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# Harvesting from a Repotted Plant: A Qualitative Study of Karen Refugees' Resettlement and Foodways

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Karen refugees from Burma have maintained their cultural identity while in the United States through aspects of their resettlement lifestyle including community and family support, faith and Christian values, and the intergenerational transfer of foodways knowledge and practices. In this ethnographic study, foodways are defined as the social meaning of food, gardening practices, cooking of food and the practice of eating together. Fourteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcripts were subjected to open, pattern coding and thematic analyses. Using life course theory as the guiding framework, findings are described in terms of three stages of the refugees' resettlement experience: The Uproot, The Transplant and The Harvest. Findings suggest participants identify with their culture through traditional foodways and desire to preserve native dishes, gardens and celebrations for the sake of familial relations and cultural identity.

Keywords: Resettlement, Karen refugees, foodways, cultural identity

## Introduction

Many displaced families are resettled around the world due to long-standing, relentless instability in their homelands. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recommended resettlement of over 103,000 refugees from Burma, a politically unstable Southeast Asian nation and the native country of the Karen ethnic group (UNHCR 2014a). In order to reflect the participants' wishes and perspective, the authors chose to maintain their use of 'Burma' instead of 'Myanmar'. In the participants' eyes, Burma is the more accurate name of their country because it reflects

what they believe is truly their home. Many participants discussed how they felt betrayed when the government changed the country's name to Myanmar in 1989. They use the term 'Burma' to reflect their home as well as their protest of the new government.

The large influx of refugees from Burma to the United States reflects Burma's increasingly severe civil conflict as well as recent United States policy to admit refugees of this conflict (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2013). In 2005, the UNHCR began aggressively seeking relocation for refugee camp residents along the Thailand–Burma border (UNHCR 2014b). According to United States Census data, one of every three refugees admitted to the United States in 2011 was from Burma. This population growth comprises the largest percentage (30 per cent) of the 58,000 refugees admitted to the United States during that year (United States Census Bureau 2012). This article will focus on Karen refugees living in the south-eastern United States state of Georgia, which has received over 24,000 refugees since 2004 (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2013).

In Georgia, 20 per cent of all refugees are directly from Burma or refugee camps in Thailand (Georgia Refugee Community 2014). The UNHCR sends many displaced people through Georgia's capital, Atlanta, a notable refugee resettlement hub where approximately 2,500–4,000 refugees are processed every year through various agencies (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2013). The State of Georgia Refugee Health Guidelines Manual emphasizes the importance of addressing health and basic needs of refugees in conjunction with their resettlement location (Georgia Department of Community Health 2011). Georgia's Department of Public Health maintains refugees are legal residents of the United States; therefore, refugees must be treated equally to all other legal United States residents, including citizens (Georgia Department of Public Health 2010). Adding to research about refugees is not only the responsibility of a nation founded by immigrants, such as the United States, but such research is also ethically needed to ensure the future security of an increasingly diverse population.

Many Karen families have spent a great deal of their lives in refugee camps along the Thailand–Burma border. Though the Karen comprise the second largest ethnic group in Burma, they have a long history of persecution, injustice and oppression by the Burmese government and current human rights violations stemming from religious differences and power struggles (Horstmann 2011; Ford 2012; UNHCR 2014a). Refugee families in north-eastern Georgia continue to adjust to and pursue a new chapter of their lives. This ethnographic research focuses on influences of resettlement processes and cultural traditions associated with foodways on the identity of refugee individuals and families in northeast Georgia. The question guiding this research was: 'How do Karen refugees living in northeast Georgia interpret, evaluate and transmit cultural identity across generations?'

## Background

### *Cultural Identity*

Culture is the context of human existence. Cultural identity takes place in a world of meanings and understandings of beliefs, values and customs members of society use to make sense of their world and the world of others (Servaes 1988; van Willigen and Lewis 2006). Karen people's identity is shaped by cultural context, politics and personal experience (Ford 2012). Cultural identity can change with transitions and influences across the life course and can differ across generations of resettled refugees (Lewis 2008). The extent to which food traditions are passed down through refugee families upon third-country resettlement is an understudied area of refugee research. In this study, reinforcement and reproduction of cultural identity are exemplified through foodways and traditional knowledge passed down through generations in resettled Karen refugee families.

The Karen people of Burma have been displaced for decades, establishing temporary shelters in Thailand with help from the UNHCR in the 1980s (UNHCR 2014b), primarily as stateless refugees in camps bordering Thailand and Burma. Horstmann (2011) suggests the creation of a 'liminal' or temporary homeland established by Karen refugees as a distinct space between the two countries. Such liminal and interminable displacement contributes to the ambiguity of home for Karen refugee families resettled in the United States.

Jansen (2007) describes the complicated and confusing endeavour that refugees face in finding a home. Home is the context for the dynamic social process of relationships and the production of personhood. Rather than hoping to return to native lands, refugees oftentimes preferred to find sanctuary in their resettled communities. Jansen (2007) also found that, while elderly refugees desired returning to their home nations, younger refugees focused on creating a fresh start. This is indicative of the autobiographical sense of self found within familiar surroundings (Lewis 2009) and reflects generational differences as well as potential difficulties in passing down traditional foodways due to location, climate and social norms of resettlement communities.

