she wished cameras had been as ubiquitous in 1982 as they are today. There would have been so much to look back on and laugh, she thought. She recalled for me memory of a Cambodian woman in America in the early days, walking down a busy street, wearing fashionable clothes that she had received from her sponsor, including a pair of high heels, and carrying a brown paper grocery bag on top of her head, balancing it with one hand.²²⁵

²²³ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 602-03.

²²⁴ Center for Applied Linguistics, “Cultural Orientation Resource Manual, vol. 1,” 603.

²²⁵ That fact that many refugees were eager to sponsor family members to come to the United States is evident in correspondence with Elaine Kenseth-Abel of the Family Reunification Advocacy Project. See the following folders, “Correspondence About Advocacy Reports, 1845-85,” “Status Reports-Border,” “Status Reports-Undocumented/No Food [I, II, and III],” no box number, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records.

Chapter 4

In 1982, the Cambodian half of my family set foot on American soil for the first time. Leaving behind the cramped quarters in camp Khao-I-Dang, where they'd stayed for nearly three years, they—my mother; her eldest sister, my aunt; and my uncle came to the city of Grand Forks, North Dakota, where a local family had agreed to be their sponsor. With the help of their sponsor, the three of them moved into a small apartment, where my aunt had a frightening experience with a match-light stovetop. They had acquired some English while the camps, but still struggled to make themselves understood to their hosts. Fortunately, as many as two hundred Cambodians had been resettled in North Dakota in the preceding years, and the sponsoring agency called on the services of a Cambodian woman with strong English, who came and acted as a go-between.²²⁶

During the first few months of my family's stay, their sponsor brought them cash to cover their expenses, about fifty dollars per week. A little more than half of that was sufficient to cover groceries for the three of them. The sponsor discouraged them from applying for government relief. As the sponsor had been working through the local church, other members of the congregation could be called upon to volunteer resources, and the pious people of Grand Forks donated bicycles to help the refugees get around. One member of the congregation operated an American-style restaurant—burgers,

²²⁶ Strand and Jones Jr., *Indochinese Refugees in America*, 149-59; Chin and Bun, interview, 41. The Cambodian refugee population in North Dakota was reported by the CDC, as Strand and Jones note.

chicken, fries—and within a few months of arrival, my aunt began working as a dishwasher.²²⁷

The bicycles provided by the congregation were of great help in getting to work, though riding a bicycle through the snowy, Grand-Forks winter made refugees a spectacle to behold; from the luxury of heated vehicles, bemused locals gaped in bewilderment. The bicycles doubled as transport for groceries, though the Grand Forks supermarket carried few of the foods the Cambodians were accustomed to eating. It probably carried some variety of American-grown rice, which is broadly considered to be rather bland. Even at as much as double the price, imported jasmine rice was preferred. My family relied on the English-savvy Cambodian interpreter, who had a car, to spirit them to the bustling hub of Fargo, where they could purchase rice, fish sauce, soy sauce, and even *prahok*, though their limited budget kept their purchases modest.²²⁸

Based on its availability and affordability, chicken became a staple in the household. Too tender, mild in flavor, and lacking heads and feet (yet with overinflated breasts), the look and the taste of factory-farmed chickens was unfamiliar at first, but, baked in an oven with just salt and garlic, and served with fresh tomatoes, lettuce, and

²²⁷ Chin and Bun, interview, 4-5, 40-41.

²²⁸ Chin and Bun, interview, 5-6, 24; MaryCarol Hopkins, *Braving a New World: Cambodian (Khmer) Refugees in an American City* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 18; Anne R. Kaplan, Marjorie A. Hoover, and Willard B. Moore, *The Minnesota Ethnic Food Book* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 257; Ronnie J. Booxbaum, “The Fabric of Cambodian Life: Sarongs at Home, Dunagrees at Work” (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1995), 177-78. The perception of American rice as bland has been my experience, and both Hopkins and (anthropologist) Ronnie J. Booxbaum observed this during their fieldwork; the prices I quote are taken from Kaplan, Hoover, and Moore.

cucumbers, and a Cambodian dipping sauce (garlic and chili peppers macerated with lime juice or white vinegar; with salt, sugar, and fish sauce to taste) and a heaping helping of prized jasmine rice, American chickens could be very palatable indeed. Sometimes my aunt prepared a simple, sour soup with chicken, using lemon or lime juice as a substitute for tamarind. In the early years, such meals were prepared in the Cambodian way: close to the ground, whether squatting, kneeling, or sitting, and they were probably eaten that way too; as late as the early 1990s, my sister can remember eating while seated on reed mats unfurled on the floor of a conventional Minnesota home.²²⁹

Although they had not been accompanied by very young children upon first resettling in the United States, the family grew quickly. Within a year, immigration officials reached out with a photograph of two boys, ages eleven and twelve, who lived in Khao-I-Dang as orphans. They were nephews of the Grand Forks trio, born of a sister who never came to the United States. The boys joined the family in North Dakota, which created its own set of challenges, as the boys went to school, where they were exposed to American culture.²³⁰

²²⁹ Chin and Bun, interview, 4, 24. There are a variety of contemporary recipes that exist for the dipping sauce: the preferred chili is the Thai, or “bird’s eye” chili; some recipes call for water or coconut water for dilution; or the inclusion of roasted peanuts, or cilantro; or the use of brown sugar. I have even seen monosodium glutamate (msg) added. As with all seasoning in Cambodian cuisine, one should prepare the sauce to taste. See Jameson, *Cooking the Cambodian Way*, 18; Rotanak Ros and Nataly Lee, *Nhum: Recipes from a Cambodian Home Kitchen* (Phnom Penh: Rotanak Food Media Co., 2019), 176; Monteiro and Neustadt, *The Elephant Walk Cookbook*, 49, 183; Joannès Rivière and Maja Smend, *Cambodian Cooking: A Humanitarian Project in Collaboration with Act for Cambodia* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 2005), 19, page numbers refer to digital navigation in Adobe Digital Editions version 4.5; Jack E. Tyler, “The Khmer of Atlanta: A Community in Formation” (master’s thesis, George State University, 1987), 616.

²³⁰ “Refugees: Families Apart,” *Minneapolis Star & Tribune Company*, July 24, 1983, 6, News Articles Collection for Xerox Folder, box 1 of 7, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records. At this

Motivated either by the cold Dakota winters or by pecuniary opportunity, within a few years of arrival, my aunt and uncle left Grand Forks for Lowell, Massachusetts, though not before providing their approval to a marriage between their younger sister and a language teacher. The newlyweds, my parents, took responsibility for the young boys. In Lowell, to extend their purchasing power, my aunt and uncle shared an apartment with another Cambodian family. By the end of the decade, U.S. born children, myself among them, further added to the family numbers.²³¹

junction, I will caution that the issue of age is of considerable importance, but its application must be appropriately tempered. In contrast with twenty-first-century—particularly suburban—US patterns of youth and adolescence, Cambodians around the age of eleven or twelve would have considerable responsibilities. As seen in chapter one, children participated in the household industry from an early age; approaching their teens, Cambodians would be entrusted to carry out important tasks such as cooking for the family, serving as a courier, handling money, etc. In that sense, it is not unlike Steve Hoffbeck’s observation that, before the advent of heavy machinery in Minnesota agriculture, a boy became a man the moment he could wield a scythe. Traditional life patterns were, of course, cataclysmically disrupted by the ordeals of the 1970; as such, we have only a fuliginous understanding of any theoretical notions of youth and/or childhood for this period. Still, as this chapter shows, the issue of age presents valid categories of analysis, with only partial fidelity to legacy lifeways, and which are neither totally Cambodian, nor American. On youth responsibilities in Cambodian culture, see “Understanding Cambodian Cultures,” 2, Folder 120, box 4, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records; see also Hoffbeck, *The Haymakers*, 27.

²³¹ Chin and Bun, interview, 39-40. Dating and courtship were not practiced in Cambodia; rather, marriages were arranged by parents. According to Svang Tor, single women could not go out with men until after marriage. As I understand it, my parents went on a few dates chaperoned by my uncle, but—at least by American standards—they married quickly. This kind of pattern occurred between George and Chanthy Chigas as well, who were engaged to be married in less than one month of having met each other. Cambodian American Sokcon Swing detailed the story of how her parents were married in Cambodia for the Stockton Cambodian Oral History Project; she added that when she had a boyfriend while in college, she did not inform her parents, since it was not traditional to go on dates in Cambodia—for her, she could respect her parents’ culture by not introducing them to her boyfriend unless she was absolutely certain she could spend her life with him. “Understanding Cambodian Cultures,” 1; Svang Tor, interview by Richard Mollica, December 1988 through February 1989, transcript, 127, Cambodian American Women: An Oral History Project, <https://www.harvardcambodianwomen.com/files/ugd/bce9098cb05074d9a0449ab819ecd7a8a7db02.pdf>; George Chigas, interview by Tom Ramkin, September 2, 1988, transcript, unpaginated, page 3, <https://archive.org/details/CLHOH-G-Chigas/page/n1/mode/2up>; Sokcon Swing, interview, January 29, 2013, video, 36:00-40:00, Stockton Cambodian Oral History Project, <http://www.stocktoncambodianoralhistoryproject.com/sokcon-swing-interview/>.

In Cambodia in the prewar era, Buddhist monks made rounds every morning and collected food and the names of the dead from villagers. Through prayer and consumption of the food, Buddhists believed that the spirits of the departed would be fed.²³² Cambodians attempted to replicate these practices in their new environments; in the early days, they affirmed their religious devotion by feeding the monks at an informal temple set up on the third floor of a tenement building at 20 N. Franklin Court in Lowell. In 1985, in nearby North Chelmsford, the Venerable Sao Khon Dhamathero opened the more official Trairatanaram Temple in a building formerly used by the Knights of Columbus. In both cases, the religious practice of feeding the monks was reversed: in the United States, the Cambodian people went to the temple to feed the monks, rather than the monks visiting the homes of the people.²³³

Lowell offered readier access to a variety of ethnic foods through Cambodian grocers. Refugees could also dine on Cambodian cuisine at eateries like Phnom Penh Restaurant or Le Petit Café. Despite such cultural and religious comforts the enclave city offered, a criminal element to the city—gang activity and racial animosity—drove my aunt and uncle to relocate their family to Minnesota, where they shared a house with my family. There, obligatory schooling for the children and occupations for the adults impeded cultural transmission. In prewar Cambodia, young girls participated in

²³² Chin and Bun, interview, 29-30.

²³³ *Cambodian Neighborhood Walking Tour* (Lowell, MA: n.d.), pamphlet interior; “Cambodians Drawn to Lowell,” *The Sun*, Lowell, Massachusetts, [1985], 3, Advocacy Outreach – Minnesota folder, box 92-017, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records; “Trairatanaram Temple,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, last modified July 9, 2019, <https://pluralism.org/trairatanaram-temple>.

agricultural labor and learned to prepare family meals at their mothers' knees; in the United States, a full workday and a full workday's worth of schooling and homework changed how this process unfolded.²³⁴

The experiences of my family reflect many of the historical processes that affected Cambodians and their foodways in their early years of living in the United States. This chapter examines a broad array of social and institutional pressures that impacted Cambodian refugee foodways upon resettlement. From the absence of traditional ingredients, to new rules and regulations; and from the American bonanza of industrial slaughterhouses, to the quotidian inculcation of school lunches, Cambodian foodways faced numerous challenges in their new contexts. Cambodians and Cambodian Americans faced these challenges in a variety of ways. Elders found it more difficult to transition to life in the United States compared to their children, and each negotiated the cultural encounter differently.

Children encountered American ways of eating through school, and selectively absorbed some of these practices. Women largely remained in command of the kitchen and faced challenges in accessing traditional ingredients. They also had to learn a new skillset to properly use an American kitchen. Men found that the American economy devalued the agrarian skillset. Further, necessary cultural adjustments undermined the

²³⁴ Chin and Bun, interview, 39-40. On a different occasion from when I conducted an oral history, when I shared details of my trip to Lowell with my aunt and uncle, they both remembered having eaten at Phnom Penh Restaurant. Additionally, my uncle specifically asked if I had gone to Bayon Market, and excitedly said that his old home had been only a few blocks away. A Cambodian man living in Lowell, whom I met during my trip, told me that, at least as of 2022, Le Petit Café was the oldest such restaurant in the city.

traditional family structure in a major way: how could the patriarchal family structure remain intact when parents depended on their children to help navigate their new environments, and often could not help with even elementary homework assignments? One Cambodian woman, a counselor in California, described the situation: “the assumption of parents that came here as first generation is that you listen to your parents, period; you don’t question it back. But in raising children in mainstream America, [the children] do not listen, so parents leave the educational system to their second generation, to their kid, even though their kid is six, seven, eight, nine years old.”²³⁵

As early as 1983, Cambodians living in Long Beach, California expressed concerns about the “loss” of culture.²³⁶ Refugees held relatively little pull in the face of the existing American hegemony, which they encountered in the workplace, in the market, and at school. The attenuation of existing cultural practices, to be subsumed by American values, was essentially the purpose of cultural orientation programs, which started in the camps. It was also the function played by sponsors who taught refugees how to be “American.” Cambodian refugees had to adjust to the American social compact. In order to succeed in the United States, they needed to stop behaving as Cambodians, and start behaving as Americans: they needed to tell time as Americans,

²³⁵ Leslie Asako Gladsjo, dir., “Pass or Fail in Cambodia Town,” *America by the Numbers* (Arlington, VA: PBS, 2014), 13:50-14:25, <https://www.pbs.org/video/america-numbers-pass-or-fail-cambodia-town/>.

²³⁶ “Long Beach Cambodians Fear Loss of Culture,” *Asian Week*, January 13, 1983, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/long-beach-cambodians-fear-loss-culture/docview/371376065/se-2>. On the concept of hegemony, see Adam David Morton, *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 87-110, ProQuest Ebrary.

speak like Americans, learn and teach like Americans, look like Americans, work and accumulate like Americans, and they needed to eat like Americans. One elder Cambodian lamented such pressures, saying, “I also thought that in America, the government [would] let refugees keep their natural cultures, because in this country there is freedom. Now I know it is not so.”²³⁷ An enduring theme in American history that elements of the population believe that inside every subaltern or foreigner is a little, true-blue American just waiting to be chiseled free from the stone prison of their culture.²³⁸

²³⁷ “Look Tha: A Former Buddhist Monk,” *Beyond the Killing Fields*, 60. One anonymous sponsor in Massachusetts complained that elder Cambodians “[didn’t] push themselves into the American dream,” but felt that this was acceptable because their children would be “more like [the sponsor];” in other words, that the children would grow up to be better adjusted to life in the United States. Consider also that contemporary critics of the US, such as Ibram X. Kendi—who, in so doing, quotes Louis Farrakhan—frame the unilateral placing of the goalposts (what I allude to as institutionally embedded in society) in a more unflattering light: “the real evil in America is the idea that undergirds the setup of the Western world, and that idea is called white supremacy.” Mike Cole, vis a vis social theorists Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, further details the corrosivity of hegemony in the context of schooling. See Cathy Schneider and Suellen Loyd, “An Informational Study on a Select Group of Cambodian Refugees and Their Sponsors” (n.p.: February 1986), 29, box 1, MS 341, Sylvia Forman Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA (hereinafter referred to as “Sylvia Forman Collection”); Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016), 464; Mike Cole, *Racism and Education in the U.K. and the U.S.: Towards a Socialist Alternative* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 115-39, see also 73 for a comparative alternative, ProQuest Ebrary. See also Yaghmai’s discussion of Michel Foucault’s notion of “discourse.” Sanaz Yaghmai, “Voices of Second Generation Cambodian Americans in Long Beach, California: A Participatory Action Research Report” (PhD diss., Alliant International University, 2014) 25-27.

