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**‘The social and cultural role of food for Myanmar refugees in regional Australia:
making place and building networks’**

Mandy Hughes

Abstract

The social role of food has sustained growing interest in recent times. These studies become even more meaningful to sociological discussions when the research participants have faced multiple levels of disadvantage based on immigration status, ethnicity, experience of trauma, language abilities, and geographic location. This research maps the social and cultural food journeys of people from Myanmar¹ to the regional city of Coffs Harbour, Australia. This interdisciplinary study uses focused ethnography and participatory/collaborative research methods to document and analyse food experiences. The findings reveal a positive settlement story, one where differences and challenges have been overcome and a resilient community has utilised networks built to confidently mark out its place in a new home. The role of food in bringing together communities and individuals, has allowed these networks to be strengthened.

Word count 7019

¹ The name Myanmar is adopted as the research participants’ preference because it is believed to be inclusive of all ethnicities.

Introduction

Food author Naomi Duguid conceptualises food as ‘the last refuge’. She states ‘the kitchen and the dinner table are places where people can relax and feel safe, where they can take a break from the challenges of the world outside’ (Duguid 2012: 2). The food experiences of humanitarian migrants from Myanmar, now settled in the Coffs Harbour region of northern New South Wales, Australia, demonstrate this to be the case. These experiences are complex, challenging and noteworthy, and they tell settlement stories in authentic and relevant ways. This inter-disciplinary study draws on ideas from sociology, anthropology and geography to document these food stories to understand the social and cultural factors that influence food choices in an unfamiliar environment. This research combines discussion and analysis of the important issue of food availability and choices, and how this is connected to placemaking and the fostering of social capital through the continuation, interruption and re-definition of cultural practices.

Research context:

In recent years, around 20 per cent of humanitarian migrants to Australia have settled in specifically identified regional areas (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014). There are more than 400 Myanmar settlers residing in the regional city of Coffs Harbour (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2016a). Myanmar is a nation of considerable ethnic diversity and this diversity is also present in Coffs Harbour where all the major ethnic groups of Myanmar are represented. The Chin community (which is in itself made up of many sub-ethnicities and tribal groups) makes up the largest percentage of the population (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2016b). Lesser numbers of former refugees come from Burman, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Rakhine, Kayan, Shan and Mon ethnic groups (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2016b).

Settling in: making place and building networks

Placemaking as a concept emerged in the 1970s in planning theory (Rios & Watkins 2015) but is increasingly seen in modern sociology, anthropology, geography and philosophy (for example Casey 2001; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Malkki 1992; Pink 2008). Placemaking is linked to Deleuze and Guattari's theorisation of 'assemblage' (Rios and Watkins 2015: 210) in its examination of the merging of bodies, actions, passions, statements and materiality, and how these are territorialised and reterritorialised (Deleuze and Guattari 1992: 87-9, 503-5). Assemblage is relevant to the migration experience where identity (body, actions, passions) is re-created and re-negotiated. Rios and Watkins (2015) extend this idea to examine 'circulations' of material and immaterial culture. These circulations reflect the precarious and uncertain lives of asylum seekers and refugees, as well as their social relationships to material and non-material culture that can contribute to creating a sense of place, and hence a sense of self. The interruption of such circulations can create deterritorialisation (Malkki 1992) and can loosen established relationships to place. This is especially important for people from refugee backgrounds who will have experienced multiple interruptions at the beginning of the journey of forced migration, in interim countries and in their settlement destinations.

Identification and analysis of placemaking forms an intrinsic part of this study because 'creating a place for one's self and for one's group is central to personal and social existence' (Gray 2002: 39). Placemaking is also instrumental in facilitating community 'processes and products' (Gray 2002: 40), as later identified through food in this study. Furthermore, Sampson and Gifford (2010) claim the idea of connecting place and well-being is under-researched and represents an important area of study in the health of emergent settler communities.

Relevant to this study is Rios and Watkins (2015) representation of translocal place. In their study of Hmong diaspora in the United States, Rios and Watkins explain how place is not limited to geographic boundaries and recognise the ‘multidirectional’ mobilisation of ideas, products and experiences between and within global communities. The authors discuss how ‘the use of visual materials and material objects enable the symbolic and affective bridge between locations’ (Rios and Watkins 2015: 212).