### *Community*

Stressors associated with resettlement may be eased by the collectivist nature of many Southeast Asian refugees. Strong bonds with other refugees who have experienced similar suffering and hardship (Lewis 2008; Mitschke *et al.* 2011) allow refugees to draw on support from others. These connections allow celebrations of even small events with large community-wide reunion-like gatherings (Mitschke *et al.* 2011). Refugees also may form ethnic enclaves as they are resettled with others of the same ethnicity. In the current study,

the enclave community of Karen refugees shares a garden space. This space provides opportunities for cultural maintenance (Moller 2005) and social support through working alongside and visiting with other refugees.

### *Foodways*

Foodways include the sociocultural meaning of food acquisition (Bennett *et al.* 1942), gardening practices, food preparation and mealtime. Many refugee families reinforce cultural identity through foodways to preserve their heritage and maintain connection to their native lands. After years of living in Thai refugee camps where soldiers distribute monthly rations of dried rice, yellow beans, salt, oil and fish paste, Karen refugees may be overwhelmed upon resettlement at the abundant availability of fresh food. Access to familiar foods found in international stores can provide a sense of homecoming for those who have been unable to prepare native dishes since life before refugee camps (Lewin 2001). Native foods provide a primary sensory experience for refugees through which they embrace, share and pass down their culture within their families. Yet, few researchers have addressed how refugees use foodways to maintain and transmit cultural identity within a family unit as well as purposefully delineate their family identity using foodways.

Foodways and food traditions linked to cultural identity have been studied among a variety of groups, including both immigrants (Tuomainen 2009; Leonini and Rebughini 2012; Tovar *et al.* 2013) and non-immigrants (Goody and Goody 1995; Moller 2005). Foodways, including consumption of certain types and brands of food, have been found to differ among immigrant groups according to generation and age (Leonini and Rebughini 2012). Younger immigrants express 'double belonging' to their host society's and their parents' cultures by practicing foodways from both traditions (Leonini and Rebughini 2012). Eating practices including mealtimes, meal frequency and meal style are also reflective foodways for immigrant groups, and maintenance of family mealtimes following immigration have been found to reduce the prevalence of obesity among such groups (Tovar *et al.* 2013). For example, Moller (2005) studied the importance of foodways among South African elder gardeners. Participants cited cultural, health and financial advantages as primary motivations for gardening, affirming the benefits of gardening outreach with all migrants (Moller 2005). Refugees show similar values tied to gardening as a way to connect to their native identity. Recent outreach projects with Karen refugees have revealed many parallel benefits of community gardening in cities across the United States including New York, Chicago and Salt Lake City (International Rescue Committee 2012; World Relief: Minnesota 2014).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Life course theory (Elder 1994; Elder *et al.* 2003) provides the framework for contextualizing transitions, agency and linked lives within historical place and

time and the comprehensive influences these have on one's life and choices. This theoretical perspective allows us to ask how one's past influences and shapes one's present and future choices, relationships and personal development. Refugees transition to refugee camps which are novel environments due to forced displacement, and some eventually transition again via resettlement to a third host country. Displacement due to trauma and persecution can occur repeatedly as families are moved from one setting to another, adding further complexity to life's transitions.

Refugees' social trajectories may have unanticipated and abrupt changes, which subsequently shift their developmental pathways. Refugees may experience short-term transitions upon third-country resettlement. For example, refugee children and parents immediately encounter new environments, schools and cultural norms, while simultaneously experiencing changes in their human agency and linked lives with friends and relatives. Refugees have often experienced great loss of loved ones, in addition to losing their homes and, in many cases, their livelihood. Their physical loss of links to others is compounded by their loss of their status and agency as individuals. Human agency, which comprises planning and making choices for their lives, changes meaning for refugees, who are often unable to make long-term plans for themselves or their families without guidance. Making transitions through life can become more tedious, due to limited finances, health issues and language barriers.

This study focuses on the agency of Karen refugees whose lives have been shaped by experiences in Thai refugee camps after fleeing Burma. This study of Karen identity through foodways acknowledges the timing of transitions throughout participants' linked lives, with certain traditions interpreted differently by younger participants than by elders, which demonstrates differences associated with personal histories across generational timing of lives or developmental stages within the lifespan. While younger participants experienced only one major transition from a refugee camp to resettlement in Georgia, others moved from their homeland of Karen State in Burma to multiple refugee camps before finally resettling in the United States. Consistently with life course theory, age, transitions, social ties, timing of lives, personal control and historical circumstance influenced interpretations of identity and traditional foodways for participants in this study. The opportunity to begin a new life in the United States is often tainted by harsh memories of the past (Jasso 2003). Although upsetting memories persist, findings reveal participants have maintained their Karen identity through family, faith, community and traditional food practices.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design and Approach*

This study is designed to add to the body of research related to acculturative processes of Karen refugees living in the United States. Human subjects'

approval was secured through the Institutional Review Board, Human Subjects Office of the University of Georgia prior to data collection. Methodology was guided by ethnographic methods described by Patton (2002), including focus on a specific cultural group through continuous, long-term fieldwork (14 months) with observation, in-depth interviews, family group meetings and member checking. Karen refugees have formed and maintained relationships since their initial resettlement in a suburban area near one of Georgia's largest cities. They have created and maintained contact through church services and Karen holiday celebrations (e.g. Karen New Year and Christmas) (Z. Cooke, Jubilee Partners, personal communication).