²³⁸ For instance, historian Jonathan D. Spence summarizes the history of Western presence in China as having come from a “standpoint of superiority” founded on a sense of technical and moral advancement, and whose actors believed that their advice was “sorely needed,” in order to help “develop” the culture of a people who they considered “lower than themselves on the ladder of human progress.” As such, Westerners were frustrated when the Chinese rejected their advice in order to pursue their own objectives. Similarly, historian Christopher T. Jespersen concluded that the Sino-American relationship of the twentieth century was filled with a mélange of “racism and xenophobia (...) *paternalism*, and awe” [emphasis mine]. Jespersen points, for instance, to Henry Luce’s 1941 essay in *Life* magazine on the American Century, in which Luce articulated the United States’ responsibility to the rest of the world as a kind of—in Jespersen’s words—“benevolent hegemon, or paternal authority, acting under the presumption that it alone knew what was best for other nations.” “Paternalism,” Jespersen goes on to say, “is especially suitable when applied to an earlier era (...) when the United States tried to assume the role of a father, implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, casting China as a child.” In the context of American foreign policy

Typical patterns of acculturation are evident in the Cambodian case as they are elsewhere: one useful heuristic is that younger Cambodians were much more receptive than their elders to American cultural and food practices. Cambodian refugees continued to be resettled well into the early 1990s, with 1991 representing the first year that the number of Cambodians who arrived to the United States as immigrants outpaced the number that arrived through the resettlement process. Later arrivals had more access to community support systems in the form of Mutual Assistance Associations.²³⁹ Still, the receptivity of youth alone should not be awarded sole credit for determining the outcomes of the meeting of Cambodian and American cultures.

Cambodians faced local circumstances as much as they did national ones. Despite unambiguous discrepancies between Cambodian and American foodways, there is also a rich tradition of culinary and cultural regionalism in the United States, along with urban and rural dynamics. Understanding the period immediately following resettlement

regarding Vietnam, historian Mark Bradley argues that American leaders believed in a theory of “modernization,” in which “‘stagnant societies’ ought to move in a gradual, linear path toward the universal evolution endpoint represented by the United States.” Bradley quotes President Lyndon Johnson to capture the essence of Americans’ belief in their own exceptionalism: “I want to leave the footprints of America in Vietnam. I want them to say when the Americans come, this is what they leave—schools, not long cigar. We’re going to turn the Mekong into a Tennessee Valley... Old Ho [Chi Minh] can’t turn me down.” The central idea, that members of other cultural groups could be raised up to live by the implicitly correct standards laid out by Whites, are similarly evident (although not subscribed to ubiquitously) in both historical and contemporary racial discourse (e.g., civility politics, the “kill the Indian, save the man” policy, spreading democracy, etc.), fitted in the context of Pablo Casanova’s concept of “internal colonialism.” See Jonathan D. Spence, *To Change China: Western Advisers in China, 1620-1960* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1969; London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2002), 290-91, citations refer to the Penguin edition; Christopher T. Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), xiv-xvi, xvii; Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Post-Colonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 187; Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, “Internal Colonialism and National Development,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 1 (1965): 27-37.

²³⁹ Chan, *Survivors*, 80.

requires an appreciation for processes of both “Americanization” as well as “localization.” I describe the former more than the latter, but, of the latter, consider: the town in which my family grew up had a large Mexican population, and my sister cooks wonderful, authentic Mexican food. Of two Cambodians I know who spent years living in Louisiana, both cook and enjoy Cajun foods like andouille sausage, gumbo, and jambalaya. Cambodians living on the coasts likely have better opportunity to enjoy fresh fish, and those living in enclave cities would have greater access to Cambodian foods.²⁴⁰

An early effort known as the “Cambodian Cluster Project” or the “Khmer Guided Placement Project” affected about thirty percent of cases in the early 1980s. This left the plurality of cases to chance. In 1981, every state in the union, including Alaska, became the new home for at least some Cambodian refugees.²⁴¹ Irrespective of where refugees were resettled, local sponsors became the immediate interlocutors between the newcomers and their new environs. In that respect, experiences could be wide ranging, as sponsors could be exceptionally generous or exactly the opposite. Sponsorship was an

²⁴⁰ Children as vehicles in the generational displacement of traditional food practices has been observed, in addition to elsewhere, among Japanese migrants in California, among “white” migrants broadly, and among Hmong families in Minnesota. Contrastingly, many Italian children sided with their parents in thinking that “American” foods were inferior. See Matsumoto, *Farming the Home Place*, 50-70; Yong Chen, “Food, Race, and Ethnicity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*, ed. Jeffrey M. Pilcher (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 436-37, Oxford Academic Online; Kaplan, Hoover, and Moore, *The Minnesota Ethnic Food Book*, 236-38; cf. Diner, *Hungering for America*, 82, ProQuest Ebrary; Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 52-55. For examples of various regional foodways, see, e.g., Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); James E. McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Sean Brock, *South: Essential Recipes and New Explorations* (New York: Artisan Books, 2019).

²⁴¹ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 26-27; Chan, *Survivors*, 97-98; Strand and Jones Jr., *Indochinese Refugees in America*, 157-58. Through this program, Cambodian refugees were to be resettled in small groups to areas that had not yet been impacted by refugee resettlement, provided they met the criteria of offering economic opportunity in the form of entry-level jobs.

enormous commitment: sponsors agreed to take in refugees and house them, feed them, clothe them, find them gainful employ, and bring about a mental transition that the refugees' bodies had already made: to make the journey to the United States. The federal government contracted with volags to facilitate resettlement, providing an initial payout of \$500 per refugee in order to help offset the costs of the effort.²⁴²

Local sponsors could and did attack this problem in different ways. The sponsor who helped inaugurate the arrival of my aunt and uncle insisted that they not register for governmental benefits; instead, after the expenditure of the \$500 in federal moneys, donations from the congregation supported refugees until they could be set up with a job. Sponsors like this, who discouraged the use of government solutions, were not unique.²⁴³

²⁴² Volags included (1) United States Catholic Conference, (2) International Rescue Committee, (3) Church World Service, (4) American Council for Nationalities Service, (5) Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, (6) Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, (7) World Relief Refugee Service, (8) Tolstoy Foundation, (9) American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees, (10) Young Men's Christian Association, (11) Iowa Refugee Service Center, (12) Buddhist Council for Refugee Rescue and Resettlement, (13) Rav Tov Committee to Aid New Immigrants, (14) Polish American Immigration and Refugee Committee, (15) Idaho Refugee Services. Robinson, *Terms of Refuge*, 130; North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 26-27.

²⁴³ North, Lewin, and Wagner found that volags or sponsors in rural communities were more likely to discourage the use of public assistance, although urban settings had its own share of naysayers. In 1986, Cathy Schneider and Suellen Loyd interviewed only a dozen sponsors in Massachusetts and found that at least one church (some ecclesiastical organizations facilitated sponsorships; see previous note) "promote[d] the philosophy of no welfare assistance" for refugees, while another church even believed that sponsors should offer no financial support to refugees whatsoever; according to Schneider and Loyd, many of the sponsors they interviewed stressed the ideal of immediate self-sufficiency. Sucheng Chan finds that in a survey of Cambodian communities in the United States, those who were resettled into states with stringent welfare programs, but an abundance of entry-level jobs, tended to fare better than their counterparts. Jack Tyler, who lived among Khmer in Georgia, argues that welfare benefits may have inhibited the initiation of traditional patterns of responding to crisis. After all, there was no welfare system in Cambodia—rather, extended families operated as self-sustaining units that took care of members in the expectation that they provided some value in return. Furthermore, the patron-client relationship was more rigid in Cambodia than it is in the US; there is less emphasis on dynamic social mobility. North, Lewin, and Wagner reported that, in interviews with refugees, they had obtained secondhand information about welfare programs while in overseas holding camps, and in some cases had the misapprehension that Americans were fully entitled to welfare as, essentially, a basic right (not a privilege), with no conception of its limitations or social stigmatization. Eric Tang, moreover, observes that problems of institutional

A 1982 edition of the *LIRS Bulletin*, a publication of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, makes it clear that American sponsors were worried about Cambodians “retir[ing] onto welfare benefits.” An edition of *Migration Today* from the same year claimed that it was controversial among sponsors as to whether or not refugees should be put to work immediately or be allowed a period of adjustment at the expense of the taxpayer.²⁴⁴ An article published in *Reader’s Digest* in 1985 criticized volag penny-pinching and prompted an internal memo to be circulated among LIRS staffers, which characterized connecting refugees to welfare as a last resort.²⁴⁵

Despite efforts from sponsors to inhibit use of public assistance, many Cambodian refugees found a way to connect with welfare programs. At the federal level, support for Indochinese refugees had diminished during the period between 1975 and 1982, and support was even less forthcoming as the decade wore on: whereas refugees in 1975 qualified for medical and financial support for up to three years, that period was halved

bureaucratism were doubly challenging to navigate for people who did not speak English, and there was little recourse when an administrator made a mistake—Cambodians would simply have to wait for the slow-moving office to catch up. The problem of not speaking English made welfare more inaccessible, but also complicated the process of obtaining a job. Additionally, as Aihwa Ong notes, limited welfare disincentivizes entry into the workforce at the bottom rung since recipients are liable to lose their benefits and actually end up with a lower income—and no healthcare—than if they had not accepted a low-paying job. See North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 125, 129-32; Schneider and Loyd, “An Informational Study on a Select Group of Cambodian Refugees and Their Sponsors,” 11, 28, box 1, MS 341, Sylvia Forman Collection; Chan, *Survivors*, 122; Tyler, “The Khmer of Atlanta,” 401-03; Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Superghetto* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 77-94; Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*, 115-16, 122-25.

²⁴⁴ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, *LIRS Bulletin* 8, no. 2 (June 1982): unpaginated, point five on “public assistance,” folder 110, box 4, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records; Eve Burton, *Migration Today* 11, nos. 2-3 (1982): 31, folder 108, box 1 of 7, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records.

²⁴⁵ “LIRS Fact Sheet in Response to Reader’s Digest Article,” May 31, 1985, 2, folder 110, box 4, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records.

by 1982, and reduced to twelve months by 1988. Cash assistance was often inadequate to support large families. As Soy Duong recalled, “the money that welfare gave us was not enough for all eight of us (...) I remember that every time the supermarket had a sale on items such as chicken all eight of us went together to buy it.” Each member of the family took turns purchasing chicken at a discounted price on account of sale prices having purchasing limitations.²⁴⁶

Anthropologist Karen Quintiliani finds that welfare reform in the 1990s exacerbated issues. The introduction of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children, introduced more stringent work requirements, shifted administrative responsibilities onto individual states, and cut funding for some groups. According to Quintiliani, “over half the savings accrued the first year of Welfare Reform was due to reductions in immigrant recipients.”²⁴⁷ With Cambodian families losing medical or assistant benefits, new pressures emerged that prompted refugees to accept informal labor contracts for cash jobs. Soy Duong’s case affirmed much the same, with her family recycling cans and bottles or picking berries during the summer to help make ends meet.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Chan, *Survivors*, 105, 154.

²⁴⁷ Karen Quintiliani, “A Qualitative Study of the Long Term Impact of Welfare Reform on Cambodian American Families,” *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement* 9, no. 1 (2014): 4.

²⁴⁸ Quintiliani, “A Qualitative Study of the Long Term Impact of Welfare Reform on Cambodian American Families,” 8-17; Chan, *Survivors*, 154; see also Michael H. Truong, “Welfare Reform and Liberal Governance: Disciplining Cambodian American Bodies,” *International Journal of Social Welfare* 16 (2007): 258-68.

Unlike in rural Cambodia, where farmers could sustain themselves through agricultural labor, Cambodians in the United States needed to either receive money from sponsors, from the government, or find wage work. No matter how they came by money, Cambodian refugees needed to acclimate themselves to American supermarkets and learn how to operate in a American kitchen using the ingredients available. Obtaining groceries without a car presented its own set of challenges. I can attest firsthand to the capacity-for-tragedy of a fifty-pound bag of rice loaded onto the rear rack of a bicycle. Darina Siv recalled that a children's bicycle was "very helpful in carrying our groceries, especially fifty-pound bags of rice and watermelons."²⁴⁹

For Cambodians with access to public transportation, their limited English proved to be a barrier to success. The experience of asking where a bus will take you, and being brusquely told to "read the sign" (when you may not even be literate in your native language, let alone additional languages), was traumatic. Svang Tor recalled that, in Boston, in her early years in the United States, she took the wrong bus to the wrong place on several occasions, an experience that could eat up her entire day as she tried to correct course. Another Cambodian woman, who came to the United States in her mid-40s in 1983, never took public transit by herself, even years later, because she didn't know English and was afraid of getting lost. MaryCarol Hopkins, an ethnographer who lived among Cambodian refugees in the Midwest in 1987, noted the same reticence among the Cambodians in the community in which she lived. Still, for Cambodians who mastered

²⁴⁹ Darina Siv, *Never Come Back*, 172.

the transit system, public transportation provided a viable mode of transportation to and from the grocery store. Jack Tyler, who lived among Khmer communities in Atlanta and Decatur in 1984, reported that it was commonplace to see a Cambodian traipsing home to their apartment from the nearest bus stop carrying a one-hundred-pound bag of rice.²⁵⁰

Cambodians encountered a radically different market ecosystem than they were accustomed to in their home country. On the inaugural trip at the very least, they would have almost certainly had a guide. One Cambodian woman, Bou Saveth, living in Amherst, MA in 1983, was accompanied by two alternating members of her sponsor's congregation on weekly excursions to pick up groceries. Anthropologist Lucie Germer stitched together an account of one refugee's first experience shopping in a supermarket.²⁵¹ In her first trip to a American supermarket, Podeny [a pseudonym] was accompanied by her sponsor and her husband. Among the first items she picked out for her shopping cart were two loaves of French bread, which were on display in the

²⁵⁰ Bun and Chin, interview, 5; Svang Tor, interview, 127; T.P.K., interview by Richard Mollica, [ca. 1989], transcript, 79-80, Cambodian American Women: An Oral History Project, https://www.harvardcambodianwomen.com/_files/ugd/bce909_e03c392b650745e698fece2e69e1d088.pdf; Hopkins, *Braving a New World*, 32-33; Tyler, "The Khmer of Atlanta," 399-400. My aunt, for example, lamentingly recalled being told to "read the sign" when she tried to use the bus, and she was quite fearful of ending up in the wrong place. Similarly, Kenji Ima et al. note, a Cambodian man living in San Diego in the early 1980s struggled with the urban geography and "frequently got lost." According to K. R. Wilson and M. T. Rodriguez, issues of mobility are common among refugee communities when trying to access foods. Kenji Ima, Alfredo F. Velasco, Kta Ou, and Beverly C. Yip, "Adjustment Strategies of the Khmer Refugees in San Diego, California: Six Ethnographic Case Histories," March 31, 1983, California, 15; K. R. Wilson, and M. T. Rodriguez, "Resettled Refugees and Food Insecurity in the U.S.; Exploring the Caseworker's Role," *Journal of Social Service Research* 45, no. 3 (2019): 383.

²⁵¹ Margaret S. Bates, "How it All Began," [an informational packet addressed to the congregation], 4, Amherst Cambodian Cluster Committee Folder, box 92-017, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records; Germer, "The Food Their Families Eat," 1.

entryway. The sponsor chided her for her seemingly extravagant tastes, as the artisanal bread was the most expensive bread in the store. Podeny's husband, Suon (a pseudonym), wanted fish, but nothing for sale in the supermarket resembled the kinds of fish they were accustomed to eating in Cambodia.²⁵² Catfish, mudfish, elephant fish, bird fish, and so many others, they would have been excited to see; less so, whatever dubious fillets the supermarket had on ice that day.²⁵³

Failing to find any suitable fish, Podeny also declined an offer of frozen tripe from the clerk at the butcher's counter and instead elected instead to purchase steak, which she recognized. In Cambodia, she would have purchased beef that had been already processed by someone else, too. In the nonperishable aisles, canned foods were a little tricky, as one could not peer inside, and they could not read the labels. Sampwa Moni, a young Cambodian, recalled while thinking about her own first trip to an American supermarket, "we couldn't understand why Americans ate canned fruits and

²⁵² Germer, "The Food Their Families Eat," 1.