An increasing number of publications explore the link between reproducing elements of place and enabling positive settlement for people from refugee and migrant backgrounds (for example Blunt 2003; Brightwell 2012; Brook 2003; Dudley 2011; Hiruy 2009; O’Neill and Hubbard 2010; Sampson and Gifford 2010; Sheringham 2010; Witteborn 2011). This research moves beyond the notion of providing basic services for those exposed to trauma, to evaluating the impact of the whole environment (material culture, natural and built environments). Place can ‘actively enhance’ healing processes for this population (Sampson and Gifford 2010). O’Neill and Hubbard (2010), in their study on migrant settlement in the United Kingdom, confirm the vital need for developing a sense of self in connection to emplacement.

Placemaking is deeply connected to achieving a sense of belonging and identity. Kiros Hiruy (2009) argues that ‘a common emotional response to forced displacement is to make where they are now like where home used to be...remove the strangeness of the new place...[and] maintain collective memory through cultural activities...’ (2009: 95). This is relevant in terms of the placemaking aspects of food, and how the growing, preparation and consumption of food can strengthen and re-invent identity for migrants in a number of ways. However,

Sampson and Gifford (2010) note the importance of understanding the ways in which people from refugee backgrounds relate to the idea of place as not just being about a yearning for home, but also about the possibilities of creating place in their new home. Identity and belonging, as fluid processes, can be seen in both of these phases of placemaking. In essence, place can be described as ‘space’ inscribed with a sense of belonging (Blommaert 2005: 222); one that can comfort, heal and reconnect a forced migrant to their idea of home, as well as offer a sense of hope in their new lives.

For positive placemaking to occur, people need access to knowledge and materials, as well as networks and supports. The concept of social capital is useful here, and although it is a vast and variously understood topic, it highlights the dependence on networks to secure and share preferred foods. Bourdieu explains social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network’ (1986: 248). Studies on refugee settlement illustrate the ways in which social capital can both promote and undermine social connections and can impact on the creation of social networks (Elliott and Yusaf 2014; Kilpatrick et al. 2015). Inherent power relations within the Myanmar community are evident, as the more established members of the community wield more power. But the work of these longer-term group members also benefits the newcomers as it enables connections within the Myanmar community and to the non-Myanmar community. As such community leaders act as distributors (and potentially gatekeepers) for knowledge and resources. In this case, the networks serve to enhance the process of community formation and resilience through food connections.

In contrast to Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptualisation of social capital as being characterised by unequal power relations, social capital, when applied to refugee settlement can be defined as ‘the invisible glue’ that binds communities (Elliott and Yusef 2014: 101). Social capital in the

context of this study relates to the capacity of networks to enhance community. For people from refugee backgrounds, social capital can strengthen ties within a specific cultural group and form a bridge to the broader non-settler community, as well as provide links to institutional power and decision making (Elliot and Yusef 2014). Therefore, social capital networks are essential to acquire preferred foods and prevent food insecurity (Dean and Sharkey 2011). Aldrich's (2012) differentiation of three different forms of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking, can be readily applied to food procurement for people from refugee backgrounds. Access to specialised ingredients can be realised through bonding with local settlers from the same cultural group, knowledge of local growing conditions can be found in bridging social capital via relationships with the broader non-settler community, and linking social capital can influence local or broader policy initiatives. These multiple aspects of social capital can also help analyse the idea of empowered food provisioning, as outlined in the concept of right to food (Food and Agriculture Organization, 1996; United Nations, 1948) which promotes equitable access to appropriate and culturally significant food systems.