A qualitative, ethnographic research design allowed significant time to collect various forms of data. For example, verbal interview data were combined with observation data from time spent in participants' homes, shared meals, working together in their gardens and participating in celebratory gatherings (i.e. birthday parties, Christmas and New Year celebrations). The first author spent as many as 20 hours weekly from December 2012 through November 2013 in homes and Karen community gathering places (e.g. church, local resettlement centre, neighbourhood garden, Karen food store).

The intentions of this project were not to presume understanding of the lived experiences of participants, but rather to let the researchers' voices interact with those of participants who shared their stories (Denzin 1997). The authors, as modernist ethnographic researchers, recognized the goal to promote cultural understandings in its truest form without fictionalizing or embellishing the reality of the experience. The authors also recognize limitations exist through interpretation, transcription and analysis (Denzin 1997; Patton 2002). Through this qualitative, ethnographic study, authors found meaning through interpreted data and were diligent in confirming their understandings of meanings and nuances. Trustworthiness took place through member checking, an ongoing, recursive process throughout the analysis. Member checking helped negate faulty interpretations and honoured participants' voices.

### *The Sample*

A total of 14 interviews were conducted with six families whose ages spanned three generations (aged 18–60 years, six women and eight men). Table 1 illustrates the ages and relationships of participants. All had lived in at least one refugee camp in Thailand, either due to fleeing Burma to find safety ( $n=12$ ) or because they were born in a camp ( $n=2$ ). Participants born in a refugee camp never lived in Burma (see Table 1 for further demographic information).

Participants were initially recruited through a local refugee relocation centre. Snowball sampling/respondent-driven sampling became the primary method of participant recruitment (Patton 2002). A member of the Karen refugee community introduced the field researcher to participants. He served

Table 1

Organization of Family Structures			
	Young	Middle-aged	Elderly
Family 1	<i>Eh Khu (20)*</i> and <i>Eh Nah</i> <i>Yowah (18)*</i>	<i>Naw Wah (50)*</i> and <i>Saw Kaw Nyah (51)*</i>	
Family 2		<i>Paw Htoo (27)**</i> and <i>Saw Moo Eh (37)**</i>	
Family 3		<i>Naw Mari (32)**</i> and <i>Has Ka Paw (32)**</i>	<i>Hser Ku Moo (56)**</i>
Family 4			<i>Law Eh Paw (60)**</i> and <i>Eh Ta Mu (56)**</i>
Family 5		<i>Paw Wah (43)**</i> and <i>Saw Kaw Ku (44)**</i>	
Family 6		<i>Saw Ta Mla (37)*</i>	

Names joined with 'and' indicated a married couple. One asterisk (\*) indicates individual interview; double asterisk (\*\*) indicates dyadic interview. In all, 10 individual and group interviews were conducted among 14 participants.

as a cultural broker and obtained permission for interviews. The education levels varied from seven years of low-quality education in Burma to college enrolment in the United States.

### Data Collection

Researchers collected interview data over a period of nine months using a semi-structured, open-ended protocol. Because this project was not conducted as a long-term ethnography, and because neither researcher lived in the community for an extended amount of time prior to conducting the interviews, the semi-structured protocol facilitated open and casual conversation. Researchers were not only aware of participants' schedules balancing work, family and household chores, but they also considered the seriousness of the interview content.

A guided protocol helped maintain momentum and focus while also allowing participants to skip uncomfortable questions or topics (Patton 2002). The researchers used a topical outline including an explanation of the study, demographic questions and focused questions regarding family history, roles, legacy, foodways, values and hopes for future generations (see Table 2). If participants needed a break during the interview, they were told they could stop the interview at any time.

The onsite researcher conducted all interviews in homes of participants and each lasted between 40 and 120 minutes with individuals or groups of up to three family members. Family or group interviews are not uncommon for cross-cultural ethnographic research (Patton 2002). It is common in a

Table 2

## Examples of Core Interview Questions

Demographic	What is your primary status in your family? (child/parent/grandparent) What is your age? Where were you born?
Family history	Tell me about your path from Burma to here Tell me about your arrival and resettlement in the United States; what did you learn, was it confusing, was it difficult?
Roles	Tell me about how your family operated in your home country and also now here in America Tell me about your role in the family and explain if this has changed since living in the United States
Legacy	What is important about being Karen that you want to pass down to your family? How do you pass these things to your family? How do you teach younger family members about Karen and being a Karen person? What do they teach you?
Foodways	Tell me about your native foods from your home country Tell me about what food means to you and your family Tell me about your food-preparation routine Please describe how you learned about these traditions
Values	Tell me about important values in your family Tell me about how your family values are related to traditional Karen values Explain if being away from Myanmar changes values in your family
Hopes for future generations	Tell me about your hopes for your family

collectivist society for members to engage in collaborative, co-constructed conversations. In order to address the possibility of a more dominant voice disempowering those with less dominant voices, the interviewer carefully guided the exchange so all voices were heard. Although participants answered based on their own experiences, family members were often interviewed together ( $n = 10$ ); group participants often aided each other in translating and clarifying their responses. Six participants were bilingual and did not require translation and eight required partial or full translation. A bilingual member of this Karen refugee community volunteered to assist with interviews and, over time, became a cultural broker into the Karen refugee community.