²⁵³ Although certainly not an exhaustive list of the types of fish Cambodians enjoy, Longteine de Monteiro references these in particular in her cookbook. Rotanak Ros mentions more still, as her cookbook, compared to de Monteiro's, targets a Cambodian audience. Narin Seng Jameson noted that, in Cambodia, the fish were so plentiful that Cambodians would "often say that one need only stand near a pond and snap his fingers and [a] fish will jump into his pot." Online videos from today may not give the exact impression Podeny and Suon would have been accustomed to in prewar Cambodia at the market, but you will at least appreciate the diversity of fish (note, however, the absence of frozen fillets of tuna, salmon, halibut, or decapitated shrimp, and the presence of live fish). See de Monteiro, *The Elephant Walk*, 156-74; Ros and Lee, *Nhum*; Jameson, *Cooking the Cambodian Way*, 50; "Cambodia Fish Market Video – Morning Daily Activities of Vendors & Buyer @ Prek Phnov," Countryside Daily TV, November 12, 2022, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ej_qgr1P-FE; "Cambodian Fish Market Show @Kilo 9 – Amazing Site Distribute Rural Fish, Alive Fish, Seafood & More," Countryside Daily TV, February 11, 2023, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeupVLqsH6w>.

vegetables when their grocery stores had beautiful produce. The food I'll never forget was the can of ham in our refrigerator. Imagine, meat from a can instead of an animal."²⁵⁴

Cabbage, broccoli, green onions, and oranges were familiar enough to be taken onboard the cart. Fresh fruits and vegetables aligned more to the kinds of things they were accustomed to eating in Cambodia. If Podeny was anything like my mother, she sampled grapes on the spot. Podeny and Suon's sponsor did not quite understand them, and during their shopping trip frequently tried to push upon them various "boxes and bags;" although Germer's account does not specifically identify what those items were, we can imagine they were probably boxed meals of some kind. Whatever the case, Podeny was adamant in her refusal of the unusual goods.²⁵⁵

As she had already visited the Asian market, where she had purchased needed spices, jasmine rice, and *tuk Trey*, Podeny was ready to cook when she got home. She quickly retrieved her Chinese-style cleaver and her mortar and pestle, both of which she had managed to carry with her during her resettlement journey. Squatting close to the floor, with the ingredients spread out around her, she set to work preparing the meal in

²⁵⁴ Germer, "The Food Their Families Eat," 1-2; Criddle, *Bamboo & Butterflies*, 37. The process of breaking down an animal is a learned trade, and people do it differently depending on their preferences and skill. Although I don't know the specific techniques used by the Cham in Cambodia—not least those used forty years ago—but I have never seen a American-style steak in Cambodian cuisine; rather, beef is most frequently sliced thin and stir-fried. My thinking about this is prompted by an Indonesian friend, Jaka T. Indarta, who insists that he could strike it rich in Indonesia if he could import US butchering techniques and equipment, as, according to him—and to his dissatisfaction—the meat there is always just sliced off the bone to be used for *satay* (what we might call a kebab). I draw no exacting conclusions about Cambodian butchering techniques other than to say that they are, doubtless, different from those practiced in the United States.

²⁵⁵ Germer, "The Food Their Families Eat," 2. In Cambodia, merchants in the market provided samples to customers so that they could taste a fruit or vegetable before buying a bunch. "Bopha: A New American," *Beyond the Killing Fields*, 75.

her new kitchen, which found relatively comfortable except that the stovetop was so far from the ground, requiring her to reposition frequently.²⁵⁶

Retaining the practice of cooking on the floor was not uncommon. A letter dated September 10, 1985, from a rental company asked Cambodian families to move out of their apartments because the families routinely “chopp[ed] up food and vegetables on their kitchen floors,” causing damage to the property.²⁵⁷ Since many Cambodians continued working close to the ground in preparation of foods, the discomfort of using the American range was probably a very common and awkward hurdle to overcome. Not unlike the occurrence between my aunt and the gas range, other kitchen appliances were approached with misapprehension or confusion as well. Apartment managers complained that their Cambodian tenants damaged their ovens by cooking directly on oven racks without using any kind of tray to catch grease. Historically, Cambodians did not use ovens, and so probably these Cambodians were using the ovens as a substitute for something they were more accustomed to using.²⁵⁸ Landlords also accused refugees of

²⁵⁶ Germer, “The Food Their Families Eat,” 2-3.

²⁵⁷ Letter reproduced in Jack Tyler, “The Khmer of Atlanta,” 742.

²⁵⁸ Tyler, “The Khmer of Atlanta,” 742. With the exception of Joannes Riverie’s (who is very much catering to an international audience), the Cambodian cookbooks only extremely sparingly suggest the use of an oven for baking. de Monteiro does recommend the broiler, which is essentially an indoor substitute for a grill. Jameson has only one recipe (113) that uniquely calls for baking in an oven; meanwhile, the two recipes in *Nhum* that are translated as “baked” are actually wrapped in banana leaves and grilled (190) or just shallow-fried (192). On Chinese cooking, cookbook author Irene Kuo discusses how the Chinese did develop a practice of commercial roasting-houses, which use ovens that resemble kilns, but that such ovens were never integrated into the home setup; Eileen Yin-Fe Lo also discusses the lack of ovens in the Chinese home in her cookbook. See Rivière and Smend, *Cambodian Cooking*; Monteiro and Neustadt, *The Elephant Walk Cookbook*, 64, 148; Jameson, *Cooking the Cambodian Way*; Rotanak and Lee, *Nhum*; Irene Kuo, *The Key to Chinese Cooking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 113-14; Eileen Yin-Fe Lo, *Mastering the Art of Chinese Cooking* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2009).

plugging up the kitchen sink due to letting rice and other food waste go down the drain. As Cambodians were accustomed to cooking outdoors, and feeding their scraps to the animals to which they tended, there was clearly a disconnect between the refugees and American technology. According to Ching Te Ing, some Cambodian refugees had a “general distrust” of both freezers and refrigerators and did not use them correctly.²⁵⁹

Cambodian-refugee women made an effort to reproduce culturally “authentic” foods in their new environment. Just as my family quickly turned to shopping at both an American and an Asian grocery store, so too did Podeny. Access to an Asian market was of inestimable importance. A small survey taken in 1984 found that among Cambodian American families with children, one hundred percent of them shopped at both American supermarkets and Asian grocers.²⁶⁰

In the Asian markets, some fresh produce might have been familiar, but many canned or jarred foods presented another unusual addition to the shopping basket. Totally rural Cambodians would have been more likely just to make their own fish sauce, and rice noodles, but my aunt and uncle, who lived outside Phnom Penh, remembered that you could buy fish sauce just about anywhere near the city, and my aunt, although she

²⁵⁹ Tyler, “The Khmer of Atlanta,” 742; Ching Te Ing, “Acculturation of Cambodian People in the United States,” (master’s thesis, Mankato State University, 1991), 32. While the exact misuse of refrigeration is not entirely obvious (one example that I can think of is that, in my experience, Cambodian people sometimes let foods marinate on the countertop at room temperature, rather than covering it and putting it in the refrigerator), it fits the historical pattern—no refrigeration, going to the market on a daily basis—and the ensuing clash with American appliances.

²⁶⁰ Mary Story and Linda J. Harris, “Food Habits and Dietary Change of Southeast Asian Refugee Families Living in the United States,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 89, no. 6 (June 1989), unpaginated, Gale Power Search; Germer, “The Foods Their Families Eat,” 22.

knew how to make noodles, would normally have purchased them at the market. Still, whether dealing with fish sauce, soy sauce, canned coconut milk, or readymade noodles, the products were invariably imports from other countries—Thailand, Vietnam, or China—and not Cambodia, as the latter is not a major exporter of foods.²⁶¹

At first, Cambodian refugees were resistant to the canned goods, but they did eventually come to implement them in their cooking. The transition was a matter of at least a little debate. In Germer’s study of refugees in Utah, every Cambodian woman reported using canned coconut milk, and that they unanimously agreed it was in no ways inferior to the genuine article. Still, some Cambodians criticized foods as “inauthentic” for relying on such readymade products.²⁶²

But the American system was set up to push products of convenience onto consumers. Cambodian women found that their time was increasingly in demand. Just as my aunt had done, many Cambodian women joined the workforce to help contribute towards a stable life in the United States. In the second half of the twentieth century, living in the United States increasingly demanded a multiple-income household. As Eric Tang and Aihwa Ong both note, welfare recipients often needed two incomes in order to

²⁶¹ Chin and Bun, interview, 7, 52; Sok Piseth, Yang Monyoudom, and Houn Tynarath, “Cambodia’s Agri-Food Trade: Structure, New Emerging Potentials, Challenges & Impacts of Covid-19,” *Feed the Future: The U.S. Government’s Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative*, Research Paper 5, November 2021, https://www.canr.msu.edu/prci/PRCI-Research_Paper_5_Cambodia_updated.pdf.

²⁶² Germer, “The Food Their Families Eat,” 56; Jennifer Michael, Leendavy Kuong, and Theany Sam, “Food Isn’t a Meal Unless Rice is Served: Exploring Cambodian Foodways,” *Philadelphia Folklore Project: Works in Progress* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 6, Cambodian Foodways Folder, box 10, Lowell Folklife Collection, Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts, Lowell, MA (hereinafter referred to as “Lowell Folklife Collection”).

transition from welfare to work. Although women had always contributed their labor on the homefront, in the fields, and at the market, their jobs in the United States often took them away from home.²⁶³

Some women circumnavigated these challenges by participating in off-the-books economies. One such example was sewing garments; Cambodian women took in the necessary materials and in several days' time turned them into traditional garments to be re-sold in a market. These women were compensated with cash, though paid substantially below a minimum wage. Reasons for involving themselves in such arrangement included the inability to participate in the legal or to supplement income without threatening welfare status, which would be jeopardized by work that paid less than the welfare check. One Cambodian man recalled that when he was still in high school, a social worker assigned to his family used to keep watch at the house to make sure no one was going to work without reporting it.²⁶⁴

²⁶³ Chan, *Survivors*, 196-97; Tang, *Unsettled*, 96-99; Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*, 115-17.

²⁶⁴ Tang, *Unsettled*, 114-23; Karen Quintiliani, "A Qualitative Study of the Long Term Impact of Welfare Reform on Cambodian American Families," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement* 9, no. 1 (2014): 10-18; Rattana Pok and Sokeo Chhit, interview, video, 01:18:30-01:19:30, April 28, 2012, Stockton Cambodian Oral History Project, <http://www.stocktoncambodianoralhistoryproject.com/rattana-pok-sokeo-chhit-interview/>. While paying below the minimum wage is (obviously) illegal, and invites condemnation from well-intended observers, there are some important considerations to make. Kenneth J. Guest articulates a similar arrangement among Fujianese restaurateurs in the US, who don't pay below the minimum wage, per se, but relatively dismal salaries to other Asian workers for very grueling work conditions; Guest writes, "[the] enclave economy has not been primarily a system of mutual support, but an unregulated free enterprise zone that creates opportunities for some members of the community to succeed by exploiting other disadvantaged Chinese immigrants." While Guest's assessment is, *prima facie*, accurate, I think there is a little more to it. For two years, I worked in exactly the kind of restaurant that Guest describes in his article, and my initial reaction was to view the arrangement as purely exploitative as well, but other workers explained that my perspective was very American, and that they had entered into the arrangement knowingly, that they could leave whenever they wanted to, and that the arrangement offered tangible benefits not normally accounted for in American working relationships (housing, transportation, access to cultural foods, negotiation of the

The transition into a wage-labor economy all but proscribed the agricultural lifestyle that Cambodian refugees had traditionally practiced. Although the marketplace had been an everyday component of life for most Khmers, it had always served in conjunction with the more immediate connection they had with foods grown in their gardens or harvested from the environment. The markets also allowed Cambodians to buy, sell, or trade their own foods—vegetables from the garden, fish from the lake or rivers, or pigs and fowl raised for slaughter in arrangement with Chinese merchants. But the early refugee community owned neither fruit trees to harvest nor land to cultivate.

This did not stop Cambodians from trying. Jack Tyler recorded that families grew small gardens next to their apartments in addition to potted plants kept inside. Among the most common plants were lemongrass, bird’s eye chilis, three types of mint (probably Chinese, Thai, or Holy “basil”), and several other plants. Neighbors shared seeds and stems amongst one another, which they had in some cases brought with them from Thailand, or in some cases purchased in the Asian market. Haing Ngor wrote about purchasing seeds for Asian vegetables while in the refugee camps, just as soon as he had found out he was going to be resettled in the United States.²⁶⁵

My family cultivated a garden in the 1990s, and when my aunt and uncle were able to purchase a house in the 2000s, they kept one as well, and they grew fresh Thai

American system, etc.). There is also the case that people who would normally be too young to work in the United States, but who would have been workers in their home country, can find ways to circumnavigate their exclusion from the workforce in the US. Kenneth J. Guest, “All-You-Can-Eat Buffets and Chicken with Broccoli to Go,” *Anthropology Now* 1, no. 1 (April 2009): 23, 21-28.

²⁶⁵ Tyler, “The Khmer of Atlanta,” 612-14; Haing Ngor, *A Cambodian Odyssey*, 424.

chilis. Hopkins recorded that Cambodians living in the pseudonymous Middle City kept both vegetable and flower gardens, and shared produce among friends and family. In Massachusetts, Bou Saveth grew vegetables in a garden to supplement her family's meals. Elsewhere in Massachusetts, the Cambodian community, in conjunction with local sponsors, launched a two-acre pilot project. One elder Khmer woman who attended the program's launch stated, "I'm a little old now, but I really want to farm again. I'm happy the opportunity is here."²⁶⁶ Nikita Prajapati, at the time of her research in the 2010s, finds that it was widely known that all Cambodian American households in the Long Beach area had a garden.²⁶⁷

In lieu of an army of local benefactors, most Cambodians lacked the capital to purchase houses, and primarily occupied apartments, which complicated gardening prospects. Whereas in an agrarian society such as Cambodia's, the rural poor depended on their ability to grow and harvest foods, and would have scarcely, if ever, eaten in restaurants, the situation in the United States was reversed. Impoverished families relied on cheap, unhealthy fast foods, while the ability to eat foods grown in a personal garden is associated more with a middle- or upper-class lifestyle. Tyler wrote that two out of the four communities he stayed with in Georgia voiced complaints about landlords placing restrictions on gardens; in one community, the landlord permitted neither spice nor

²⁶⁶ Hopkins, *Braving a New World*, 18; Bates, "How it All Began," 4; [land project], 1-2, Folder 126, box 4, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records.

²⁶⁷ Nikita Prajapati, "Lost in Food Translation: Khmer Food Culture from Cambodia to Long Beach, California" (master's thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 2016), 9.

vegetable gardens to be grown.²⁶⁸ Still, Cambodian refugees sometimes ignored the rules, both willfully as well as out of ignorance to them. One such rule, which must have been in permanent violation, had to do with the number of legal occupants per an apartment building. Tyler noted in Decatur, GA, that fifteen people were evicted from an apartment unit that was outfitted to suit a single family. One Cambodian woman recalled that she shared an apartment with twelve people, and, fearing eviction, sometimes the signatory on the lease warned people to hide in to prevent discovery. A survey of one thousand Cambodians in Long Beach, CA in the summer of 1989 found that an average of eight people occupied one-bedroom apartments, and an average of nine occupied two-bedroom apartments. Such arrangements allowed for refugees to pool their resources and labor, including cooking, all parts of which—shopping, washing and chopping, preparing, and serving—are made more enjoyable with company. Kien Srey remembered, “if we have a three-bedroom apartment—three families. Sharing. If we have two bedroom, two families sharing. It’s difficult for me to live like that, but if I don’t live like that, I don’t have enough money to pay for my rent.”²⁶⁹

These arrangements probably brought scorn from neighbors, perhaps in part due to the strong scent of their foods. One Cambodian woman reported that she had been

²⁶⁸ See, e.g., Michael Pollan, “The Futures of Food,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 4, 2003; Renee Montagne, “The Food Revolution of Alice Waters’ Chez Panisse,” *NPR*, April 27, 2007; Tyler, “The Khmer of Atlanta,” 615, 365.

²⁶⁹ Tyler, “The Khmer of Atlanta,” 373-74, 346; Bopha, *Beyond the Killing Fields*, 79; Scott Shaw, *Cambodian Refugees in Long Beach, California: The Definitive Study* (Hermosa Beach, CA: Buddha Rose Publications, 1989), 80, 89; Kien Srey, interview, video, 01:01:00-01:02:30, Stockton Cambodian Oral History Project, <http://www.stocktoncambodianoralhistoryproject.com/kien-srey-interview/>.

taught to spray an air deodorizer after cooking Cambodian foods, as she had been informed that the odor “smell[s] bad to Americans.”²⁷⁰

Even when Cambodians were not packed to overfull, they made an effort to share foods amongst one another. One Cambodian man living in San Diego lived within just a few blocks of over twenty-five members of his family; the family saw each other every day to “exchange food, child care, transportation assistance and other goods and services associated with an extended kinship system.”²⁷¹ Cambodians also faced institutional challenges to a variety of their traditional food practices. Tevi’s family in California cultivated a small garden where they raised vegetables for food and to sell in the market. Tevi was assigned the task of selling the vegetables at a Farmer’s Market, a job which she carried out dutifully for a couple of weeks until finally rules enforcers closed her shop after challenging her to produce her permit to sell in the market. These kinds of regulations just to sell homegrown vegetables in an informal market were totally unfamiliar to Cambodians; Tevi had no idea what a permit was or why she should have one. “Americans ha[ve] lots of strange rules,” reported Tevi’s parents after asking some acquaintances about the permit, “for instance, people [a]ren’t free to chop down nearby trees for firewood, keep chickens or pigs in their back yards, or cultivate unused land. You [can’t] even catch fish without buying a license.”²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Aiwha Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*, 92.