Food in Myanmar

Food sourcing for people from Myanmar is considerably different from typical foodways in Anglo-Australia. Many Myanmar settlers in Coffs Harbour come from rural areas where subsistence farming is the norm. All available land is used for growing food and crops are planted right up to the doors and windows of homes. Food supply is practical, yet limited. Supermarkets do not exist. One participant from a rural area stated 'in Burma, not shopping, everyone has a farm and we eat mostly corn and sometimes rice, special times we eat rice, every day we eat corn'. Food markets are present in towns and cities, but supply is generally based on local availability. Another participant told of how in Myanmar, the seasons totally guide food choices. He also stated that there is a strong belief in the medicinal nature of food, so any food is potentially deemed medicine or poison. Food is also something that is offered

unconditionally to guests (or strangers): ‘since I was tiny, everywhere you go, if you knock on someone’s door and say I’m looking for such and such, they won’t tell you until they feed you. Food means welcome in Myanmar culture’. Another significant difference in food culture is the availability of food stalls in cities and towns. These stalls are embedded in the local landscape and are identifiable markers of place. One participant stated that in Myanmar he could walk outside his front door and purchase his favoured bone-broth for breakfast. Mohinga (noodle soup, with fish and banana flowers) could also be bought on neighbouring street stalls but in Australia it takes considerable time to prepare, and not all ingredients can be readily sourced.

Food in Myanmar varies considerably depending on ethnicity and tribal groups, and re-creation of these unique dishes contributes significantly to reproducing cultural identity, especially during displacement (see Ewen, 2012; Hadley, Zodhiate and Sellen, 2006; Harris, 2014; Rios and Watkins, 2015). The regional and ethnic differentiation in cuisine is reflected in Myanmar community foodways in Coffs Harbour. During my fieldwork I noticed a distinct difference between Burman/Myanmar² and Chin food, with Karen food seeming to fall somewhere in between the two in terms of common ingredients and style of cooking. Burman/Myanmar food typically includes chili and is often deep fried, with extensive use of fish, fish sauce and shrimp paste. Alternatively, Chin food is often boiled with water and chicken is the favoured meat. At various community events I saw the classic Burman/Myanmar meals of pork or chicken curry prepared. These curries were created with large amounts of onion and were seasoned with turmeric and ginger, reminiscent of Indian

² The names Burman and Myanmar are often used together or interchangeably to describe the majority ethnic group. When referring to the ethnic group I will use Burman/Myanmar to distinguish from the broader, multi-ethnic Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour.

spices. I also observed that a mortar and pestle was a standard piece of equipment in participants' kitchens to grind up the various spices. These are familiar tools 'from home' that contribute to the act of placemaking in terms of both aesthetics and embodiment. The act of pounding the ingredients and the subsequent aromas that emerged connected the cook to 'old ways of doing things' in a multi-sensory way.

Research Approach

My methodological approach was embedded in the desire to engage with people from refugee backgrounds in a collaborative, sensitive and respectful manner. In applying a concept of 'reciprocal research' (Mackenzie et al. 2007), I sought to develop meaningful, trusting relationships with my participants and mutual benefits ensued. Focused ethnography was used to employ participatory methods, thus embedding an interpretive, reflexive and constructivist approach (Hjorth and Sharp 2014; Whitehead 2004).

Various qualitative research instruments were used to explore and document the multiple social realities and experiences of participants. These tools were utilised in a way that connected (over a period a time, in different settings) the participants and the researcher to understand events rather than control them (Higgs 2001: 46). Methods used included community consultation sessions, walking interviews/home and garden tours (O'Neill and Hubbard 2010; Pink 2007b), semi-structured and informal interviews with participants, and participant observation, including watching, talking and doing (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Observations were recorded in a field journal and were filmed where appropriate consent was provided. Key findings were used to create a documentary film depicting the participants food journeys.

Purposeful and snowball sampling (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007) was used to recruit participants for the fieldwork period of ten months. There were 12 main contributors to the study and these participants were interviewed formally and informally, and observed on multiple occasions, in different settings. A reciprocal interview style was achieved through developing positive relationships with participants over time and adopting a conversational, empathetic tone which reflected genuine interest in wanting to hear their stories. Although the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour is culturally and linguistically diverse, Burmese was used as the common language between different ethnicities and was therefore used in most interviews. Participants' responses were then translated into English.

This research was inductive in order to allow understanding to emerge, rather than be imposed. Thematic analysis was used to organise and interpret the collected data (Berg 2009; Perakyla 2005). van Manen (1990: 92-93) in his examination of the lived experience outlines three different approaches to thematic analysis: 1) a wholistic approach that examines the entire text to elucidate themes; 2) a selective approach that requires multiple readings to identify specific statements or phrases that carry meaning about the selected phenomenon; 3) a detailed approach that closely examines specific sentences to provide insight into the lived experience. I used a combination of all three as there are times when the broader context/text provided meaning relevant to specific themes, and other instances where single words or phrases were significant.

