

Culturally Relevant Food Offerings and Their Mental Health Impacts on Refugee and Immigrant Families, Children, and Youth in Canada: A Narrative Inquiry

**A Postdoctoral Research by
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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want to acknowledge that the researcher and research participants of this project are gathered on all First Nations' traditional territories, including the Dakota, Lakota, Nakota, Nakawe, Denesuline, Nahiawak and the Homeland of the Métis. We recognize the historical oppression and harm that have been committed on this land and affirm the inherent and treaty rights to education. We come together on this land that guides us, teaches us, heals us and unites us to continue our decolonizing and healing journey for all peoples of this land. We are all treaty people.

SUPPORT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the anonymous funder for this project to be conducted at the Child Trauma Research Centre – University of Regina. Without your significant funding, this project cannot come to the light.

I also wish to share my deepest gratitude to Dr. Nathalie Reid for her ongoing guidance and support. Meaningfully, Dr. Reid's mentorship plays an important role in this challenging research journey with the refugee and immigrant populations and their mental health areas.

My appreciation and gratefulness is also dedicated to all refugee and immigrant parents, children, and youth who wholeheartedly participated in this project, all members of the Child Trauma Research Centre, the support staff at the University of Regina, the newcomer support organizations and local food banks in Canada, and my family and friends near and far. Thank you so much for your tireless care, unconditional love, ongoing encouragement, time sacrifice, and valuable wisdom that have anchored and guided this research in a good way.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustrations features in this report were developed by the researcher and the photos were taken by the researcher and the refugee and immigrant children, youths, and parents who participated in this research from September 2023 to September 2024.

RESEARCH ETHICS

The research ethics for this project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Regina on September 1st, 2023. Research Ethics ID is # 33.

A DEPARTURE OF THIS PROJECT: NARRATIVE BEGINNINGS OF THE RESEARCHER

Story One: The Kitchen Garden

Anh đi anh nhớ quê nhà
Nhớ canh rau muống nhớ cà dầm tương
Nhớ ai dãi nắng dầm sương
Nhớ ai tát nước bên đường hôm nao

*(Living afar, he misses his hometown so much
Misses water spinach soup and pickled eggplants in soybean sauce
Misses the person hard working under the sun and within the fog
Misses the person scooping ditch water by the road one day)*

(Vietnamese anonymous poem and Tran's translation, Summer 2022)

Fast backwards to summer 2015, my family left Vietnam to immigrate to a western province in Canada. Throughout my family's first year on the new land, we not only missed our family members and relatives but we also missed our Vietnamese rau muống (water spinach or Ongchoy in English) very much. Back home in Vietnam, rau muống is an iconic vegetable of Vietnamese cuisine. This vegetable is very easy to grow, and it appears in every Vietnamese family's kitchen garden. Traditionally, each household in my homeland has a kitchen garden, where we cultivate our everyday vegetables and cereals. My grandparents and parents planted a lot of rau muống in our little pond and picking this very green and nutritious vegetable is always my most favorite job, as seen in the above photo taken by my spouse some years ago (Figure 1). We also love rau muống because it is rich in iron and very healthy. From our kitchen garden, rau muống can be transformed into many delicious dishes.

Rau muống had been indeed my family's everyday food back home; however, we could not afford to buy it in Canada because it was too expensive. The first time my family saw fresh rau muống on the shelf of an Asian supermarket, we were so thrilled as if we met our old villager after a long time. But our excitement was soon replaced by our deep sigh in disappointment when seeing the price of a bunch was 13 times more expensive than it was in our homeland. With my pocket money as a newly immigrated person, I lifted the rau muống bunch up and then immediately put it down. Being upset and shameful because of my incapacity to buy our culturally traditional vegetable, I felt lost in my heart.



Picking "rau muống" at her grandparents' kitchen garden in Vietnam.