All participants provided both written and verbal consent; the consent forms were typed using large font and simple English language. If participants did not speak English, the translator verbally explained the consent

form to participants in the Karen language prior to signing. All participants agreed to allow their interviews to be recorded using a digital recording device. Researchers also actively applied member checking as an ongoing, recursive process throughout data collection. For example, the onsite researcher returned to the community for observations and described findings to participants who provided their understanding of the analysis and suggested adjustments.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis began and continued throughout the data collection process as researchers transcribed interviews and organized field notes and observations. Using Dedoose® Version 4.5 (Web Application for Managing, Analyzing and Presenting Qualitative and Mixed Method Research Data (2013), Los Angeles, CA, SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com))), an online qualitative data analysis program, researchers conducted open, pattern coding as they read through data and set up first-level codes, which were further revised and grouped into patterns (Miles and Huberman 1994). This type of content analysis is described as reducing and understanding of qualitative data through the identification of core meanings (Patton 2002). Data were organized into themes, which led to the overall recognition of the metaphorical parallel of uprooting, transplanting and harvesting of crops.

### **Findings**

Research findings are organized using three major sections according to the central framework of life course theoretical perspective (see Table 3). The refugee participants' journey connects strongly with influences of foodways in their lives, supporting the plant-related metaphor. Although participants did not explicitly describe themselves using these terms, the importance and their connection to the garden are reflected in the metaphor of uprooted, transplanted and harvested crops. Participants also emphasize the importance of foodways in their cultural maintenance. Composite statements are presented when participants' responses were in agreement. All names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

### *The Uproot*

Fleeing Burma was a major life event among most participants ( $n = 12$ ). The Burmese state has used persecution and fear as weapons to discriminate against the Karen ethnic group and has caused the displacement of over one million former citizens of Burma (Ford 2012; UNHCR 2014a). Certain areas of Burma experienced greater turmoil than others, with the Karen State experiencing extreme persecution and conflict.

Table 3

<b>Organization of Primary and Secondary Themes</b>		
Section	Description	Life events
The Uproot	Describes the context of Karen refugees in terms of their home state in Burma, as well as their experiences in refugee camps	Fleeing Burma Refugee camp life
The Transplant	Describes findings related to participants' reasons for and experience leaving refugee camps and settling into the United States culture	Flight establishes international refugee status Initial adjustment struggles in the United States The question to return 'home' Education as motivation to stay in the United States
The Harvest	Incorporates a resilience lens to explain how participants have overcome and continue to encounter obstacles as they reconcile their lives in their homes in north-eastern Georgia	Maintenance of culture Strength of community Foodways as a manifestation of cultural ties and familial closeness

Refugees commonly flee to or are placed in refugee camps. In this study, 10 participants reported being uprooted twice in their lives. Paw Wah (aged 60) described her journey long before she was a refugee and arrived in a camp:

We always have to flee, like we have to flee when we were kids, we live in the village, and when the enemy comes to the village, we have to run out of the village to hide, but when the enemy is gone [we] have to come back to our village. We always running, hiding and coming back to the village. Our life is just hiding, like floating around, go here go there to hide. Until [we] moved to Thailand refugee camp.

The harsh reality of persecution in Burma continues to cause many to flee to Thai refugee camps. Saw Ta Mla (aged 37) described this reality in gruesome detail:

I go with my family because people who live in the village...the Burmese soldiers, they came and they destroyed our village. They burned and they killed the people, and they raped the woman, or girl, or old lady...and they kill people and pregnant women...they kill them...like very badly.

Saw Ta Mla detailed his experience as a young boy fleeing his village with his family, spending days upon end hiding in the jungle, struggling to survive the journey to the Thai border. He and his family arrived at the Thai border in 1981, before the United Nations established official refugee camps in Thailand. Others preferred not to discuss memories of fleeing Burma; some cited memory loss and others simply did not want to recall such memories.

All participants spent their childhoods and, for all but two, their early adulthoods in the Karen State of Burma before fleeing. Leaving Burma because of frequent human rights abuses has been documented as a common issue for the Karen (Brough *et al.* 2012). Once arriving in one of the nine United Nations refugee camps along the Burma–Thailand border, refugees reconstructed their lives as camp residents. Many aspects of their lives changed with regard to daily activities. Planting and harvesting their own food were part of the daily routine in Burma, a cultural practice that was difficult to reconcile with life in the camps. Saw Ta Mla explained the difficulty in finding food for their families because of limited access to hunting land and gardens:

We not allowed to go out of the camp. If we go out of the camp to get our vegetable—like many different leaves that we use to eat—if you go out, the Thai government will catch you, and then to be able to go back to the camp, your parents are going to need to get fined. Sometimes even for a lady to go out, they arrested the refugee lady, and sometimes they killed the men too.

Participants described long-term difficulty in finding employment and having limited educational opportunities. Refugees engaged in dangerous practices like selling bags of rationed rice or sneaking out of the camp to find work, fresh meat or vegetables. Camp residents were provided with some food, yet they often were forced to pay for provisions—a significant problem for unemployed residents. As Saw Kaw Nyah (aged 51) stated: ‘Yeah, you need money, because we get rice, fish paste, salt and yellow bean . . . that’s it. We don’t get meat, fish, vegetable, we have to buy that . . . and soap.’ This father of six described his struggle to adequately provide for his family despite holding two jobs as a cultural consultant (for UNHCR schoolteachers) and as a Baptist pastor in the camps. His salary of \$30 per year was insufficient to purchase needed supplies, and he often snuck by the Thai guards early in the morning in search of work.