Challenges for new arrivals in Coffs Harbour

After arriving in a destination country, people from refugee backgrounds go through many phases of adjustment, which can be grouped into three broad stages as the post-arrival ‘honeymoon’ stage, culture shock, and eventually ‘settlement’ (STARTTS 2014; uscrierefugees 2001). A participant expressed positive feelings post arrival, ‘my first impression was I felt like I escaped, I’m free from all the difficulty I have faced in the past’, and another stated ‘I looked in the mirror and I knew I would live longer here’. However, conflicting feelings were demonstrated by another participant who stated ‘at first I feel like heaven. Then I’m not sure if I’m happy or not happy...I had difficulty finding a house, also this is not my country, so I had trouble with depression’. Another participant made the following comments on their arrival experience: ‘we are very surprised, different people, different language, different culture...surprised but after that we are very happy again, we are safe and happy’. Whilst all entrants through the regional humanitarian program will receive some form of orientation about life in Australia, including a five-day pre-departure course and post-arrival education from settlement services (Department of Social Services n.d.b; Refugee Council of Australia 2011), participants in this study indicated they experienced considerable culture shock. Topics taught in the pre-departure sessions included cultural adjustment and money but there was no specific topic on food. It is important to recognise that small, everyday tasks that Australian citizens may take for granted, such as shopping, can be very challenging for people from refugee backgrounds in a new and unfamiliar environment.

Relationships with food play a key role in settlement and many participants recalled negative early experiences with shopping in Australia, such as ‘only my husband did...it was nearly a year before I did it...it was very scary’, and ‘in Coffs Harbour the market is big, I’ve never seen before’. Whilst local settlement services now offer a brief shopping orientation, the reality of independent shopping can be daunting. One participant outlined issues with communication:

This is my first challenge because we don’t know how to buy the things...I don’t know how to pay the money...It’s hard because they don’t understand our pronunciation. I want condensed milk but I can’t find. It is difficult for us...I don’t know much English. Easy things I know, like potato and tomato.

Common mistakes relating to the incorrect purchase of certain foods were recalled by different participants: ‘I thought I bought beef but it was lamb. I’ve never eaten it before, so we didn’t eat it’ and ‘I wanted to buy pork but I bought lamb [because you couldn’t read the label?] yes’. Fostering social capital is relevant here in terms of shared information within the community (bonding) and development of English language skills (bridging), which in turn leads to access to desired foods.

Participants identified common ingredients that could not be found in their new home. These included rosella leaves, specific vegetables including Asian eggplants, very hot chili, a preferred type of shrimp paste, and banana flowers and stems (an essential ingredient in mohinga). One newly arrived participant noted that they found similar food types to what they are used to but the taste was not the same: ‘I found rice but not exactly the same as in my place [Chin State] but I can manage. I found corn but it is different. [Fresh] millet I cannot find’. After this interview I made enquires to a local community garden to see if they

were growing millet and although they were not, they said they could possibly grow it if the interest was there. So the potential to source this item was present if the right social connections were made despite presenting an initial challenge. Moreover, another participant described their early food shopping experience:

When we arrived in Coffs Harbour we did not find the things we like to eat, we only found Woolies [supermarket] food. After a while we made friends who live in Sydney and Brisbane and we found our traditional foods, the kind of food we normally like to eat.

These examples illustrate how both bonding and bridging social capital can provide access to desired foods.

Over time, as the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour has grown, so too the food landscape has transformed since the early arrivals. Many changes have occurred as a result of consumer demands, as well as through the settlers' expanding garden culture. This transformation has not only served to meet culinary desires, it also performs an important role in placemaking - making here like there - by transforming the landscape (gardens), the kitchen (culturally specific ingredients and cooking tools) and transforming the neighbourhood (strong smells of traditional foods). As the settlement journey progresses, adaptation to the local food landscape can also occur.