²⁷¹ Ima, et al., “Adjustment Strategies of the Khmer Refugees in San Diego, California,” 13.

²⁷² Criddle, *Bamboo & Butterflies*, 41.

Children were responsible for attending school for much of the day, and, unlike school in Cambodia, where they would “go home for lunch and have a siesta” before returning to school to finish out the day, in American schools, there was no break to return home, and the children often ate lunches prepared by the school.²⁷³ These circumstances had a double effect: first, by separating the family, it impeded cultural transmission; second, it introduced Cambodian children to the dubious matter of American foods served as public-school lunches. Many Cambodians were not particularly fond of American foods at the time of their resettlement. One Cambodian woman, Reasmei, felt that foods in the United States were not only not appetizing, but they were also unsatisfying: “sandwiches do not fill you up like rice.”²⁷⁴ A Cambodian man, Bun Thab, recalled that when he first arrived in the United States, his sponsor met him at the airport and brought him home, where the sponsor served a meal of hamburgers, but Bun felt that “[he] just couldn’t eat them[;] [as] he had eaten only Cambodian food all [his] life, and [he] couldn’t eat the new food.”²⁷⁵ Darina Siv, who was in her mid-20s upon coming to the United States in 1981, recalled that her family’s

²⁷³ Sivone Brahm, “Guidebook for Teachers, Administrators and Educators of Cambodian Children,” Language and Culture Series (n.p.: Khmer Research Organization, 1980) 15, folder 120, box 4, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records; Khoeup Kham, “A Typical Day in Cambodian Village,” 1-3, [ca. 1990], Essays (Duplicates) “A Typical Day in Cambodian Village” Folder, UML 9, Memories of Cambodia Tsapatsaris Collection. The latter item is a short description of daily life written by Khoeup, a Cambodian-refugee student, age 13, for an assignment in a US school. In his description, Khoeup wrote, “school starts at 7:30 (...) we walked back home at 11:00 o’clock to eat lunch, always rice and sometimes fish, chicken. We never drank milk. Just plain water or coconut water. I had to go back to school at 2:30 and walk back home at 5:00p.m. (...) How different living in America is.”

²⁷⁴ Mitra Das, *Between Two Cultures: The Case of Cambodian Women in America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 59.

²⁷⁵ “Bun Thab: A Khmer Rouge Escapee,” *Beyond the Killing Fields*, 130.

sponsor fed them cereal with milk for breakfast, and sandwiches for lunch, but that her family, accustomed to rice, could eat everything and still feel hungry.²⁷⁶

Rice had always been the cornerstone of a meal. The significance is even linguistically embedded: Cambodian educator Mory Ouk observed, “Americans use a different name for each meal of the day: breakfast, brunch, lunch, snack, dinner, supper (...) Cambodians use only one expression: eat rice [*nhum bai*].”²⁷⁷ Even some years later, when a physician gave a diagnosis of diabetes to an adult Cambodian man and warned him he should stop eating rice, the man went home and, relating the encounter to concerned parties, existentially responded to the doctor’s orders: “if I can’t eat *rice*, what can I eat?”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Darina Siv, *Never Come Back*, 166.

²⁷⁷ Mory Ouk, “Cambodian Students: Their Educational Difficulties and Needs” (Long Beach, California: n.p., 1983), 6, Folder 120, box 4, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records.

²⁷⁸ For the sake of privacy, I omit biographical details about the subject, but this story came to me firsthand.



Figure 2 – Loc lac from Le Petit Cafe, a Cambodian restaurant in Lowell, MA. Thin-sliced beef stir-fried with a light, umami sauce (recipes varyingly call for oyster-, soy-, or mushroom-soy sauce), served over a bed of crisp vegetables. Notice the very generous serving of jasmine rice (for scale, this is a standard-size dinner plate)—it isn't just “a side of rice” as you might expect with other cuisines. When I ate this meal, I felt that it was the closest thing I had ever tasted to the way my mother would prepare this dish when I was growing up. Photo credit Anthony C. Smith, August 2022.

The public school system was, far and away, the most significant pressure acting upon the foodways of young Cambodians in the United States. Nearly every single day of the academic year, Cambodian children reported to school. Many children started from the same place as adults regarding their familiarity with American foods. An eleven-year-old Cambodian refugee, Ponn Pett, summed it up in an essay she wrote for school, saying, “I had never seen or tasted milk and never eaten cheese or butter. I had never

used a fork or knife.”²⁷⁹ Ponn was able to learn how to use the utensils at school, from other Cambodian children who had been in the United States for longer, who had already acquired the skills. Learning how to appreciate American foods took a little bit more time, and most likely happened in stages. Leendavy Koung recalled that it took him almost a year to learn how to eat American food; “I didn’t know that American food was this hard to eat,” he said, alluding to his experiences with hoagies and pizza in his high school’s cafeteria.²⁸⁰ Hopkins notes that from a school lunch, young children might partake of canned peaches and chips, but not eat the sandwich entrée or drink the provided milk. When Hopkins observed a school picnic, most Cambodian children dissected their provided bologna sandwiches and discarded the bread, eating only the meat. As Ponn Pett said about her school lunches, “at first I didn’t like the food[s] cheese[,] salad[,] and pizza[,] and [milk]. So I threw it away,” but, “the foods I hated are some [of] my favorite foods now like pizza, cheese[,] and milk.”²⁸¹

Not only were Cambodian youths exposed to such foods at school on a daily basis, but their American teachers also reified the correctness of standard American fare. As Ching Te Ing wrote, “discussion of a ‘good’ breakfast often did not take into consideration that the Asian child did not have cereal, toast, eggs, waffles, et cetera [sic], but instead, they might have rice soup, noodle soup, and a protein like pork, chicken,

²⁷⁹ Ponn Pett, “An Immigrant in the United States,” 1, [ca. 1990], Essays (Duplicates) “How I Felt Being a Cambodian Immigrant in U.S.” Folder, UML 9, Memories of Cambodia Tsapatsaris Collection.

²⁸⁰ Ponn Pett, “An Immigrant in the United States,” 1; *Philadelphia Folklore Project: Works in Progress* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 5, “Cambodian Foodways” folder, box 10, Lowell Folklife Collection.

²⁸¹ Hopkins, *Braving a New World*, 19-24; Ponn Pett, “An Immigrant in the United States,” 2.

dried fish, or shrimp.”²⁸² Institutional reinforcement affirmed some young Cambodians’ thinking on their transnational contexts; one young Cambodian man stated, “I know I can never go back. I will stay here and get U.S. citizenship. So I eat hamburgers.”²⁸³

Channy Vann, a young Cambodian refugee living in Massachusetts, wrote a letter addressed to a brother who still lived in Cambodia, in which Channy expressed his approval of the delectability of American foods.²⁸⁴ Around the border of the paper on which the letter was written, he drew pictures of some of his favorites—including pizza twice—and wrote, “we have a lot of food (...) that we didn’t eat before in Cambodia[,] like pizza and other food. My favorite food in America is hamburgers. (...) I like tomatoes, pickles and lettuce on mine. Americans love French fries too. They are long thin pieces of potatoes, fried. They are delicious. I like ketchup on my food too. I like Cambodian and American food.”²⁸⁵

Cambodian parents, such as Than Pok, found that their children “prefer[red] eating American burgers at McDonald’s every night to the more traditional Cambodian dishes served at home.”²⁸⁶ While it may be the case that Than was exaggerating the extent of his children’s changing eating habits, it was symptomatic of the broader issues

²⁸² Ching Te Ing, “Acculturation of Cambodian People in the United States,” 32. Mory Ouk worried about the same thing, and advised educators to “please be aware of [Cambodian children’s] eating habits,” since they were unaccustomed to eating “pancakes, toast and jelly, or even cereals” for breakfast. Mory Ouk, “Cambodian Students: Their Educational Difficulties and Needs,” 10.

²⁸³ Germer, “The Food Their Families Eat,” 12.

²⁸⁴ Channy Vann to brother, January 16, 1990, Letters to Cambodia (Duplicates) Folder, UML 9, Memories of Cambodia Tsaptsaris Collection.

²⁸⁵ Channy Vann, letter to brother.

²⁸⁶ “Long Beach Cambodians Fear Loss of Culture.”

caused by the rearrangement of values and family structures evolving in the wake of children's long-term exposure to the hegemonic values instilled in American schools. Samkhann Khoeun, director of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of the Greater Lowell area in 1995, summarized his thoughts:

Five days a week, the kids, all the kids, all the children are in school being exposed to different aspects of Western ideas and concepts, way of living, way of talking, doing this and that. They don't see their parents until five or six p.m. in the evening for dinner. And after that, the kids are left to do their homework. So, they don't really have much chance to talk to one another at all. They are busy with their homework, with watching TV, listening to the stereo, and playing computer games.²⁸⁷

The impact of such an education contributed to a reorientation in the household, in which many Cambodian parents lost power over their children, who quickly became the “most educated” member of the household, and who more readily navigated the American ecosystem.²⁸⁸ As Lay Kry—once a professor of philosophy in Cambodia—put it, “in Cambodia older is better. Old is gold[.] (...) [In the United States] the power is switched. The kids know better. The parents are deaf and dumb because they cannot speak the language.”²⁸⁹ Along with promoting contentiousness around the dinner table, this disruption in traditional patterns also saw to it that Cambodian youths began participating in American dating rituals, which commonly includes dining in restaurants, something

²⁸⁷ Samkhann Khoeun, *Not Just Victims: Conversations with Cambodian Community Leaders in the United States*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 127, 140.

²⁸⁸ See, e.g., Samkhann Khoeun, *Not Just Victims*, 136-41.

²⁸⁹ “Long Beach Cambodians Fear Loss of Culture.” I interpret the comment “deaf and dumb” as intended to describe adult Cambodians’ mutability within their host society, given their inability to communicate inside of institutions with a default of English, which had the potential to leave them totally dependent upon their children as interpreters.

that would have been unfamiliar territory for many Cambodians; this was especially the case for teenaged boys, as girls were subject to parental overprotection.²⁹⁰

The knowledge and skill to cook were considered valuable skills for women, and their absence was noted by the community as a sign of cultural loss; Mum, for instance, describing a friend, explained, “(...) if you see her, you would think that she was born here, she is so Americanized. The way she talks, *the way she eats*, the way she acts, what she wouldn’t do[,] is so American. *She doesn’t know how to cook*, or take care of the house.”²⁹¹ The inability to cook was associated with “white girls.”²⁹²

Cambodian patterns of life were often very incompatible with life in the United States. Resettlement was a process that unfolded over the course of more than a decade, and every time another Cambodian was approved for sponsorship, another hourglass turned over, and all the sand that had built up through each person’s lifetime began to flow in the other direction. For children, the sand trickled down more quickly than it did for their parents, and there was less of it in the aggregate. For many refugees, the first constant was establishing a connection to jasmine rice, even when they had to go to great

²⁹⁰ On some other issues caused by inversion of household dynamics, see, e.g., Samkhann Khoeun, interview, 136-41. The sources on dating tend to describe dating as a generality, and I did not find any accounts that specifically outlined what dating might have looked like, so it is my prediction that some dating venues would have been restaurants. See, e.g., Chan, *Survivors*, 202-09; Mory Ouk, “Differences in Culture Between Cambodians and Americans,” 1, folder 120, box 4, MS 361, Cambodian Crisis Committee Records; Pu Ma, Mum, Apsara, and “Koun Srey: A Teenage Daughter,” *Beyond the Killing Fields*, 114-15, 151, 157, 234, 244-45. On restaurants in Cambodian society, Jameson wrote that Cambodian people “almost exclusively” hosted and cooked for themselves and for friends and family when living in Cambodia, though residents of Phnom Penh could have gone to Chinese or European (i.e., exotic) restaurants on occasion. Jameson, *Cooking the Cambodian Way*, 5-6.

²⁹¹ “Mum: Dad’s Little Girl,” *Beyond the Killing Fields*, 160, emphasis mine.

²⁹² “Nya Srey: A Widowed Single Parent,” *Beyond the Killing Fields*, 217.

lengths to get it. Sponsors and refugees struggled to understand each other, and this mutual misunderstanding was evident in the kinds of foods that Americans suggested when sponsors took refugees to generic supermarkets. These markets, rather than supplementing an agrarian lifestyle, became the chief mode of acquiring foods, and were driven by cash exchanged for wage labor, though many Cambodian refugees—despite the contentious discouragement of American sponsors—came to rely on government assistance. When Cambodians made their first meals on American soil, they struggled not only to finesse the technology in their homes, they also continued working close to the ground while preparing foods rather than upright on the countertops. Before the refugees could acquire cars, public transit, when it was not too intimidating, were a useful way to transport groceries, and so, too, were bicycles.

At the local supermarket, Cambodians were much more interested in the fresh ingredients over the frozen or canned, though, for some Cambodians, the fast pace of American life helped to break down the resistance to canned goods. American supermarkets were in some ways a disappointment, not least because they carried none of the Cambodians' beloved fish. Still, inexpensive chicken and beef allowed Cambodians to expand their daily palate while still fitting the traditional, Buddhist patterns in which the act of killing the animal was performed by someone else. In the Asian markets, the refugees found greater access to more culturally appropriate vegetables and herbs, but also began to use more canned products such as coconut milk, which rankled some feathers, but was found to be a suitable substitute for the real deal by many. The market

also sold gardening seed, and Cambodians planted gardens wherever they could, though institutional regulations limited the extent to which they could grow, as well as inhibited access to markets where they could sell their produce if they had a surplus. To boost their purchasing power, but also because it fit their traditional patterns of living, many Cambodians shared their living space with extended family or with acquaintances, and pooled their resources, preparing meals for large groups. This had the potential to run afoul with the authorities, as living spaces were subject to rules and regulations.

Due to many Cambodian adults' limitations within their host society, there was often a major shakeup in households in which elders, who had traditionally held the most prestige within the family, became subject to the wishes of children or grandchildren, who held the power of communication in a foreign land. Although children, like their parents, did not enjoy American foods at first, many came to appreciate it, primarily through their daily exposure to foods in the school cafeteria. The combination of all-day school and wage labor away from the home resulted in net negative contact among families, limiting the amount that girls could learn from their mothers, and also increasing children's vulnerability towards and acceptance of American values such as individualism. Combined with an inversion of family dynamics, empowered children—mainly boys, as girls remained highly policed—to insist on eating American foods, and also opened up the possibility of dating, where they began eating in restaurants.²⁹³ The

²⁹³ Prajapati, who interviewed a few Cambodian Americans in Long Beach, records that one woman stated the reason her children did not learn to cook Khmer foods was because she [the woman] hadn't the time to teach them. Prajapati, "Lost in Food Translation," 40.

early period of Cambodian foodways transitioning into American society was marked by almost total transformation in the processes, tools, and ingredients, but Cambodian chefs found ways to provide culturally authentic meals for their families. The ability to cook was recognized as a signifier of Cambodian culture, and those who could not cook were marked as having been Americanized.

Chapter 5

As I was growing up, each year my family drove about forty-five minutes to celebrate the Fourth of July holiday with another Cambodian family. In any given year, the events of the day transpired much the same as they had done in years prior. My younger brother and I, and the four boys from the other family, all similarly aged, all of us American born, would leave the adults to their own devices and spend the day playing video-game titles like *Super Mario World 2*. Later we would rejoin the adults, share a home-cooked meal at the dinner table, and afterwards walk to the nearby college football stadium, where we sat in the bleachers, waiting restlessly for the sky to grow dark. Although I can't recall the specifics of the foods we ate on those days, I can say for sure that the meal always included rice. I explicitly remember this detail because we would put a little bit of soy sauce on the rice for flavor, and the other family used a different brand than my family used at home.