Although participants acknowledged the limited prospects for an economically fruitful life, a few also fondly remembered the simplicity of their past. Naw Mari (aged 32) and Paw Htoo (aged 27) respectively reported:

The first camp is happiness.

When we live in Thailand, we took shower outside (smiles and giggles). [This] I miss yes! I miss! [Also,] in summer time we, whole family, we went to the river, swim, fishing very nice for us. Never forget.

Many participants warmly recalled friendships they developed in camps. In a fog of memories, Eh Nah Yowah (aged 18) recalled: ‘After school, [I] played soccer with my friends . . . but I [do not] know any of them now, like I am not in touch with them.’ The struggle to form new friendships upon resettlement for refugee children and young adults can add to other stressors of immigration (Atwell *et al.* 2009). The importance of friendships and community was a consistent theme across ages. Participants described the greater Karen family as ‘brothers and sisters’ because of their collective experience of seeking refuge from oppression. A former pastor in the camp, who now works for a local chicken-processing plant, recalled how church members brought his family the first food from their harvest. This gesture of sharing powerfully demonstrated the cultural bond of respect between these forcefully uprooted people.

### *The Transplant*

The immediate resettlement process has received little attention in refugee literature. However, the first resettlement step is critical for long-term physical and mental health of refugees (Schweitzer *et al.* 2011). Current findings suggest that air travel establishes their status as international refugees. The emotions they experienced along their journey overwhelmed and exhausted them. Many described the uncomfortable feeling of jet lag and sleeping for hours on end upon arrival to their temporary housing.

Some age differences emerged surrounding refugees’ descriptions of initial arrival at the United States. While younger participants elaborated on personal emotional struggles, parents often withheld describing their emotional reactions. Instead, parents simply mentioned their anticipation over flying on an airplane and finally arriving in Atlanta. When Saw Kaw Nyah was asked to discuss how his six children coped with the flight from Thailand to Atlanta, he said: ‘Good. They were good. There are movies in the airplane! We are very happy, this is okay, everybody is okay. Just [my youngest son], he is a little baby and he cry in the airplane.’

Learning English was participants’ primary struggle upon initial arrival. Younger participants explained being overwhelmed throughout initial processing. Eh Khu (aged 20) described his first impression upon arrival: ‘When I first came, to me I just felt bored, because no friends, no nothing. [I] didn’t know nothing, didn’t know what to do, didn’t know where to go.’ Eh Khu’s brother, Eh Nah Yowah (aged 18), was only 13 when he arrived in the United States. He emotionally recalled his experience as a non-English speaker:

When I move here, we don’t know English . . . that’s like pretty bad. We couldn’t communicate with other people and we have trouble with making friends because of our language. We don’t know anything about it. And it’s hard for us to do things we need to do like when we go to school, we don’t know how to

type in the lunch number or where to go, where to find the schedule . . . so it's hard for us.

Amidst physical battles of sleep deprivation and stress, participants often described how their Christian faith united them with a network upon arrival to Atlanta. As Eh Khu said: 'We have the Karen community in Atlanta, all of a sudden we just get the group together and they have a worship service.' As time passed, their reliance on faith and community became even more essential.

The initial arrival to the United States evoked vivid memories from participants. Even then, they reflected upon their desire to return 'home' in the future. Ten participants expressed the desire to visit family in Thailand and Burma, but they did not expect to return permanently. Many, like Naw Wah (aged 50), described family members she hoped to visit:

I would like to stay here . . . I do not like to stay [in Burma]. I do not want to go back to the country, but I have the parent still live in Thailand refugee camp, so sometimes I want to visit my parents in refugee camp, but I like to stay [in America] though. Some of the other Karen people want to go back to their country but I do not want to do it, because of the government, the fighting stuff.

Conversely, participants who had arrived within three months of the interview discussed *when* they would return home instead of *if*. It is likely that a return mentality reflects a delay in accepting that resettlement may be permanent whereas those who have been in the United States for a longer period have established local ties and the possibility of their return to Burma has become more ambiguous. Some participants said they would like to reunite with family in their homeland when it is safe. As Paw Wah (aged 43) explained: '[I]f there is no conflict in Burma, probably I want to go back there . . . if they are peaceful.' Overall, participants recognized and cited serious danger in Burma and expressed gratitude for refuge in a safer environment.

Although many participants hoped to *visit* family in Thailand and Burma, there was consistent agreement their children have more opportunity for education and safety in the United States, and this was their motivation to apply for refugee status. One mother of six, Naw Wah (aged 50), said she

hope[s] for the children to get a good education . . . if the other people can do it, we can do it. We can do anything in general, like have an education, do jobs, have skills, we can do it . . . [I] want them to get a lot of education and experience so they'll have more opportunities.