Adaptation to Australian food

Most participants in this study had tried 'Australian' food but very much favoured their traditional foods. Interestingly the interpretation of 'Australian' food was limited and usually associated with American fast food chain offerings, as well as barbeques. Many had tried fast food but always ate traditional foods after in order to feel satisfied. A common attitude was

that a meal without rice was not a meal. In fact, some scholars suggest that *rice* actually means *food* or *meal* in some Asian cultures (Bishwajit et al. 2013). One participant commented that he was concerned because he had seen some community members ‘getting big’ by eating takeaway, followed by a traditional meal of rice or noodles. Some research (Hadley et al. 2006; Renzaho 2004) highlights the preference of some new arrivals for processed western foods but this does not seem to be the case for the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour.

The realities of location, work commitments and general changes in lifestyle have meant that it is not always possible to eat the traditional way but responses from participants indicated there is a strong preference to keep eating food from home, wherever possible. It is essential, therefore, to be able to source such foods, and this becomes possible in many instances by growing your own food.

‘Make a shop behind your house’: the role of gardening

Gardening has had an impact on all the Myanmar community members in Coffs Harbour in one way or another, as all participants have some form of home garden, from simple polystyrene boxes filled with herbs to expansive plots bursting with rare jungle plants and trees. Gardening also exemplifies the role of placemaking and social capital in building networks and promoting positive settlement. Gardening can provide many opportunities in settlement including a means to access traditional foods, engagement with nature/green space as a form of therapy, and it can also potentially provide an income. It is also a very clear, visual and sensory link to the past and to the traditions of Myanmar ways of life. This was summed up by a participant who recalled a Myanmar proverb which states: ‘if you want to be

happy get married. If you want to be happy for life do gardening. If you want to be happy for this life and the next do meditation and mindfulness'. Gardening is therefore connected to Myanmar spiritual and philosophical beliefs as it is embedded in one of the three paths to happiness. This participant added 'so gardening is going to give happiness for a lifetime, and also planting trees and vegies, you're not just planting for yourself but also for the next generation, you've already planted the seed so it's good karma'. Gardening has long term and intergenerational effects and these benefits can already be observed for this community in Coffs Harbour.

A participant explained that it was difficult for him to secure employment upon arrival, despite considerable work experience in the community development/charitable sector. He joined a public community garden to grow the kinds of things he liked to eat and also to provide healthy and economical food for his family. Upon meeting a generous stranger, this man was offered a larger plot of private land to use free of charge to grow more vegetables and herbs, and ultimately supply local restaurants and markets. The garden provided not only an income but it also offered a refuge and a means to feel happy and productive. This participant stated, 'if I hadn't been doing gardening it would be so bad. So I love my gardening. It helped a lot with my mental health and well-being'. This reasserts the positive role of gardening in promoting psychological benefits, as indicated in the literature (Anderson 2010; Ashton 2015; Brook 2003; Kaplan 1995). The link between gardening and well-being is apparent here and in interviews with different participants. The love of gardening was easily distinguishable as not only a means of productivity but also as an embodied experience, connecting the participant to home and facilitating placemaking by manipulating the natural and human-made landscape. Making connections to the broader community through gardening also demonstrates the important role of bridging social capital.

On a practical level the sub-tropical climate, extended growing season and fertile soil in Coffs Harbour make it an ideal place for agricultural pursuits and participants have remarked that it is similar to parts of Myanmar in this regard. Many crops commonly grown in Myanmar flourish here. These include rosella (commonly grown for its leaves), 'stick pumpkin' (Asian eggplant), varieties of cress and beans, and a vast array of trees, including moringa, cultivated for their leaves. Participants also grow vegetables and fruit more familiar in Australia, such as choko and pumpkin, but use all of their components, including the leaves.

One man reported that he has lived in Coffs Harbour for more than seven years, and, along with his family, is purchasing a home on a large suburban block. The land has been planted out over a number of years and is now completely covered in food crops, 'at first we cannot do the big one, but every year we extend. So now it is completely covered [smiles]'. This participant has undertaken horticultural training and is now employed as a school gardener, cultivating an award-winning food garden with students.