This brief account of spending the Fourth of July with another Cambodian family indirectly reveals some evolving aspects of Cambodian foodways. Many Cambodians have come to celebrate American traditions—such as Independence Day—although we may do it in our way. The celebration of holidays is but one instantiation of social events that see Cambodian Americans coming together to share their traditional foods (among everything else) with one another. In the introduction to her cookbook, Narin Seng Jameson proclaimed, “food is the essence of life in Cambodia. There is not an occasion I

can remember that does not end up at the dining table.”²⁹⁴ Although Jameson had been reminiscing about the life she lived in Cambodia, I would argue that the characterization is just as apropos to describe Cambodians living in the United States. Additionally, by this point in the narrative, Cambodians had become more likely to eat while seated at a table rather than on the floormat.

In this chapter, by depicting a period during which Cambodian Americans had become more comfortable navigating their surroundings, I identify both enduring as well as newly emerging issues in the Cambodian American foodways. The present chapter narrows in on how growing pains persisted and/or evolved in the context of the first generation of U.S. born Cambodian Americans. For instance, I show how Cambodian Americans found themselves patronizing two types of grocery stores, both Asian markets as well American-style, in order to satisfy the needs of their families. Cambodian American parents adjusted their diets to their new, meat-rich-but-fish-poor environment in the industrial foods society, and also attempted to coax their children into eating Cambodian cuisine by offering a selection curated to not offend picky eaters. They also learned to cook simple American meals like spaghetti or macaroni and cheese.

In addition to tracking such acculturation across two generations, this chapter describes Cambodian American foods in the contexts of community parties for holidays and/or major life milestones, such as marriage. Cambodian celebrations always included copious amounts of homemade foods, and the burden of preparation was sometimes

²⁹⁴ Jameson, *Cooking the Cambodian Way*, 5.

shared among informal corps of Cambodian American women, who repaid the favor of other women's assistance by returning the same favor when situations reversed. In addition to Cambodian American parties, this chapter reflects on the importance of cultural foods to identity formation. Some Cambodian American youths found aspects of their identity in culturally "authentic" foods, an aspect of their culture to which they had been exposed, in lieu of the dissonance in the narration of their heritage. The chapter also discusses Cambodian American restaurants, and alarming health statistics that suggest that being linked into the machinery of American foodways caused problems for many Cambodian Americans.

Negotiating the confluence of Cambodian and American cuisine was an issue for many Cambodian American families, and many Cambodian American youths migrated away from traditional foodways in favor of American comestibles, or at least forged new inventories where both things shared space. The notion that some form of intervention is needed in order to stem the tide of cultural loss is not uncommon even today. As such, this chapter presents a baseline of issues and topics pertaining to Cambodian American foodways that I feel confident in voicing, though I also acknowledge that my limited perspective here will benefit greatly from further characterization and contextualization.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ On cultural loss, see, e.g., Sivaing Suos, interview by Tyler Sar, August 19, 2019, transcript, 40-41, University of Massachusetts, Lowell, Southeast Asian Digital Archive, Oral History Project, UML 17, <https://umlseada.omeka.net/items/show/1319>; Dr. Chang Thach, "Transmission of Cambodian Culture to the Next Generation," Watt Munisotaram, Religions in Minnesota, <https://religionsmn.carleton.edu/exhibits/show/wattmunisotaram/transmission-of-cambodian-cult>.

When I asked my mother if she could remember what kinds of foods we ate in the 1990s, she responded, “different kind of stir fries, chicken curry, pho, fried rice, egg rolls (...) we didn’t really make the true Asian food where they use the [stinky] fish in the soup. We know you kids would not eat it.”²⁹⁶ She also added that she recalled us eating Mexican, American, and Italian foods. Her claim about “true Asian food” is interesting, as such “untrue” Asian foods are also foods that appear in Cambodian cookbooks, and are served in Cambodian restaurants. The essential point she makes is that the lack of *prahok* made the foods less “true.”

Rotanak Ros wrote that *prahok* is so widely used in Cambodian cuisine that there’s a common saying, “no *prahok*, no salt,” meaning that a dish without *prahok* lacks flavor.²⁹⁷ Christine M. Su, a Cambodian American who grew up in the United States, wrote about her experience of eating *prahok* for the first time when she traveled to Cambodia in the late 1990s. When Su finally tried it, she liked *prahok* so much that “from that point on, both in Cambodia and the U.S., at every community gathering, every house party, every restaurant, [she] is looking for it.”²⁹⁸ Two key takeaways from Su’s account are that, first, that she grew up, a Cambodian American, without having ever

²⁹⁶ As a quick note, the term “pho” is used here to refer to a similar Cambodian soup, which I have seen represented in English as *kuyteav*.

²⁹⁷ All of the “untrue” Asian foods were on the menu at Le Petite Café and Heng Lay Restaurant in Lowell, MA (I have photographs of their menus) and I suspect all of them—for sure the pho, which I ate there—were on the menu at Phnom Penh Restaurant, also of Lowell (I did not take pictures of their menu). The quote “no *prahok* no salt” appears in Rotanak and Lee (54). On the “untrue” foods in cookbooks, see Jameson, *Cooking the Cambodian Way*, 44, 47, 77, 117; Rotanak and Lee, *Nhum*, 122, 148; Monteiro and Neustadt, *The Elephant Walk Cookbook*, 46, 78, 104, 192, 206.

²⁹⁸ Christine M. Su, ““Can You Eat Prahok?” Narratives of Khmerness and Cambodian Cheese,” in “Food & Identity,” *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>.

eaten *prahok*; and second, *prahok* was on the table at community gatherings, house parties, and at restaurants.

In spite of the ubiquity of the ingredient in Cambodian cuisine, it seems that my family was not the only one to curb the use of *prahok*. Cambodian American adults pared down the breadth of their cuisine to ensure that the tastes of Cambodian foods would be palatable to the preferences of their children; about the dish *loc lac*, which is a stir fry we ate regularly in my family, Narin Seng Jameson wrote, “[w]hen my children were small and very picky about what they would eat, I could always rely on this dish, which was sure to please them”²⁹⁹ An anonymous Cambodian American who responded to a survey wrote, “because [my kids grew up] here, they prefer American food. They would not eat Khmer gourmet food.”³⁰⁰ Similarly, according to Nikita Prajapati, a Cambodian American man in Long Beach stated that his children “only eat simple Asian dishes,” and did not like the flavors of Cambodian foods.³⁰¹ I can recall at least one incident from my youth when my aunt or my mother was cooking with *prahok*, or with the Cambodian mudfish from which *prahok* can be made; the whole house was filled with such a powerful and inescapable odor that my younger brother and I hid ourselves away in our shared bedroom and bitterly complained about the pungency.

Looking back, despite the importance of fish to the traditional Cambodian diet, I do not remember eating very much fish of any kind in those days. This is one facet of

²⁹⁹ Jameson, *Cooking the Cambodian Way*, 77.

³⁰⁰ Sarvnaz Modarresi Ghavami, “Food Insecurity and Culture – A Study of Cambodian and Brazilian Immigrants” (master’s thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2013), 51.

³⁰¹ Prajapati, “Lost in Food Translation,” 42.

Cambodian American foodways that I would expect to change based on proximity to an Asian market; that is to say, it does seem probable that Cambodian Americans living in urban areas are likely to have had a different experience—with at least a little more fish. One anonymous Cambodian American in Lowell, responding to a survey, stated that they continued to eat more fish than either beef or chicken, adding that “that’s why [it’s] [healthier] than the American food.”³⁰² During a span of time when I lived with a cousin only fifteen minutes away from such a market, we ate fish much more frequently. In American markets, apart from canned tuna, or fish sticks, seafood is a luxury product, and an expensive alternative to the trio of pork, beef, and chicken. Some Cambodian Americans living in Seattle, WA professed to preferring fish, but owing to its price, alternated between fish, pork, and chicken. My family ate a lot of chicken and used cheap cuts of beef, which keep tender when cooked quickly in a stir fry. We made egg rolls with ground pork, and many non-Asian foods called for ground beef. This kind of arrangement was the total opposite of the kind of diet Cambodians maintained before the 1970s, when their proteins came almost exclusively from fish, they rarely ate beef, and slaughtered fowl on special occasions.³⁰³

The remaining constant was jasmine rice. At any given time, Cambodian American families had one or two fifty-pound bags of an imported jasmine rice on hand, and an electric rice cooker ensured there was always some prepared. The primacy of

³⁰² Ghavami, “Food Insecurity and Culture,” 51.

³⁰³ Doris Piccinin and Katie Lai, “Diabetes in Cambodian Americans,” January 1, 2004, “News,” EthnoMed, <https://ethnomed.org/resource/diabetes-in-cambodian-americans/#>.

imported rice, but simultaneous necessity to respond to children's demands for, "macaroni and cheese, hot dogs[,] and pizza," as was the case for Hong Soon, a Cambodian American woman in Lowell, meant that Cambodian Americans continued to regularly patronized both American as well as Asian (or Cambodian) markets, though the intervals between visits to the latter increased and decreased based on budgetary concerns, geographic distribution, as well as changing attitudes towards American ingredients.³⁰⁴ Even if children nagged their parents to buy American foods, at the end of the day, the parents chose where to spend their money, and even families that had to travel a great distance regularly shopped in Asian markets on the weekend. Paysha Stockton, a reporter out of Seattle, found that Cambodian American parents stated that they often needed to shop at both a Cambodian (or Asian) market in addition to an Albertson's or Safeway.³⁰⁵

Cambodian American families by this point had also started making good use of the freezer, not just for American foods like frozen pizzas or vegetables, but also to extend the shelf-life of Asian ingredients. My mother always kept a package of Thai chilis in the freezer, to be used as necessary. Curry pastes were also candidates for freezer

³⁰⁴ Lawrence A. Palinkas and Sheila M. Pickwell, "Acculturation as a Risk Factor for Chronic Disease Among Cambodian Refugees in the United States," *Social Science Medicine* 40, no. 12 (1995): 1645.

³⁰⁵ Paysha Stockton, "Nutrition and Fasting in Cambodian Culture," June 1, 2001, "News," EthnoMed, <https://ethnomed.org/resource/nutrition-and-fasting-in-cambodian-culture/#>.

storage. Even if they didn't taste quite as fresh the second time around, this prevented excessive food waste.³⁰⁶

Cambodian American life, as it should suggest, was a mixture of both Cambodian and American practices. If we take, as a metaphor, the evocative subtitle of Ronnie J. Booxbaum's dissertation, "The Fabric of Cambodian Life: *Sarongs at Home, Dungarees At Work*," I contend that the situation was at least a little more complex.³⁰⁷ There is a degree to which the notion is accurate, as, in the workplace or other "American" institutional functions, Cambodians had to strive towards conformity with hegemonic normativity, whereas the home afforded more opportunity for traditional practices. At the same time, both in the workplace and at home, there was further transition and mixture than suggested by a simple binary; beneath their dungarees, these workers remained Cambodian, and, in the house, underneath their Sarongs, they were Cambodians living in the United States.

Krystal M. Chuon shared a photograph of her family sharing a meal, which I think is a closer approximation of the truth: in it, we see an adult man and woman sitting cross-legged in frame, the woman garbed more traditionally than the man, along with three children, two of whom wear American-style children's dresses. They are seated on a reed

³⁰⁶ The late Cambodian American author Anthony Veasna So, whose collection of short stories, *Afterparties*, vividly reflects on scenes from Cambodian American life, wrote a scene with a woman chopping up lemongrass and garlic to be stored in the freezer. While So's work is intended as fiction, the scene is surely drawn from his own experiences. See Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties: Stories* (New York: Ecco, 2021), 240.

³⁰⁷ To be fair to Booxbaum, despite the binary of her title, she argues that Cambodians "actively blend new traditions with older rituals." I address the subtitle here because it's a captivating phrase. Booxbaum, "The Fabric of Cambodian Life," ix-x, emphasis mine.

mat on the floor, and the children are eating McDonalds Happy Meals, and two small, ceramic bowls in the photo contain a little bit of ketchup. Neither of the adults appear to be eating these foods, suggesting they may prefer to eat something more traditional—and by extension, the children are no doubt accustomed to eating “traditionally” sometimes as well, and other photos in Chuon’s collection suggest that the next meal might be a traditional meal; in one of the others, the family sits together around a table, with Cambodian soups at the center of the table, served in a metalware soup server purchased from an Asian market. Chuon’s pictures, set against several others from her collection, offer snapshots across time in a variety of circumstances, and together they strike closer to the truth than Booxbaum’s attractive phrase.³⁰⁸

Although Cambodian elders may have preferred to frequent Asian markets, which carried more culturally “authentic” ingredients—for instance, galangal, bird’s eye chilis, mints, Chinese eggplant, and so on—such markets did not benefit from same economics of scale as products available in their American counterparts. Resultingly, while the foods were attractive, the prices were hard to swallow.³⁰⁹ Cambodians, therefore, “learned to eat American food” by substituting standard supermarket vegetables and meals in place of traditional ones, because the monthly budget was insufficient to cover the higher cost associated with eating only their preferred ethnic foods.³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Krystal M. Chuon, “Meals with Loved Ones [ca. 1990s],” in “Food & Identity,” *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>.

³⁰⁹ Ghavami, “Food Insecurity and Culture,” 49.

³¹⁰ Ghavami, “Food Insecurity and Culture,” 51.

On top of paring down Cambodian cuisine to those components that would seem most palatable to their children, Cambodian women learned to cook foods outside of their familiarity. While shopping in American supermarkets to save on costs by substituting expensive, ethnic ingredients with cost-friendly alternatives, Cambodian American adults could also purchase the foods many of their children demanded. Such purchases came in the form of readymade, processed foods in addition to foods that come in the form of individual or separate ingredients needing to be prepared. In my household, my aunt and my mother continued to share the responsibility of preparing meals, as they had done previously, although if someone wanted something simple, like a packet of instant noodles, they were free to prepare it themselves.³¹¹

For Cambodian American women especially, who had honed their mastery over their kitchens over the course of decades, there was a particular irony in the fact that their children would sooner eat what would today be considered cheap, processed, often unhealthy American foods, rather than the kinds of nutritious meals that had sustained Cambodians for generations. Although on some days they ate a curated selection of “Asian” meals, on other days, instead of rice accompanied by a Cambodian stir fry or soup, many children demanded the kinds of foods to which they were accustomed to eating among peers at school. Or, if they hadn’t eaten it at school, they might have eaten

³¹¹ Hopkins observed a similar arrangement—children as young as nine preparing simple foods (such as noodles) for themselves and younger children—during her fieldwork. Hopkins, *Braving a New World*, 20, 24.

it at a friend's house, and asked if the item could be purchased the next time they went shopping.

At my house, we ate boiled spaghetti noodles served with a reheated jar of readymade marinara. We also ate ground beef flavored with pre-mixed packets of taco seasoning. These meals were interspersed with chicken curry; *kuy teav*; or a stir fry with oyster sauce. For breakfasts we ate sugar-laden cereals of every variety. The Cambodian Americans who allowed Hopkins to live with them ate similarly: "everyday family meals show more Western influence: fried chicken, airy white bread, sandwiches, chips, reconstituted orange juice, granola bars, and canned peas, beans, and spaghetti."³¹²

In order to feed their children, these very capable Cambodian American cooks, who could transform traditional ingredients into healthy and delicious meals, had to rely on premade and prepackaged foods, which are endemic to the ways that many Americans eat. Hong Soon relied on her older children to help purchase and decipher America-style cookbooks; other parents likely had been taught by their American sponsors. Younger Cambodian Americans, and/or those who came to learn English, relied on reading instructions printed on the packaging. In my house, when we ate American vegetables, they often came in the form of a can of corn or green beans microwaved with butter.³¹³

Sometimes the preparation of American foods received a Cambodian touch. Results were sometimes mixed. Successful examples included imparting American foods

³¹² Hopkins, *Braving a New World*, 20.