The two participants who came to the United States as children with their families expressed happiness with their parents' decision to resettle in America. Eh Khu (aged 20), who arrived as a young child, explained: 'Probably, I think here they have the good education, probably [my parents]

have the plan for us, for the children, so we can get the good education or better life.’ Eh Nah Yowah (aged 18) confirmed his brother’s beliefs about his parents’ central motivation for moving to the United States: ‘They do not have a plan for themselves...but they have a plan for their kids...to get more education, and to be knowledgeable.’ Participants stressed that raising their children in the United States and the educational value of living in the United States was worth whatever cultural differences they may encounter. As Paw Htoo (aged 27), a mother of four, expressed: ‘[If we still lived in the camp,] they would be obedient, but they are not educated [there] like here. Here, the education is very good. Not over there.’ The three participants without children also described education, safety and the opportunity for an overall better life as reasons for resettling in the United States. Eh Nah Yowah’s simple statement profoundly summarizes the reason these transplanted refugees persevere through the arduous resettlement process: ‘Karen people need a comfortable life in America.’

### *The Harvest*

Ten participants lived in the United States for an average of four years. After establishing permanent residence in a north-eastern Georgia town, their palpable determination to maintain culture and pursue opportunities for their families became evident through the data-collection process. Referencing their faith, family, friends and community garden, participants described overcoming daunting resettlement issues by maintaining cultural values. Saw Kaw Nyah (aged 51) summarizes how families have adjusted and maintained aspects of their identity:

We speak Karen for the kids...we wear the Karen clothes all the time. On Sunday, we go to the church, and then...we teach the Bible in the Karen language, and then we sing in the Karen song. In the home also. And we pray for the kids in the Karen language every night before sleep. And eat Karen food.

Large families are common in the Karen culture. Four families included at least two and the largest had six children. Many participants stressed the importance of family values including remaining close to one another emotionally and physically. For example, Eh Khu (aged 20) described how his family of eight remains close:

We just eat together, talk together in the afternoon, pray together, and on Sundays we go to church. Yeah, that’s all...talk, hang out, eat, relax. We share the bedroom, because too many kids (laughs).

Paw Htoo (aged 27) explained how she hopes her four children remain close as they grow up in the United States:

I tell my children...every day every day they fight, and I say, you are sister and brother, you are to peace. America is a big country; if you don’t peace, if you grow up [and] you don’t live together, you [will] want to see your brother. You

never see other Karen people. If we peace, all the time we stay together, close to the family. All the time.

Refugees described their strong, supportive family relationships and ties as strengthened throughout their journey because of their shared faith in God. While participants acknowledged safety in the United States, they believe God will keep them safe throughout future challenges. Despite difficulty finding work, accessing health care and learning English, all participants explained that trust in God is their fundamental source of support. Saw Kaw Nyah explained his belief that his family's refuge was possible only through faith: 'It's safe [here], but because we are Christian, and [because] we believe God and Jesus, so we don't have no problem for family. We are safe for my family.'

Participants explained how they prayed every day for guidance, describing a range of difficult experiences from fleeing Burmese soldiers to finding a job in the United States. When participants were asked to consider what the future holds for their families, all said they trust God will direct them. Parents not only discussed personal faith in God, but they also attended worship services with other Karen refugees, prayed together as families and prayed with friends during phone calls. Parents teach children their values by practising kindness, respect, generosity and friendliness. A newly arrived couple, Shaw Baw (aged 60) and Eh Ta Mu (aged 56), explained: '[We] teach [our] kids [to] respect others, especially to know God and to love each other...and always depend on God and have faith in Jesus.' When Naw Mari (aged 32) was asked whether she worried about her three children growing up in the United States, she said:

I'm not really nervous, no. God will give me knowledge to grow them. Mostly I let everything in God's hands. I think they will be fine and good in U.S.... In everything, everyday I trust God. You know, sometimes I am very sad. When I pray and read the Bible, it's very good. I feel like I have strength; I'm stronger. When you [are] sad, then you are weak. You don't want to go anywhere; you want to stay inside and thinking, thinking.

Regardless of age and gender, all participants described how their faith has strengthened them throughout resettlement by connecting them to God and a larger Christian Karen community. Karen families maintained this essential aspect of their identity, which separated their ethnic group from others in Burma, by attending services with family, praying each night and throughout the day, and giving thanks.

Participants frequently referred to their Karen refugee community as a strengthening aspect of resettlement, in conjunction with faith and family. Sharing meals among families was common, and participants linked this practice to their culture, recalling sharing meals in refugee camps. Eh Khu (aged 20) and his mother, Naw Wah (aged 50), shared their experience:

At Christmas time, one family cooks something, another family cooks something, another family cooks something, and we all get together and put the food together, eat together, relax together. It is how Karen people do it.

Karen families who have permanently resettled locally have befriended other refugee families who have arrived at the resettlement centre despite ethnic and language differences. On one occasion, a Mexican refugee family was visiting a local Karen family and the multitude of children in both families translated for their parents while they prepared a meal together. Both families talked and ate together, closing the night with prayers. Law Eh Paw (aged 60) attributed the tradition of hospitality to the history of the Karen people:

Their culture is like welcoming people, be generous, be kind . . . because they live in the mountain, they live in the village, they never been to the city, so they do not know about the culture in the city, but they just know most of the Karen people live in the village, in the mountains. So they just be nice, be kind, be generous.

The Karen refugee community regularly met to celebrate birthdays, religious holidays and life transitions for newly arrived families. For example, the entire Karen community gathered together for a meal and a service to wish a family departing for Atlanta well and give thanks to God for their safe arrival. Has Ka Paw (aged 32) explained how the Atlanta-based Karen refugee community and non-profit organizations such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) welcomes newly arrived families:

When I live in Atlanta there is agency called IRC . . . . When [families] move there, if the agency find[s] them a job, they will work; if not they will stay home. There is a lot of Karen people there; if they go, there will be a lot of [Karen people] welcoming them to come over, you know Karen people.