Gardening is about much more than providing food and income, it also represents an important means of attaining health and well-being. After suffering a stroke, one participant spent several months in hospital. During this time he yearned to be back in his garden. He described how this access to green space played an important role in his rehabilitation: 'It is therapy, yes. Also, for my left side I do exercise. I weeding slowly, good exercise'. He added 'when I come home from the hospital I go into my garden and I look around my garden, my feeling is good'. But this is not just about access to green space, it also represents a way to

connect with a familiar and culturally specific land(food)scape. This form of placemaking gives deep meaning to the experience of the everyday, whereby attempts to ‘“feel at home” in new surroundings are helped by efforts to stress continuity amidst change’ (Ho and Hatfield 2011: 711).

Another participant has achieved similar outcomes by converting his garden in a rental property to a highly productive food source and familiar place: ‘...it’s like we’re eating food in Burma’. This was revealed in a garden tour where the participant proudly showed me what he grew. Here every possible growing space was utilised, including the front garden, a somewhat unfamiliar notion in the ornamental gardens of Australian suburbia. Many small plants were growing in polystyrene boxes, whilst more established trees such as papaya were planted directly in the garden. He was very happy to receive permission from the owner of the property to cultivate the garden. The first plant he grew was rosella (as also reported by many other participants) and he now has more than 30 rare jungle plants thriving in his Coffs Harbour garden. He described the challenge of finding familiar foods on arrival and so he visited ‘here and there’ and travelled ‘here and there’ (Brisbane mainly) and now after five years ‘we have plants we want to eat, now it’s the way we like it’. The creation of this garden was facilitated largely by tapping into local and interstate Myanmar community networks. This man’s respected position as a community leader fostered the development of bonding social capital and allowed him to distribute these benefits locally.

A Myanmar saying, ‘make a shop behind your house’, previously mentioned by another participant, was retold during this visit. The participant explained ‘it means you do not have to buy things from outside and that shop will provide enough food for your family and minimise costs. It means make your own garden at the back of your house’. This participant

added that he only buys onions and garlic, all other fruit and vegetables are grown in his garden. The utilitarian nature of home gardening is clear but such cultivation also links participants to the past and to ways from home, including the farming/growing tradition. It represents an important way to reproduce tradition, and for culture to continue, transform and adapt to new situations.

Food enterprises

Cooking and gardening skills have provided a means of income for Myanmar settlers in Coffs Harbour and a way to make cross-cultural links to the broader Coffs Harbour community (bridging and linking social capital). During my field work I often encountered new arrivals who held ambitions of opening a food stall, and ultimately a restaurant. This dream has been achieved by one family who own a popular Thai restaurant. The owner of this restaurant learnt Thai cooking techniques during her seven years in Thailand waiting for refugee status. Arriving in Australia with little knowledge of English, this settler commenced work as a kitchen hand and eventually convinced her husband that they too should open a restaurant. In planning their menu, they conceded that Australians were not familiar with Myanmar food and so decided to opt for the more familiar option of Thai food. But there has always been some Myanmar food on the menu, including boneless duck and chicken curry which are very popular with diners. This participant continues to have a strong preference for the Myanmar food from her childhood, including ‘noodle salad you fry with flowers, and tomato and vegetable salad – very nice’ as well as her mother’s ‘soup with smelly fish’. Interestingly, this participant did not actually learn how to cook Myanmar food until she arrived in Australia, because prior to leaving her home country her mother always did the

cooking. Her memories of eating Myanmar food remain strong and reproducing these recipes continues to link her to her family and her home country.

When I first visited one family, the father told me about his plans to open a stall at a summer food market. Soon after the first interview he contacted me to say he had a start date and so we met again to discuss his plans. He explained:

At first I was thinking Sunday market but they didn't have a vacancy, I had to wait, so they gave me the waiting list. So now I try Friday market, only food market...but I have to wait for my certificate...if I have certificate I can go next week....something like traditional food, I will have pork curry, beef curry, soup and crunchy [deep fried chick peas with tamarind sauce].