³¹³ Lawrence A. Palinkas and Sheila M. Pickwell, "Acculturation as a Risk Factor for Chronic Disease Among Cambodian Refugees in the United States," *Social Science Medicine* 40, no. 12 (1995): 1645-646.

with “Asian” flavors; for instance, when my mother cooked hamburgers, she seasoned the meat with soy sauce. When she prepared a fresh tomato salsa, she flavored it with MSG and fish sauce. On the other hand, my aunt brought a homemade *salsa verde* to a birthday party that was excellent *despite* an overwhelming presence of fish sauce, which my aunt, so accustomed to the taste, claimed she could not taste.³¹⁴

Something to consider about these kinds of American foods is that many of them are more convenient than they are healthy. Lawrence Palinkas and Sheila Pickwell noted that many Cambodian American children tended to snack on potato chips and drank sodas after school, and that women like Hong Soon “ha[d] little concept of the dangers of ‘hidden fat and calories’ inherent in many American [foods] favored by her children.”³¹⁵ A recent study conducted among young Cambodian American women in Lowell concluded that acculturation was linked with a decreased intake of vegetables and herbs.³¹⁶ This makes sense given that Cambodian thought on the health properties of

³¹⁴ In my experience, many older Cambodians have an aversion to undercooked steak; that is, they always cook them to ashen gray. I am unsure whether the cause might be the lack of familiarity with cooking that style of food (although this happens with grilled skewers of beef too), or possibly, as the experience of food is subjective, this is just a preference that could be rooted in different sanitation conditions at the market (with flies everywhere, is it safe to undercook?). For another example of this “fusion,” Banrith Yong, a Cambodian restaurateur in Jordan, Minnesota who serves a French menu, offers a classic Minnesota Wild Rice soup, except that it’s also laden with fish sauce.

³¹⁵ Lawrence A. Palinkas and Sheila M. Pickwell, “Acculturation as a Risk Factor for Chronic Disease Among Cambodian Refugees in the United States,” *Social Science Medicine* 40, no. 12 (1995): 1645. This connects to the conversation about healthy eating with Julie Guthman’s indictment of industrialized foodways, although I think the conversation runs even deeper. The American food system supports the American lifestyle, wherein eating well becomes a luxury or a daily chore—think about meal replacement products like Soylent and Huel, which ostensibly free consumers from the task of thinking about foods, in lieu of eating something engineered to merely satisfy bodily needs.

³¹⁶ Jerusha L. Nelson-Peterman, Lindiwe Sibeko, and Lorraine S. Cordeiro, “Consumption of Cultural and American-style foods among Young Women of Cambodian Heritage,” abstract, *The Journal of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology* 30, no. 1 (April, 2016): 901.22-901.22.

foods came in the form of regulating temperatures of the body, rather than targeting specific nutrient profiles (and even if adult Cambodian Americans did think in terms of nutrient profiles, they might not possess the language skills necessary to decode the arcane list of ingredients that compose many American foods). Look Tha, an older Cambodian American man, also reflected on the shift to a sedentary lifestyle in the United States, which differed from the life he had led in Cambodia: “I miss my rice fields and my big garden with all the fruits and vegetables. There, I worked hard and *ate a lot more food than I eat here*; in Cambodia we didn’t have diets. Now, because I don’t do any work, I eat only what I need to keep me from starvation. Otherwise[,] I will get fat, and lose my health.”³¹⁷ Between the sedentary lifestyles available in the American context, and the industrialized privileging of commercial convenience and mass production over concerns for the health outcomes for the average consumer, Palinkas and Pickwell also note that many Cambodians, especially the young, who were more likely to consume American diets, were overweight.³¹⁸ More than just young Cambodian Americans were in danger of physical ailments associated with foods. In a survey of Cambodian American residents in Long Beach, close to ninety percent of Cambodians self-reported a general assessment of their health status as either “poor” or “fair,” which was double the rate of other “demographically matched population[s], and more than four times higher than that found in the general California population;” a study on

³¹⁷ “Look Tha: A Former Buddhist Monk,” *Beyond the Killing Fields*, 57, emphasis mine.

³¹⁸ Palinkas and Pickwell, “Acculturation as a Risk Factor for Chronic Disease Among Cambodian Refugees in the United States,” 1646.

disproportionate rates of diabetes in the Cambodian American community found that they suffered at more than twice the rate of the national average, and in Long Beach, the rate reached as high as a staggering thirty-eight percent of the population.³¹⁹ In Lowell, Cambodians over the age of forty-five had a mortality rate attributed to diabetes five times higher than the state average.³²⁰

Karen Quintiliani writes that Cambodian Americans have a national poverty rate of about twenty-two percent, the highest rate among all Asian groups, only slightly below the poverty rates for Blacks and Hispanics. Not only is the population disproportionately impoverished, but the American industrial food system includes government subsidies for food products geared towards the broader population; by contrast, to purchase culturally appropriate foods, Cambodian Americans have to pay added costs to import products from Southeast Asia. In other words, in addition to higher rates of poverty, the costs of purchasing Cambodian foods was higher than the cost of purchasing foods produced for normative American eaters, who have the benefit of industrial economy and government subsidy. While it would be disingenuous to suggest that the American system of foods was the only risk-factor producing these disproportionate results among Cambodian Americans, the link between poverty and negative health outcomes is well-known.

³¹⁹ See Eunice C. Wong, et al., “The Unusually Poor Physical Health Status of Cambodian Refugees Two Decades After Resettlement,” *J Immigrant Minority Health* 13 (2011): 879, 878-80; Julie Wagner, et al., “Diabetes Among Refugee Populations: What Newly Arriving Refugees Can Learn from Resettled Cambodians,” *Current Diabetes Report* 15 (2015): 56; Elizabeth Dobbins, “Study Examines Diabetes in Local Cambodian American Community,” *The Lowell Sun*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.lowellsun.com/2018/08/20/study-examines-diabetes-in-local-cambodian-american-community/>.

³²⁰ Piccinin and Lai, “Diabetes in Cambodian Americans.”

“We’re not able to afford the super-healthy foods,” executive director Pouv stated, before pointing out that approximately half the Cambodian population of Long Beach qualified as low-income, with a quarter of them living in abject poverty.³²¹

Something else to consider about “eating American” is that, while some Cambodian Americans did come to enjoy certain aspects of American foodways, not everyone did so purposefully or willingly. Some came to eat American foods out of necessity: as one Cambodian put it, “I am [now] used to the fast pace here, so at times because it’s really hard to package Cambodian food, rice and some dried stuff, vegetable, I’m used to eating the precooked stuff. And whether it’s hot dog or hamburger, just microwave. So, I’m used to doing that. It’s a quick fix;” another said, “it is important for me to make the adaptation here, because I depend on my kids, that came here first, so when they took me to American pizza or things like that I couldn’t eat it. I thought I should go back to Cambodia; however, after several times, I like it and I don’t mind.”³²²

In other words, American convenience foods suited the fast-past lifestyle demanded by the contours of life in the United States, but intrafamilial pressures also inspired change among those who could not picture themselves eating hamburgers or pizza. The former notion is undergirded by food practices in many American homes—we

³²¹ Quintiliani, “A Qualitative Study of the Long Term Impact of Welfare Reform on Cambodian American Families,” 2; Hossfeld, Kelly, and Waity, eds., *Poverty: Food Insecurity and Food Sovereignty among America’s Poor*; Elizabeth Dobbins, “Study Examines Diabetes in Local Cambodian American Community.” K. R. Wilson and M. T. Rodriguez note that studies convincingly show that resettled refugees struggle with issues of food insecurity at higher-than-usual rates, possibly as a result of being placed into food deserts, or just because culturally preferred foods are unavailable. Wilson and Rodriguez, “Resettled Refugees and Food Insecurity in the U.S.; Exploring the Caseworker’s Role,” 383.

³²² Ghavami, “Food Insecurity and Culture,” 53, 51.

have the concept of “weeknight meals,” which are quick and easy to prepare, preferably requiring little to no cleanup, and also the idea of a meal best suited for the weekend, something requiring a little more panache. Hopkins observed this in her field work:

[they] are more likely to eat traditional foods during leisure times such as weekends and summer vacations and at celebrations, whereas they eat American foods when their time is more strictly scheduled. So, for example, on a school day[,] children may have a hasty 6:30 a.m. breakfast of dry cereal (sometimes with milk), candy, a popsicle, or ‘nothing.’ But on weekends, the meal may be late in the morning and consist of rice, noodles, fish, chicken, vegetables, fried eggs, and other rather substantial foods.³²³

This is certainly the kind of arrangement that I recall from my teenage years, after my aunt and uncle’s family moved into a separate house and my older cousin’s family moved away. “From-scratch” meals, which demand more time and attention than a box of Hamburger Helper, became more of a weekend affair.

Many Cambodian American adults continued to find American foods unappetizing, and adjusted in other ways. Hong Soon reported that on the days she prepared American foods for her children, she ate only rice for dinner. Similarly, I recall that there were times when my brother and I suspected that our mother elected not to eat, though perhaps she also just ate rice. For multifamily or intergenerational households, another solution would have been to prepare separate meals—this is something that I have done when I lived with an older cousin and cooked for the family.³²⁴

³²³ Hopkins, *Braving a New World*, 18-19.

³²⁴ Palinkas and Pickwell, “Acculturation as a Risk Factor for Chronic Disease among Cambodian Refugees in the United States,” 1645. Maly, a Cambodian American woman in Long Beach, learned to eat Western foods because her children enjoyed them, and they frequently cooked tacos, spaghetti, and hamburgers at home. Prajapati, “Lost in Food Translation,” 42-43.

Social gatherings, such as birthday parties—a tradition absorbed from living in the United States—offered opportunities for Cambodians to eat traditional foods that, for a variety of reasons, they didn't or couldn't enjoy on an everyday basis. Other community events that served similar purposes were holidays such as the aforementioned Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, as well as Christmas, both American and Cambodian New Year; and also milestone events like weddings and graduations. Cambodian Americans, like many other inhabitants of the United States, marked these occasions by spending the day together, and the events always featured food.

Although I can't say for sure when Cambodians Americans began celebrating birthdays, celebrations for marriage and for Cambodian New Year were anything but novel. As per American holidays, Booxbaum notes that in 1995, the city of Amherst's Fourth of July celebration, a major affair, was "well-attended" by Khmer Americans.³²⁵ Booxbaum also notes that, while Christmas was celebrated in different ways, Thanksgiving had, at the time, only been adopted "by a minority" of Cambodian Americans, who received turkeys as a holiday bonus at work, or as a donation from local congregations; she reports, "[Thanksgiving] is a day off from work and the children are not at school, therefore families gather to cook the turkey, as well as more typical Cambodian food."³²⁶ Consistent with her findings, my family eats turkey on Thanksgiving, though we eat Cambodian foods as well. One young Cambodian American

³²⁵ Booxbaum, "The Fabric of Cambodian Life," 187.

³²⁶ Booxbaum, "The Fabric of Cambodian Life," 187.

I met said his family does the same: they have turkey with all the fixings, but they also enjoy Cambodian hotpot along with other Cambodian dishes. Sophia Lee described how her family's Thanksgiving meal included a dish with a base of rice noodles, but also a turkey "stuffed with ginger, lemongrass, and other Southeast Asian herbs."³²⁷

Similar considerations apply as they would in any other ethnic group's party—planning begins as far in advance as necessary, with consideration to the number of guests, the complexity of the fare, and so on. There are also matters of "face," a social system not unlike honor or shame, involved with hosting, and it is my understanding that—contrary to American, potluck-style sentiments—the host fully expects to provide for the needs of guests, though members of a family (cousins, nieces, nephews) might want or expect to contribute some side dish to compliment the variety of entrees. Additionally, when parties have been hosted by younger members of my family, my aunt and my mother invariably prepare foods in advance and bring them with among a smattering of tin-foiled containers and lidded pots, to be re-heated and served.

Also, for especially large events, Cambodian women from outside of a family, but who are part of families that would be attending a party, contributed labor towards food preparation. The ingredients were provided by the host, but the assembly and preparation were handled by large groups of women who came together as a group and worked to prepare large quantities of food. This kind of mutual assistance was provided under the

³²⁷ Sophia Lee, "Until the Next Meal, I Wait," in "Food & Identity," *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>.

expectation that efforts would be repaid in the future, and women from the host family assisted in food preparation for parties hosted by other families. Hopkins actually has a wonderful representation of this, drawn from her fieldwork with Cambodian Americans in the Midwest:

For communal events, women gather the day before, kneeling or squatting on a blue plastic tarp in a kitchen (...) to cook in large quantities. They chop, peel, season, stuff, wrap, mix, fry in huge woks, and grill outdoors. One group may make hundreds of eggrolls, another make and grill hundreds of skewers of marinated meat. (...) There may be fifteen or more women at any one time, and others may come and go over the course of the day; they work late into the night, sometimes all night. (...) It's a major social event in itself, filled with gossip, teasing, stories, and laughter as the women share food, cooking tips, and criticism.³²⁸

I have seen such assemblies of women in action, and can attest to their industriousness, though the particular social components of the arrangement are outside of my purview. For smaller occasions, a standard kitchen range might be sufficient to heat and prepare foods, but outdoor propane burners were used at larger events, where a little more firepower enabled cooking in larger batches. Some foods were also catered in; Djuna Chun recalled a party at which an uncle brought a tray of eggrolls, and I have also heard of ordering chicken wings from Asian restaurants, or *numpaing jean brohit trei*.³²⁹

Parties offered opportunities for Cambodian Americans to steep themselves in traditional patterns of life. For Cambodians whose jobs included working among all non-Cambodian colleagues, parties afforded them the opportunity to socialize in their native

³²⁸ Hopkins, *Braving a New World*, 22.

³²⁹ Djuna Chan, "A Party in April," in "Food & Identity," *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>.

language. This pattern extended to the sharing of traditional, although parties also catered to the tastes of those who may be slightly less adventurous. Fresh fruit was always an option, especially watermelon and pineapple, which Cambodians enjoy eating with a sprinkle of salt, and also grapes. For bigger events, if there wasn't a large pan of fried rice in a warmer, few people could complain about pork eggrolls, chicken wings, or the grilled, skewered beef. The selection and inclusion of these kinds of foods was intentional, and to ensure that everyone had something they'll want to eat. My aunt weighed in on this when she recalled an incident where a White American woman at a party preferred not to partake in the *yahon* that my aunt had made, but said that she "[couldn't] wait" to eat eggrolls.³³⁰

In my experience, parties tended to self-segregate into groups, splitting along lines you might expect, resulting in elders and youngsters talking and eating alongside their peers. My family always had a "kids table" for younger Cambodian Americans, and a separate table at which adults sat. The arrangement was voluntary rather than enforced, with one motivating factor being that the adults spoke to each other in Khmer, and we children did not understand. At parties with large numbers of Cambodians, there was always some Cambodian karaoke song playing in the background from a DVD, even if the party was outside—the speakers were loud. Since food was served buffet style at these kinds of parties, guests could sit and eat, chat, go add a little more food to their plate, return, continue socializing, and repeat *ad nauseum*. Adult men drank beer,

³³⁰ Su, "Can You Eat Prahok?;" Chin and Bun, interview, 45.

Heineken a relatively popular choice, though a much surer thing was that spirituous liquors, if called for, would come in the form of cognac. Adult women were less likely to indulge, possibly due to social policing: on the occasion of my high school graduation, for example, my uncle encouraged me to drink beer, while making a concerted effort to discourage my sister, older than me by two years, from doing the same. For non-alcoholic beverages, partygoers could choose between cans of soda or bottled water, and young children could find single-serve packet drinks like Capri Sun. As a party drew to a close, there would ideally be an abundance of food remaining, which could be packed and sent home with guests.³³¹

For elders, it remained relatively unpopular to eat out at restaurants. Doris Piccinin and Katie Lai observed that, in 2004, a small survey of elders garnered responses that they [the elders] ate at restaurants only “once in a while” or “once every five to six months;” one respondent even said they’d eaten in restaurants only “three to five times in twenty-one years;” further, when they did eat in restaurants, they always selected Asian

³³¹ Cambodian karaoke songs include a singer already singing, unlike what an American might expect from karaoke. Not understanding the words, but having seen many of the videos, these songs always seem to be about lost or unrequited love. Heineken, although I don’t know why, is a selection that I have probably seen the most among the generation that migrated to the US, though Mexican beer seems to be popular as well. Cognac is a kind of brandy produced in the Cognac region of France, and readers will no doubt infer that the preference for it [cognac] is an artifact of French colonization. Good (expensive) cognac has high status; George Chigas recalled that it was necessary to have a bottle of Hennessy Cognac for his wedding. Hopkins also records that the Cambodian Americans in her study drank cognac at parties. Djuna Chan, a Cambodian American writer, specifically remembers adults drinking Heineken (though also Modelo), as recorded in her story “A Party in April.” Cambodian Americans can be seen drinking both Heineken as well as cognac in China Mac TV’s episode among Cambodian gangsters in Lowell, MA. For an example of a Cambodian karaoke song, see Khmeroverseatv, “Cambodian Music Khmer Song,” September 19, 2010, <https://youtu.be/tCR4J5c1f0E>; on beer and brandy, see Chigas, interview, 13; Hopkins, *Braving a New World*, 18; Chan, “A Party in April;” “Cambodian Bloods in Lowell, MA [Ft. East Movement],” 07:53.

foods.³³² When my aunt and uncle have talked about eating in restaurants, the restaurants in question are invariably Asian buffets, especially ones that offer a variety of seafood. Once, when on a short (just a weekend long) vacation with my brother, sister, mother, and aunt, my aunt became quite distraught by having eaten only American foods (sandwiches, burgers, etc.) for a couple of days, and we had to search out a Chinese restaurant so that we could have a meal with white rice.