The countrywide community of resettled Karen refugees also plays a role in positive resettlement. Saw Kaw Nyah (aged 51) described his upcoming trip to the Karen Baptist Convention in Minnesota where Karen leaders from around the country meet each year to network, sharing struggles and successes.

Refugees' foodways were a manifestation of cultural ties and familial closeness, similarly to past research regarding the importance of familiar foods for healthy resettlement (Goody and Goody 1995; Lewin 2001; Tuomainen 2009; Leonini and Rebughini 2012). Agencies such as the UNHCR provided staples of rice, fish and beans in refugee camps—food that continues to be staples of participants' meals. While participants were unconcerned with food security, they appreciated their community garden located at the local refugee resettlement centre. This is unlike findings by Mitschke *et al.* (2011), who reported that Karen refugees in the United States struggled financially, leading to an inadequate food supply.

Appropriately called The Neighbor's Field, a 12-acre field provides 18 families with garden space. The space allows refugees freedom to plant their choice of foods and provides a place where they can 'be very Karen' (Paw Htoo, aged 27). Participants harvested traditional Karen vegetables

such as long beans, alongside vegetables not normally grown in Karen State including 'Squash, pumpkin, corn, greens... okra, eggplant, gourd, hot chilies, and roselle' (Naw Wah, aged 50).

On steamy summer afternoons, when green leafy vegetables create a lush groundcover, and squash, zucchini, cucumbers, okra, tomatoes and Thai peppers were just beginning to bud, the smell of mineral-filled water from a nearby hose filled the air and mixed with the rich, fresh scent of chicken excrement or 'saw ey' fertilizer. Watching as a mother left back-breaking work in her plot to assist a friend who arrived to collect her family's harvest, the authors realized the boundaries of family gardens intersect and blend with other families' gardens. The ambiguous border drawn in red, Georgia clay does not keep one Karen family from helping another. The politics and cultural differences found in Georgia cannot separate the strength of the interwoven threads that connect Karen families to one another.

Karen refugees planted in The Neighbor's Field as a family unit. Most days, family members would be together in the garden planting, watering, tilling or harvesting vegetables. Children went to the garden after they came home from school and spent hours working with their parents learning to prune, dig and water. Children and parents expressed pride in their garden, showing off plants at various growth stages. Naw Wah (aged 50) described how she teaches her four children to work in the garden:

We just go to garden, and then [I] tell the kids to plant and show them how to dig in the ground for the seeds, that's all. [I] want [them] to make the fence, and make for the squash vine, the trellis for the long bean.

Garden work was followed by hours of washing, peeling, chopping and cooking vegetables for at least five dishes. Every meal included rice, which participants consistently cited as central to any Karen meal. Saw Kaw Nyah (aged 51) explained the primary foods included in most Karen dishes: 'Karen food is rice and vegetable and fish paste, meat, fish, salt, chili, hot peppers.' Saw Ta Mla (aged 37) also described the typical, extensive preparation process for one Karen meal:

Our food it takes a lot of time, you know, you have to boil... cook the rice and cook meat with many different curry, and with salt, fish salt, put it together...and also you need to cook soup, too...it can be vegetable soup. And you have to make vegetable, you have to boil vegetable...and also [if] you [want] to eat vegetable you need to have some type of salt, chili salt, a lot, [and] it's expensive. You need to have at least soup, vegetable, chili, meat, rice, many different things...and you have to spend time, at least 2 hours to cook. Like the morning and the afternoon, you know, like 4 hours a day you have to spend time to cook.

All participants were pleased to plant their own vegetables. Gardening was not only a matter of economic security, but also enhanced their efficacy as resettled people, providing them with a sense of purpose. Participants acquired meats

such as chicken, pork and fish through a variety of means. Most men worked at a local chicken-processing plant, and were occasionally allowed to bring home eggs or to purchase chickens. The local resettlement centre allows refugees to fish and hunt on their land. Several refugee families come together to slaughter and equally distribute meat of a pig someone purchased from a local farmer. Surprisingly, the convenience of their community garden and access to hunting land actually inhibited other abilities related to resettlement such as food shopping. When participants shopped at corporate food markets in town using food stamps, they did not purchase nutritious food for their families. Instead, they gathered fresh vegetables from the garden and used food stamps to purchase bottled water, sweets, chips and rice.

Not only did participants recognize the financial importance of the garden; they also described its cultural value. The garden provided a way for parents to pass down the ‘Karen culture’ of gardening to their children who are now exposed to typical American food options like chips, processed meats and frozen vegetables. Paw Htoo (aged 27) agreed that, although her four children enjoy eating ‘American food’ at school, she cooks only traditional Karen dishes at home with rice, meat and stewed vegetables: ‘Yes, the [children] like American food, they can eat [it]. But me, I don’t like American food, I eat Karen food.’ Participants expressed concern for their children’s health due to dietary changes—a finding that is consistent with other studies (see Patil *et al.* 2010). For example, Paw Htoo (aged 27) explained how she teaches her children the importance of Karen food, particularly rice:

I teach them [that during] one day they have to eat two times, three... usually not three times, usually it two times every day. Because if we don’t eat we have stomach problems. We need to eat Karen food every day. We are very poor, for we, it’s rice.