This man had been planning the stall for six months but needed certification and insurance, as well as expensive equipment. Although the entrepreneurial settler was motivated by the prospect of increasing his family's income, he also viewed this opportunity as a way to share his culture: 'if I sell here, everybody can taste our home cuisine...I think our food is more delicious!'. Cooking also continues a family tradition for this participant, as he grew up being taught to cook by his now deceased father who owned a restaurant. 'Yes, because my father was a good chef, he taught me a lot...that's why my father would be very proud of me'. Here I observed another example of how evoking memories and familial connections can be harnessed to continue traditional practices in settlement, as well as be a means of bridging social capital.

Several weeks later I met this man again, this time at the food market. It was his second time at the market after a very successful first week. In the first week he sold out of some menu items within an hour and was very encouraged by this patronage.

The first time I selling Burmese soup with chicken, and rice and chicken curry. I think I can sell more vermicelli noodle soup but I cannot. If I make samosa I will sell more, I make 60 or 65. I sell in one hour, all gone, all finished...I feel I can do more, I think like that.

The early success of his stall inspired this participant to make plans to attend other local festivals and events. But his plans were ultimately much bigger: 'yes, if my shop, now a small one, got a good name, then I do big one [restaurant] after one or two years' [smiles]. Such ambition provides another example of agency and taking control over one's circumstances, with the context of structural limitations.

Another participant told of her plans to open a restaurant but at the time of the initial interview she was feeling frustrated with Australian bureaucracy. She stated 'it's really hard to open a shop because it requires certificate II or III, not like in India [her transition country]'. However, this participant acknowledged that she had only been in Australia for one year and she 'had to try more'. She was determined to create some kind of income through cooking and selling food, and wanted 'Aussie people to encourage' her. Once again the idea of sharing culture was mentioned because this was not only a business motivation, it was also about allowing people in Coffs Harbour 'to know about our food'. These food enterprises not only allow settlers to demonstrate agency and create their own futures, they also contribute to placemaking by transforming the local food landscape. The presence of Myanmar food stalls has diversified local offerings, and has also created a new sensory presence through smells, tastes and visual reminders of another place.

Food and community

The role of food in enhancing community connectedness (binding and bridging social capital) can be observed at many different levels in the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour; including communal cooking, sharing food within and outside (non-Myanmar) the community, and sourcing hard to come by ingredients. During my fieldwork I attended many food-related events including the Thadingyut Festival of Light, Chin National Day and Myanmar community Christmas celebrations. During these visits I observed the great happiness experienced by community members when they came together through the preparation of food, and also when they were able to share their food with the non-Myanmar people invited to join the celebrations.

Celebrating with food at festivals reinstates a connection to home and facilitates the continuation of traditions and rituals. It contributes to identity construction and performance in a new homeland. A community leader summed up the important role of festivals in Myanmar life: 'we have 12 months and every month we have at least one festival. The festival can be different from place to place, town to town, district to district, but every festival has lots of food, they only make specific food for particular festivals'. In order to prepare for these festivals, the community will mobilise social networks (within and outside ethnic communities) to create a suitable feast. In preparation for Thadingyut, community members gathered to cook at a private home to supplement the food already provided by a Myanmar restaurant owner. For Chin National Day at least ten people cooked designated dishes and then assembled in a church hall for the final preparations on the day of the celebration. For the Christmas preparations about a dozen people gathered to cook on the

morning of the celebration; this, after some community members were shopping and organising until midnight the night before.

At the Christmas preparations, I observed the community coming together on both practical and social levels. Here a group made up of different ethnicities (Burman/Myanmar, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Shan) assembled to make pork and chicken curry, along with green mango salad. One very experienced cook was appointed the leader but everyone assisted in chopping, stirring, and fetching. At one stage three women of different ethnicities worked together over a pot to add spices and seasoning. Mats were spread out inside and outside the home for groups to sit and undertake preparations in a comfortable, familiar and sociable manner. Much banter was exchanged and the space was frequently filled with laughter. One participant summed up the experience as follows: 'at Christmas time we meet, everybody is happy', another added 'this is the time we are all together. We all work at different blueberry farms, so I'm very happy, normally we can't see each other...functions like this bring us together'. This happiness also brings with it feelings of both gratitude and sadness, as participants reflected on the lives of family members still in Myanmar or in transition countries. Whilst preparing a huge pot of meat, several participants stated their relatives could never afford to eat like this, so they were thinking of them on this occasion. Once again I witnessed the sensory power of food to conjure memories from the past, as well as create new ones.