This kind of situation was certainly less exemplary of younger Cambodian Americans, who grew up with American foods and with restaurants as an institution. Suphada Rom remembered “living a half-life of feeling Khmer in my home and white with my friends” in rural Vermont.³³³ She ate flapjacks “slathered in maple syrup” some mornings, and rode her bike to the pizza parlor to eat “[her] favorite garlic bread pizza with pineapple,” and drank blue slushies from the gas station.³³⁴ I remember being an undergraduate and a good Cambodian American friend practiced a American diet with “cheat days,” and on his cheat day we would eat pizza and fried chicken.

Cambodian cuisine had not really filtered into the national discourse. Longteine de Monteiro claimed that her cookbook was the first on Cambodian cuisine when it was published in 1998.³³⁵ Despite this relative lack of attention from American eaters, and

³³² Piccinin and Lai, “Diabetes in Cambodian Americans.”

³³³ Suphada Rom, “Food as Language,” in “Food & Identity,” *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>.

³³⁴ Rom, “Food as Language.”

³³⁵ Monteiro and Neustadt, *The Elephant Walk Cookbook*, 15. R. Alexander D. Orquiza notes, it wasn’t until the 2000s, for example, that *Gourmet* magazine began to feature Lao, Viet, or Cambodian foods. R. Alexander D. Orquiza, “Old Tastes, Old Stories: *Gourmet* Magazine’s Representations of Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War,” *Food and Foodways* 27, no. 3 (August 2019): 181.

although elders remained somewhat resistant to restaurant dining, a variety of Cambodian restaurants offered eaters the opportunity to eat Cambodian foods, especially in enclave cities.³³⁶ Luke Tsai, who edited *San Francisco* magazine’s food section, described the Cambodian restaurants in the Bay Area as tending to have been “mom-and-pop operations run by an older generation of immigrants.”³³⁷ This was the case for the Cambodian restaurants that I visited in Lowell in late 2022, at least two of which have been in operation for multiple decades. Le Petit Café, HengLay Restaurant, and Phnom Penh Restaurant are all small operations—Le Petit Café has only a half dozen tables, and is run by just one woman in a small kitchen, takes payment only by cash, and whose son serves the tables.³³⁸ These kinds of restaurants are “hole-in-the-wall” types. Although there’s nothing to prevent diners of any ethnicity from eating in such restaurants, all of

³³⁶ To my knowledge there has been no national survey of Cambodian American restaurants, so this claim is just based on recognizing that enclave cities like Lowell and Long Beach offer a variety of Cambodian restaurants to choose from, whereas Cambodian restaurants have a relatively low profile elsewhere (lower than Vietnamese cuisine, for example), although you can find them in metropolises and as idiosyncratic outliers in rural locations. Reporter Hien Dang of the Seattle *International Examiner*, for example, wrote, “when it comes to food diversity, we tend to take for granted what we have here in Seattle (...) even pho has become sort of the status quo (...) [but if you’re] like me, you probably never tried Cambodian food before,” even though the restaurant that he wrote about in his article, called Phnom Penh, had been open as early as 1987. See Hien Dang, “Phnom Penh: A Capital Cambodian Restaurant,” *International Examiner*, July 15 – August 4, 2009, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/phnom-penh-capital-cambodian-restaurant/docview/367454942/se-2>; see also Maryam Jilliani, “Cambodian Americans are Ready to Share Their Cuisine, On Their Terms,” *Conde Nast Traveler*, November 6, 2021, <https://www.cntraveler.com/story/cambodian-americans-are-ready-to-share-their-cuisine-on-their-terms>; Matthew Fishbane, “Will Cambodian Food Ever Catch on in America?” *Salon*, June 26, 2007, https://www.salon.com/2007/06/26/khmer_food/.

³³⁷ Mayukh Sen, “A Chef Revives Cambodian Dishes Erased By War,” *New York Times*, September 26, 2018.

³³⁸ You can briefly see into the small kitchen of Le Petit Cafe from the dining area; a video shared on Facebook by the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Lowell lets us see inside. See CMAA – Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association, “Le Petit Café is one of the oldest Khmer owned restaurants in Lowell, Massachusetts [...],” Facebook, April 06, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/cmaalowell/videos/le-petit-cafe-is-one-of-the-oldest-khmer-owned-restaurants-in-lowell-massachuset/468713688287601/>.

the other diners when I visited appeared to me to be Cambodian Americans. While the menus all offered items that were outlined as being particularly authentic or traditional, their options also reflected the turn towards beef, pork, and chicken in the United States, offering just as many of these dishes as fish-based dishes. In 2004, the menu at Le Petit Café offered just a few different kinds of Cambodian-style sandwiches and several kinds of rice-noodle soup; the menu in 2022 offered only a slightly expanded menu, including the aforementioned items as well as rice porridge and some stir-fired noodle dishes and stir-fried entrees.³³⁹ Dishes that would have been relatively rarer in Cambodia—*kuy teav*, for example, or *loc lac*, which rely on pork and/or beef; my aunt described the former as a soup for rich people living in the city—are unanimously for sale in Cambodian restaurants.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Anne Franke, “Interior of Le Petit Café, Lowell, Massachusetts,” 2004, Online Archive of California, UC Irvine, Southeast Asian Archive, <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb6d5nb47t/?layout=metadata&brand=oac4>.

³⁴⁰ Chin and Bun, interview, 15.



Figure 3 – A delicious bowl of kuy teav from Phnom Penh Restaurant in Lowell, Massachusetts. Note the mixture of meats and the rich pork broth. This dish is likely available at any Cambodian American restaurant, and undoubtedly made in homes around the country. According to my aunt, you would've had to be rich and lived in the city to eat this in Cambodia in the prewar era. Photo credit Anthony C. Smith, August, 2022.

The fact that these restaurants stayed in business for multiple decades certainly means there are enough Cambodian American diners, and probably curious non-Cambodian diners, to keep them going. It's worth considering what inspired and enabled these businesses to open in the first place, given that Cambodians did not have an abundance of this kind of restaurant culture in their home country, and, navigating the legal systems to obtain licensure is an unclear process even for people born and raised in the United States, let alone for people born in Cambodia who probably didn't read, speak,

or write much, if any, English. My aunt, who has the requisite knowledge to be the culinary mind behind one, has, in recent decades, has made overtures to the fact that she would like to run a restaurant; but as a family we lack the legalese and the business acumen to make something like that happen.

One of the most famed Cambodian restaurants in the United States, The Elephant Walk, was established in 1991 in Somerville, and opened a second location in Boston's South End three years later. The restaurateurs behind The Elephant Walk initially billed it as serving "traditional Cambodian and French cuisine."³⁴¹ Since—despite sharing a name with the restaurant—de Monteiro's cookbook was meant to capture Cambodian dishes as she had eaten them in Cambodia, and not necessarily her restaurant's menu, it's difficult to say whether the marketing is fair. When I visited the Boston location in 2022, it was a restaurant with an upscale atmosphere and menu, with fancy wines and cocktails—the French connection was readily apparent. But they did offer their take on *loc lac*, which I was excited to try. The dish seemed to cater to an American market. Rather than thin strips of stir-fried beef, they served medium-rare morsels, cubes of fine cuts of meat. Furthermore, the portions were wrong: the rice was an afterthought, and the meat overpowering. Prices were also what the same dish cost at any of the other restaurants I visited, suggesting, again, that the target demographic was probably not Cambodians, but middle-class Americans looking to try something new.³⁴²

³⁴¹ Monteiro and Neustadt, *The Elephant Walk Cookbook*, 4-7, 12.

³⁴² Monteiro and Neustadt, 12-16.

Compared to this “older” wave of Cambodian American restaurants, Nyum Bai, which began as a pop-up in 2014, and in 2018 established a brick-and-mortar presence in Oakland, and which is run by a Cambodian American woman who grew up in the United States (she arrived at age two); has higher media visibility and seems to more-openly embrace a theme of “authentic” Cambodian cuisine.³⁴³ Yun stated that she felt that her foods could help reconnect Cambodian American children with their parents:

[Cambodian history] is forgotten because it was taken over by something so traumatic. Like, my parents would always repress their stories about the genocide; like, my mom’s eyes would already get watery every time I bring up the subject. And so, a better way for the younger generations to understand their history or reconnect with their roots, I feel like they need a safe place to express that. Let’s say they bring their parents in, and they can bring up the topic over a meal. [Intoning:] “Mom, did you like eat this when you were young?” You know, hoping that the conversation of healing or reconnecting would happen organically just over food. Because once you eat certain flavors, it strikes a certain memory, right? So it’s like a segue to start healing.³⁴⁴

Connecting to culture through cuisine is precisely the same idea that I had come to when plotting this thesis. The obstacle of language has been persistent, and has complicated the transmission of culinary knowledge in a variety of ways. Many cookbook authors are chefs who come from an elite, urban background (such as Monteiro and Jameson). While this is demonstrative of a language problem that prevented less-educated Cambodians

³⁴³ Simply Khmer, “We Make Khmer Food Simple,” <https://www.simplykhmer.co/>; Nyum Bai, “Our Story,” last modified 2020, <https://www.nyumbai.com/about-us-1>; Nite Yun, “Chef Nite Yun’s Journey from Refugee Camp to Oakland Restaurateur,” *Bon Appetit*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/nite-yun>.

³⁴⁴ “One of the Best New Restaurants in America is Chef Nite Yun’s Nyum Bai – Cooking in America,” *Eater*, August 31, 2018, YouTube, 07:50-08:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAqp6CRVrMc>.

from putting their ideas into words, the opposite problem, Cambodian American youths lacking the language skills to understand their parents, created additional problems.

In the first place, the name of a dish is not always sufficiently clear to someone who doesn't speak the language if there isn't an English cognate. There appears to be no standard Romanization of the Cambodian language, and during the research I have encountered the same words and dishes represented in a variety of ways. When messaging with my mother about foods we ate in the 1990s, she mentioned that we ate "pho," though we really ate *kuy teav*; the menu at Heng Lay Restaurant also spells it *kuy teav*, while De Monteiro renders this same dish as "*k'tieu*." Cambodian sour soup I have seen represented as *salawmachu*, *mju*, *somlah machou*, *samlor mchou*.³⁴⁵ Prajapati, who wrote her master's thesis on Cambodian foods used the spelling *brahop* for the fermented fish paste that I have heretofore referred to as *prahok*.³⁴⁶

Marcella Tea expressed the difficulty of trying to search for these kinds of dishes online when uncertain on how to spell the name of a dish, or if the dish could only be

³⁴⁵ Sidney Chum, "Salawmachu," and Sithis Yim Samnang, "Mju Yuon (Vietnamese Sour Soup)," in "Food & Identity," *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>; Monteiro and Neustadt, *The Elephant Walk Cookbook*, 87; Rotanak and Lee, *Nhum*, 94. The language can be fairly difficult; although I think I have an ear for sonance, and in my best moments can speak Latin-American Spanish (i.e., something other than English) very convincingly, I recall from years ago a humorous exchange with my mother in which she attempted to correct my pronunciation of a Khmer honorific, but gave up after it became clear to both of us that I simply couldn't recognize the axis on which my error revolved. An illustration of this kind of linguistic snafu that I can mention, which I think mirrors the issue, is that a student of mine, who I was tutoring in English, was unable to hear the difference between the words "search" and "church." Since, typically, you may hear the name of a dish once and only very quickly, for non-Khmer speakers, recreating the sound can be intimidating and potentially embarrassing.

³⁴⁶ Prajapati, "Lost in Food Translation," 44.

described, but not named.³⁴⁷ In addition to difficulties with rendering foods in a search engine, there are difficulties with not having an English name for an ingredient, and the fact that Khmer elders don't cook from recipes, but from memory and working knowledge. As such, for example, I know that back in the day, both my sister and I had asked our mother to write down a recipe, but she replied that Cambodian people don't use them. Additionally, when on a different occasion I asked for just the ingredients used to make a dish, she wasn't sure about an English-language equivalent of a Cambodian ingredient.

Despite such complications of culinary transmission, foods served as part of a larger conversation about identity among the youth. Cambodian culture was totally unrepresented in mainstream American media. This is reflected quite strongly among the general population. Nite Yun, a Cambodian American restaurateur, shared similar thoughts: “if people know anything about Cambodia, it's like, the genocide, or Angkor Wat. But Cambodia has such a beautiful history.”³⁴⁸ While the young Cambodian American population does have a greater sense of their particular identities through

³⁴⁷ Marcella Tea, “មីបំពង់ (mee bampong),” in “Food & Identity,” *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>.

³⁴⁸ “One of the Best New Restaurants in America is Chef Nite Yun's Nyum Bai – Cooking in America,” 04:50-05:10. During the process of researching this project, as I told people I was investigating Cambodian American foodways, it was my experience that well-meaning, educated, non-Asian people invariably volunteered that they knew someone from Vietnam, or Laos, or “boat people,” or they asked me to explain who Hmong people are and where they come from. It's not that I don't have love for these other ethnic groups—but those were not the people I'd said I was researching. By contrast, East Asian cultural practices, particularly those of China and Japan, were fairly readily accessible (notwithstanding the fact that gross misrepresentations occur) through American television and movies or Japanese animation, widely available on the Internet. I remember that a popular animated TV show, *King of the Hill*, lampooned this when the Texas-born protagonist repeatedly asked his Laotian neighbor if he was “Chinese or Japanese.”

exposure and lived experience, there are still struggles to negotiate the spectrum between their parents and the rest of society. Peter Ly, a Cambodian American educator, who grew up in Long Beach, reflected on his journey, as well as what he saw among Cambodian American students in the next generation: “A lot of these kids [referring to his Cambodian American students] are looking for their identities.”³⁴⁹ Chenda, a Cambodian American student interviewed in Lowell, shared a similar reflection on mixed identities: “I think I’m not too Asian, I’m not too Americanized, I’m somewhere in between. I don’t try to be American or Asian; I just try to get along with everybody. I guess I’m Asian in the way I respect my Mom and Dad—I suppose some American teenagers do that, too, but a lot of them don’t. I help my parents do their chores, and I always greet older people with respect.”³⁵⁰ I remember being shocked the first time I heard one of my peers address their parent by their first name. Nite Yun remembered how she felt foods separated her from other students in Stockton, where she grew up:

When I got older and made more friends, I found out that other refugee kids had a very similar experience, not quite fitting in but trying to embrace their duality. Kids at my school watched cartoons and ate meatloaf and pizza while we ate dried fish and rice, sitting on the floor. I remember kids looking at my lunch box with a funny look, because it smelled weird and looked weird. I just wanted a sandwich to take to school, to fit in. But I wasn’t totally ashamed; back then, I was going back and forth between two very different upbringings, identifying myself as a Cambodian first and foremost, but also as an American, and that’s how I think of myself now.³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ Gladsjo, dir., “Pass or Fail in Cambodia Town,” 21:20-22:00.

³⁵⁰ James Higgins and Joan Ross, *Fractured Identities: Cambodia’s Children of War* (Lowell: Loom Press, 1997), 9-10.

³⁵¹ Nite Yun, “Chef Nite Yun’s Journey from Refugee Camp to Oakland Restaurateur,” *Bon Appetit*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/nite-yun>.