Other parents echoed the notion that, although their children enjoy American food, as parents, they will continue to eat and prepare Karen dishes at home. Despite the collective preference for traditional dishes, age played a role in participants’ fondness for ‘American’ food. Two participants (aged 18 and 20) described eating and enjoying American food at school and with friends. They also ate rice-less meals in the resettlement centre, such as tacos, potato soup, chilli, leafy salads and spaghetti. While these two young men expressed enjoyment for these meals, afterwards they consistently expressed excitement to go home and eat Karen food cooked by their mother. Overall, participants preferred traditional Karen food to American food and they made efforts to maintain such meals in their homes with their families, as well as during community celebrations.

## Discussion

Unlike the manner in which food is grown by large agricultural conglomerates, packaged and processed for United States markets, the Karen’s practice

of growing their own food serves multiple purposes: healthy diet, transmission of culture and familial exchanges. The challenge for the Karen may be that processed diets in Georgia are likely to influence younger generations' dietary practices, rates of obesity and malnutrition, and subsequent health (Tovar *et al.* 2013). Younger individuals' broad food receptivity is a reflection of their exposure to American food and their desire to create a place for themselves in United States culture. Conversely, older refugees have a lower level of exposure to United States mainstream foodways and rely on dietary knowledge gained across the life course, reflecting generational differences in timing of lives and how it affects foodways.

The primary motivation of participants for fleeing Burma originally was conflict and violence. Upon finding temporary resettlement in refugee camps in Thailand, their motivation for leaving the camps for the United States was for better educational opportunities for their children. Not unlike past research with Karen people (see Mitschke *et al.* 2011), participants noted their desire to see their children become educated and to live a 'better' life. In addition to educational opportunities, many participants echoed the thoughts of Naw Wah (aged 50) who explained her family's life in the United States compared to life in the Thai refugee camps:

It is very different because here we can relax or do whatever we like, we have a better life. You know in refugee camp, we just have to run all the time, hiding all the time, but when we are here, we don't have to do that anymore. We can relax all the time. We don't have to do nothing, everything is easy for us, like you don't have to run or carry anything. When you work, just use the car.

While this description is encouraging, it is important to recognize that this major transition in their lives is not 'easy' for resettled refugees. Resettlement is not a process that begins with a foreseeable conclusion. Instead, the process is iterative with many unanticipated and stressful transitions and losses along the way for refugee families. Transitions in life (i.e. moving from Burma to Thailand's camps to the United States) influence cultural identity, and therefore shape development. This is particularly evident for younger participants who reflected upon their identity as Karen while also 'being American' (Eh Khu, aged 20). Researchers have found younger immigrants express 'double belonging' identities in order to comfortably and efficiently integrate into the host society, in which they remain loyal to their native culture while also learning to adapt to practices of the host culture (Leonini and Rebughini 2012: 165). In this way, younger refugees are not necessarily choosing one tradition over another (Lewis 2010); instead, they are learning to live a tradition inclusive of both their host country's and native culture's foodways. Although two participants had never lived in the Karen State in Burma, both held a pluralistic identity consistently with recent research on refugees from Burma who live in Thailand (Ford 2012) and continually referred to the Karen State as their homeland and the Karen ethnicity as their cultural

identity. Such an identity occurs when refugees observe varying levels of commitment to aspects of both cultures.

Maintenance and development of strong social ties are one of the most robust aspects of personal development (Elder 1994). Community and family support, faith, Christian values and foodways were central aspects of Karen refugee identity. Participants' lives were linked with members of their immediate family, family members remaining in Burma and Thailand as well as the greater Karen refugee community in an intricate array of roots and branches. Refugee families in this study were not economically wealthy, but they were rich in their determination and drive to persist as a distinct cultural group. This community shared a garden space to plant, tend and harvest both native 'Karen' and 'American' foods as a way of remaining connected to their Karen identity and passing it on to their resettled families. This study of Karen refugees provides unique insight into practical and humanitarian customs of gardening as a way to promote and preserve cultural identity.

### **Conclusion**

This research adds to the limited scope of knowledge about refugees in the United States. Furthermore, the authors anticipate this study will lead to a greater understanding of refugee resettlement issues that should be addressed through policy and outreach. For refugee groups such as the Karen and other agrarian-based societies, providing the means for gardens such as The Neighbor's Field could facilitate the continuation of traditional foodways and reduce the reliance on state and federal aid. Gardening and other traditional foodways discussed in this article demonstrate opportunities for sustainability, maintenance of healthy eating patterns and family strengthening through intergenerational exchanges. Research on refugee families and their needs will continue to gain impetus because of increasing forced displacement around the globe. The authors recommend future research focus on dietary changes upon resettlement that influence family interactions, health and relationships. Future research might also consider mixed ethnic communities of refugees and how their community has influenced family and group foodways and familial exchanges. This study reveals that various aspects of refugees' journeys from their native land to host culture influence the resettlement process. This research also shows how foodways provide a pathway for cultural identity maintenance, family and community cohesion. Although uprooted and transplanted in a nation a great geographical and cultural distance from their own, Karen families in this study have found a way to harvest positive aspects of life in the United States.

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