Eating the food presents a further means to socialise. One man stated that he met people at festivals that he did not see on any other occasion. He also reiterated the traditional role of food sharing as an important means to facilitate communication amongst and between communities. Participants from different ethnicities referred to this social role of food, for

example: ‘yes, when we’re hungry we eat but even when we’re not hungry we eat our traditional foods with our friends and to make to new friends’ and ‘the Karen traditionally like to share food and feed friends’. The underlying theme of these comments is that you can exchange knowledge by offering food, so non-Myanmar people from Coffs Harbour (and elsewhere) can have the opportunity to learn about culture through the social experience of cross-cultural dining. This exchange becomes a form of bridging social capital. I observed this at both the Thadingyut festival and Chin National Day where non-Myanmar residents of Coffs Harbour were present to join in the celebrations, experience new tastes and learn about Myanmar culture. This was considered a very positive outcome by a Myanmar community member who stated ‘yes, I am happy, so I want other people to eat our food too...other people are interested in Burmese food, I encourage them to eat our food’.

The notion of food and community can be further identified through interactions between Myanmar people and other cultural groups from refugee backgrounds in Coffs Harbour. Cross-cultural links have been established through English classes at TAFE and from other settlement activities. This has seen an exchange of different food crops ‘for example, the African people...they show us and we start trying their food. We like it and we show them what we like’. Whilst cultures and traditions evolve over time and incorporate many new features (like new food items), linking back to the past remains an important way to enhance cultural security and strengthen identity, especially for displaced peoples.

Continuing my culture: bringing home here

Food not only constitutes a living culture, through the act of recreating and sharing traditional foods, it also represents a way to engage with the present in a new environment. Food is

about memory, about reimagining the past in positive ways by evoking the sense of taste. Throughout this study I noted many comments about how food connects participants to their culture and identity, and how important this is in times of displacement. One participant summed this up as ‘culture is your identity, it’s where you come from, the meaning behind’. And food can assist in continuing this identity, ‘yes, it is particularly important, especially our traditional foods’.

The many positive feelings surrounding food were evident throughout this study. One participant simply said cooking Myanmar food makes her feel ‘beautiful’, it reminds her of home and brings back good memories. She added when she cooks it makes her feel proud of her culture. One participant stated ‘when we have a celebration or traditional festival, we cook our food and we remember our hometown, our culture, our past lifestyle, we remember’.

The dislocation experienced by people from refugee backgrounds can be further compounded by a disruption to their relationships to food. One participant stated ‘I feel like I am disconnected from my food, it’s far away in Burma. I thought when I go back to Burma I will eat a lot of food’. Many participants made similar comments reflecting a yearning for home through food. ‘Of course I miss my home...the day I have that food I feel I am at home but also where I am is my home too’.

Despite the real importance of food in continuing identity and culture, ultimately the desire for safety is more important, as seen in this statement by a woman who spent many years fleeing violence: ‘of course I miss my home when I eat that kind of food. But when we were in our village, we had to flee all time because there had not been a ceasefire in our

village...food is important in our culture but it's not as important as peaceful living'.

Although food is important, and culturally specific foods are desirable, the need for safety is understandably of more immediate importance to these settlers. But this does not dismiss the role of food in enhancing healing, peaceful living and well-being by reasserting community connectedness and support.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the important sociocultural role of food for people from refugee backgrounds. It has described some of the challenges faced in adapting to a new home land but it has also highlighted positive ways in which communities have been strengthened through gardening as therapy and a source of rare foods, and through increased connectedness fostered in community cooking and sharing. All of these factors impact distinctly on settlement. They also demonstrate fundamental ways to facilitate placemaking in their new homes. Placemaking is achieved by accessing networks both within and outside the Myanmar community, and this illustrates the important role of social capital for people from refugee backgrounds. Understanding the sociocultural role of food for this group can play a key role in assisting in their settlement experience. What many Australians take for granted as the everyday, shopping and cooking for example, can represent a major upheaval in cultural norms for those migrating from other countries. Greater understanding in this area is essential to truly connect with the lived experience of this group of people, as well as promote positive settlement in Australia.

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