Although Nite Yun said that she grew up in a kitchen watching her mom cook Cambodian foods, it wasn't until later in her life, through phone calls to her mom, that she learned how to cook Cambodian foods for herself.³⁵²

Identity negotiation is both complex and situational. Cambodian American identities are themselves enmeshed within a complex network of other identities: Cambodian, Southeast Asian, Asian, non-White, American, etc. These kinds of identities existed within Cambodian Americans, rising to the surface in response to a variety of circumstances. When I had the opportunity to eat at Cambodian restaurants in Lowell, even though I had eaten the same or similar foods while growing up, I felt very Americanized as I overheard conversations in Khmer at tables around me, even while feeling a strong sense of association, since this was a language I'd heard spoken and food that I'd eaten while growing up. When someone brings *balut* eggs to a party and only one of my cousins eats it, others of us laugh and call her the real Asian. On occasions when I have prepared Cambodian dishes for non-Cambodian friends, I certainly feel a sense of Cambodianness, even though these are foods that I don't eat every day. I felt very Cambodian when I shared a box of rambutan fruit with White peers as a university student, and had to coach them on how to eat it. My experience seems to be similar to other Cambodian American millennials born in the United States. *Stilt House Zine* issue number three includes a host of Cambodian American writers who recalled foods from

³⁵² “One of the Best New Restaurants in America is Chef Nite Yun’s Nyum Bai – Cooking in America,” 01:45-02:00; Rachel Khong, “Nite Yun’s Cambodian Restaurant is the Talk of California,” *Eater*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.eater.com/2018/7/19/17566090/nite-yun-eater-young-guns-nyum-bai>.

their youth to reflect on the idea of their identities. Joan Chun, in the short poem “Sweeter Than Condensed Milk,” wrote about sharing Cambodian-style shaved ice with a friend in the summers, and eating “eggrolls, fried rice, beef sticks, pickled vegetables, and grilled clams” on special occasions, but she also about other sushi, pad Thai, Korean chicken wings, and “that *Sailor Moon* episode when Serena makes Japanese curry,” as well as non-Asian foods like San Francisco chocolates or Chicago deep-dish pizzas.³⁵³

Similar to identity, Cambodian foods have become embedded in a broader conversation about “Asian” foods, although this label is an insufficient catchall. Even as someone who grew up eating both “Asian” foods as well as “American” foods, there’s a clear separation between the two: for one thing, one must shop in different stores depending the type of food desired, and Asian markets offer a wide variety of ethnic foods, so while picking up herbs to prepare a Cambodian dish, one might also pick up a shelf-stable package of *lap cheong*, or Chinese sausage. It has been my experience in meeting other Asian Americans attending university that talking about which Asian market one’s family frequents can create a sense of connection. The experience is a token of mutual understanding.

While I do argue for the existence of some concept of “Asian” foods, I do not suggest that Cambodian Americans totally lost a unique sense of their own cultural cuisine. Rather than the American metaphor of the melting pot, the assortment of foods

³⁵³ Joan Chun, “Sweeter Than Condensed Milk,” in “Food & Identity,” *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>.

eaten by Cambodian Americans is more like a mixed salad.³⁵⁴ These and other foods are part of a broader discourse about foods that cater to a particular palate, the boundary markers of which may not be particularly uniform. My family elders, for example, enjoy Chinese sesame “donuts” with red bean paste, available in the deli of Asian markets. Such foods are not “authentically Cambodian,” yet they’re part of a broader body of foods that Cambodian people enjoy; in terms of flavor profile, they’re not *too* dissimilar from *nuom kong*, a Cambodian donut with a sesame glaze.³⁵⁵

For some youths, attempting to negotiate an “Asian” identity in the context of food included missteps. Sasha Rath recalled seeing a documentary about Cambodia, after which she stormed home and confronted her mother about an aspect of the Cambodian diet that she [Rath] hadn’t understood: “why did you never tell me that our people ate crickets? (...) Westerners go all the way to our country to enjoy [them]. You never made any of it for us!”³⁵⁶ According to Rath, her mother snapped, “don’t be stupid, you really want to eat that stuff? When you have absolutely nothing to eat, you learn to eat what is available. Who voluntarily chooses cockroaches over fish? Believe me, there was a time

³⁵⁴ The metaphor of the salad rather than the melting pot has been used by others; I can’t recall where I first heard it.

³⁵⁵ Yaghamai writes that second-generation Cambodian Americans have a “disconnected identity” as a consequence of being disconnected from their roots. She also notes that participants in her research asserted some Cambodian Americans had not just a disconnected identity, but they may even pretend to an alternative ethnic identity as a response to having not learned their own history, or because they are ashamed of their culture due to negative connotations: “you see it all the time, Cambodian kids who pretend they’re some other Asian,” and “it’s sad, but some people are embarrassed to say they are Khmer.” Yaghamai, “Voices of Second Generation Cambodian Americans in Long Beach, California,” 111-13.

³⁵⁶ Sasha Rath, “All in Perspective,” in “Food & Identity,” *Stilt House* 3 [ca. 2020], <https://www.calaalowell.org/food-and-identity>.

when there was nothing. People only ate those things to survive.”³⁵⁷ A personal misstep is I never learned how to use chopsticks as a child, but learned later as a teenager because I felt that “Asian people” were supposed to know how to use chopsticks, whereupon I began to use chopsticks for everything until my mother pointed out to me that Cambodian people use chopsticks to eat noodles, and use a spoon, or their fingers, for many other foods, such as rice.

This chapter reflected the changes that occurred alongside the growth of the first generation of U.S. born Cambodian American children. While the refugee population had overcome many of the growing pains they had encountered on first arrival, cultural transformations metastasized into deeper issues over time, and many Cambodian American children did not learn to eat all of the same foods as their parents, though the parents found solutions by curating their culinary knowledge to cook Cambodian dishes that would appeal to their children. But parents, too, wound up shopping at multiple grocery stores (Asian- and American-style) in order to feed their families.

Despite the efforts of their parents, Cambodian American children learned to partake in American foodways. Lacking the cultural knowledge to understand how these foods (energy-dense junk foods or fast foods) could negatively impact their children, or lacking the authority to intervene (due to the cultural disruptions of the family structure), some youths began to develop health problems. Adult Cambodian Americans experienced health problems too, and an alarming poverty rate (along with conformity to

³⁵⁷ Rath, “All in Perspective.”

an unhealthy American schedule) contributed to disproportionately high rates of diabetes, a food-related illness practically unheard of in prewar Cambodia.

Not everything revealed by this chapter has been so somber. Other themes in Cambodian American foodways articulated in this chapter include the particulars about the emerging restaurant culture, as well as the social environment related to foods at Cambodian American community parties. And lastly, this chapter has also discussed the ties between cultural foods and identity formation, inside of a broader discourse about competing categories of food in American society.

Conclusion

When I visited my aunt to conduct an oral history for this project, she fed me three times. Shortly after I arrived, we ate a savory, rice soup that she had prepared for breakfast (that she and my uncle eat that soup every day for breakfast, she said; when I asked whether she thought her daughters, my cousins, also eat this soup every day, she laughed and said no), which, in its essential form, is a delicious broth with boiled rice, and in this case contained once-frozen shrimp from Sam's Club, served with your choice of garnishes selected from an array: mung-bean sprouts that she'd sprouted at home; pickled Thai peppers in a fish-sauce brine, stored in a jar that once held some factory-pickled product; crispy-fried garlic and/or onions purchased from an Asian market; fermented soy beans; a squeeze of lime juice, in this case from one of those refrigerated substitutes, the container for which imitates its subject. After we ate, we talked for hours while the leftover soup sat on the (inactive) stovetop. When we got hungry again, we spooned more into small bowls, popped them into the microwave to re-heat, and garnished them once they'd come out. Later, my aunt gave me a lesson on how she makes tom yum soup. I was rather lucky to have this honor, as she had previously declined to teach my sister how to make a broth for *yahon*, because she doesn't think any of us could make the soup right (presumably, we'd make Cambodian hot pot taste too much like pizza, or fried chicken). Though tom yum is a Thai dish, my aunt contends that it's practically interchangeable with a Cambodian sour soup (or at least one version of it). She doesn't cook with a recipe and never has, so I pondered the importance of naming

the dish at all. As we planned to eat the soup with rice, she rinsed a few cups of rice in the liner of an inexpensive rice cooker purchased at Walmart—rice cookers in the Asian market are too expensive these days and they don't last, she and my uncle complain—then quickly eyeballed the water level before replacing the liner and switching on the rice cooker. To my surprise, her fifty-pound bag of rice was a Costco brand jasmine rice, which she said was good enough if eaten right away. I wondered if the pandemic had caused this turn away from Asian market rice, as rice had become quite difficult to obtain at the outset. I remember that every local store was completely sold out; I was working at an Asian restaurant at the time, and the owner couldn't purchase rice from his distributor.

To make the base for the tom yum, my aunt used rehydrated Mexican chiles for color (I think they were guajilloes), and for flavor, galangal, lemongrass, and kaffir lime leaf, which she had stored in the freezer. “This one, ‘the one like ginger,’” pointing to the galangal and referring to an earlier part of our conversation, “what [do] they call that [in English]?”³⁵⁸ After bringing a pot of water to a simmer on the glass stovetop, she used the butt of an American chef knife to pound a few small stalks of lemongrass before depositing a little bit of the frozen trio in the simmering water. In addition to contributing their flavor, she says that adding these aromatics to the water first would “cut the smell” of whatever meat would be cooked in the broth; this, she said, she learned from her mother.³⁵⁹ After trimming the ribcage from a package of chicken breasts purchased at the

³⁵⁸ Chin and Bun, interview, 54.

³⁵⁹ China and Bun, interview, 54-55.

local market, she added the bones to simmer before turning her attention back to the soup base. She turned the rehydrated chiles into a pulp on the surface of a plastic cutting board, de-stemmed and shredded (think chiffonade) the lime leaves, and cut the galangal and lemongrass into thin slices. Except for the chilis, she pounded the ingredients into a paste in her stone mortar and pestle adding a little salt to help break things down.



Figure 3 – My aunt pounds kaffir lime leaf (dark green), galangal (brownish-orange), and lemongrass (everything else) in a mortar. Although today she would more readily use a blender for this task, she demonstrates the traditional method for the research. “Most time I put in the blender, better,” she said to me while working the ingredients, “They make smooth. Faster. This one I just make for you to take a picture.” Photo credit Anthony C. Smith, January 2023.

Once she had achieved the right consistency, she worked the chiles into the mixture, then set aside an amount to be used in the soup that day, and put the rest in a

freezer bag to be used at a later date. In addition to the base of once-frozen aromatics, she used a store-bought packet of powdered, tamarind soup base to add sourness; at the time, she was fresh out of dehydrated tamarind pulp, which she usually buys at an Asian market. Into the simmering broth she swirled powdered chicken bouillon and Vietnamese fish sauce, both also from the Asian market, and some brown sugar. After slicing the chicken breast, she dumped it into the pot and adjusted the seasoning to taste once the soup returned to a simmer. Thawed and de-shelled shrimp, the same we'd eaten with the rice soup, would be added right before serving, to ensure that they would not overcook.

If the right ingredients had been available in the small-town grocery store (or if I had given more notice), she would have added a specific varietal of mushrooms, fish meatballs, bok choy, and other fresh vegetables such as eggplant. If the meal had been prepared for a prestigious event, or something with more of the Cambodian American community in attendance, she might have cut the vegetables and other ingredients into the shape she recognized as appropriate for the dish, something close to matchsticks, but just for family (or, just for me) she didn't mind making simpler, quicker cuts.³⁶⁰

When the soup was just about ready to eat, my aunt asked my uncle, who was watching the Minnesota Vikings on TV in an adjacent room, to come in and offer an opinion. A little more salt, a little more sugar, he thought, and it would be perfect. Minutes later, ready to eat, we all sat down in the living room on sofas adjacent to coffee tables. We ate and continued to talk while, on the television, a YouTube algorithm cycled

³⁶⁰ Chin and Bun, interview, 43.

through videos of rural Cambodian life—villagers working in their gardens, setting fishing traps, building a fence, etc.—in Cambodia and bordering countries, which, as I had come on a weekend when they were off from their jobs, they had been watching when I'd arrived that morning.

There are still Cambodian rice farms today, just as there have been for thousands of years—since long before the Bayon stood at Angkor Thom, and since before Cambodians came to practice Buddhism, even though it's said that to be Khmer is to be Buddhist. The title of this thesis, "From Farm to Table to Factory," begins with the farm, because the farm was the way of life for so many Cambodians, including many of the elders still with us today. In addition to farming rice, Cambodians maintained productive gardens and ate foods foraged from the surrounding environment. When their children were at plate, when they grew hungry, they ate the produce growing everywhere around them. Cambodians ate an inordinate number of fish, which they caught by themselves or simply purchased in the marketplace, sold by dedicated fishermen or their proxy. They sold their own garden vegetables in the same market. Lacking electricity or refrigeration, they visited the market every day, and along the way snacked on foods prepared by a vendor who operated out of a small cart. Women prepared meals for the family and taught their daughters how to cook. They all cooked and ate sitting on the floor, or squatting, with no furniture in their homes. When they were finished, they disposed of any leftovers by feeding the animals they raised, pigs and/or fowl, which they would eventually re-sell to an ethnic Chinese merchant for slaughter.

The farm began disappearing in the late 1960s, as the turmoil of Cambodian history disrupted lives and left Cambodians starved, kidnapped, murdered, and homeless. Although they were cast to the countryside, and performed agricultural work throughout the day, they became captives of the state. Throughout that time, food was the object of desire for nearly all Cambodians, and one method of control exercised by their captors. When the Communist regime fell, survivors fled to the border of Thailand to escape ongoing violence and to find food. The Thai government and the United Nations, along with international organizations, poured resources into the refugee camps, returning to Cambodians some semblance of control over their own lives.

When the international community accepted the responsibility of resettling Cambodians in countries of asylum, they first asked Cambodians to come to the table. The table in the title of this thesis represents a number of things—first of all, it's literal, as Cambodian eating practices adjusted to twentieth-century American kitchens, and meals moved to table—but, primarily, it represents the encounter between Cambodian refugees and the hegemony of a modern society. In the United States, Cambodians had to learn to adjust to just about everything, including the food. Although they had help from American sponsors, many refugees struggled to eat foods like hamburgers and tuna sandwiches, and so they invariably found ways to connect with an Asian market, where they could reconnect with the rice that had sustained them for thousands of years.

Adult women continued cooking food for their families, though their fast-paced American lives sometimes demanded that they rely on convenience products. Wage work

took women away from the home, and schoolwork took children away from the home, severing the culinary link that had been traditionally maintained between mother and daughters. Younger generations of Cambodian eaters learned to enjoy eating in restaurants, and restaurateurs catered to their tastes, establishing long-running businesses in enclave cities.

The Cambodian American diet in the United States reflected the constraints of their new environment, diminishing the centrality of fish—which were expensive in the United States—and making the transition away from the farm to the factory, a model of eating reliant upon industrial consumerism including animal meats, the latter of which were cheaper and more abundant in the United States. As the younger generation of Cambodians grew up, they clashed with their parents over the right kinds of foods to eat. Parents sought out ingredients in Asian markets to emulate traditional foods with imported ingredients, and deployed ethnic dishes that their children would also enjoy. And while children ate the Cambodian foods that their parents made for them, they also learned to eat American-style foods, sometimes from friends, sometimes just at school lunch. They took these preferences and when their parents went shopping, they asked for chips and soda, junk foods, the health effects of which neither they nor their parents understood.

The factory also represents an ironic, terminating clause to the middle-class “farm to table” food movement, the notion that foods should go directly from the farm to the table, with no in between of a processor or supermarket. The irony is that many

Cambodians historically maintained such a situation while living in Cambodia, but could not reestablish that link to the farm in the United States, where they necessarily relied on supermarkets and factory-produced foods, since they often didn't own land to cultivate substantial gardens, and disproportionate poverty resulted in detriment to health outcomes, which are common among the poor consumers in American society.

It is furthermore the case that many Cambodians worked in factories, as my mom, my aunt, and my uncle did for several decades now. The refugee generation often didn't have the skills, accredited credentials, or language to find work outside of factory jobs. And so, the factory also represents the kind of work to which Cambodians were relegated by American society, and had to perform in order to feed themselves and their families.

The journey of the Cambodian American, dramatically simplified, has been a journey from farm, to table, to factory. To where will we go next?

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