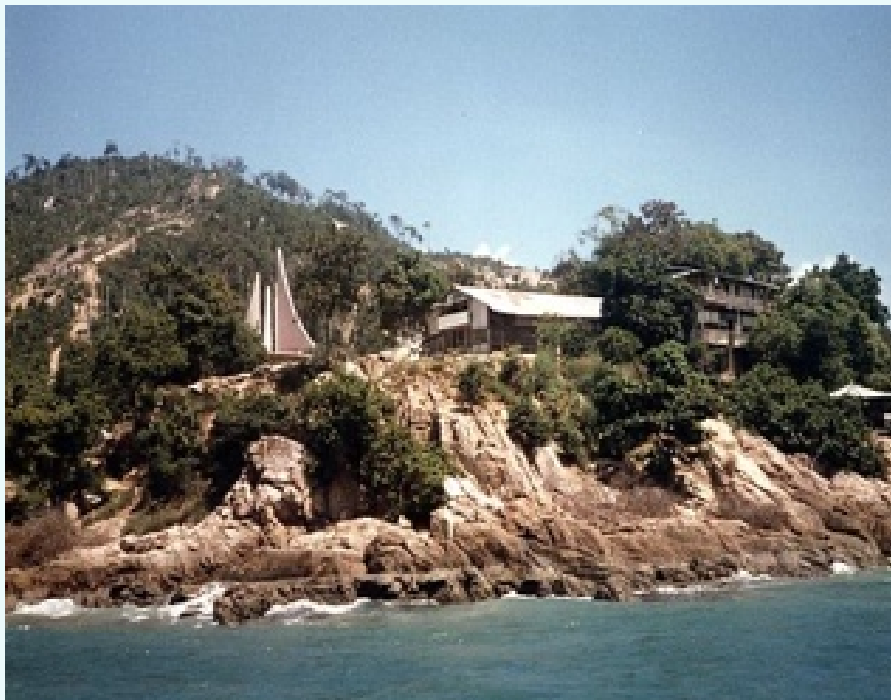
Story Two: Bà's Memoir: From Bidong Refugee Camp to "the Cold Land with Warm Hearts" Nanaimo

During our family's first Christmas season in Canada, I was privileged to meet a Vietnamese Grandma and make friend with her. My family called her Bà as it is the beloved name for our grandmothers back home. When I was invited to her home for a family gathering, Bà slowly told me her life story as a refugee coming to Canada in early 1980s. After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, her father, brothers, and also husband were put in jail because they used to work for the South Vietnamese government. Only female members were left surviving together, so Bà decided to search for an escape opportunity. After many tries, she knew a secret group led by a navy ex-captain and she told other ladies at home but no one dared to go as they were scared of being drown, robbed, raped or killed on the sea. Despite their unwillingness, Bà was determined to take all her saving golds and bring her new-born baby and join that secret group of about a hundred people of all ages on a small boat. The captain had told them not to bring things such as cereal bars or canned milk as these would cause troubles in case their boats might be stopped and checked. Therefore, six cooked rice balls and three water bottles were the only foods and drinks in the luggage for Bà and her four-month-old child.

The sixth day floating on the ocean, only the last rice ball and water bottle left so Bà only took one-tenth of the ball and one little amount of water in the lid. Her body was disintegrated and it could not produce any milk for her baby anymore. Bà had to soften the cooked rice and feed her baby while she ate nothing. The eighth day, the young mom and her little infant survived like that, nothing left to eat. Despite being full of hunger, tiredness, and sea-sickness, Bà could still hear the baby crying for food. She then remembered that before the departure, she secretly put a hold of rice into her second shirt's pocket. Estimating it of about a hundred rice seeds, she took about ten seeds a meal and kept chewing them until being watery to mouth feeding the baby. On the eleventh day, while Bà was chewing the last rice seeds for her baby, the boat was woken up by a strong noise and everyone shouted when seeing a giant ship entering closer to their boat. Many people shouted, "*Chúng tôi ở đây. Cứu chúng tôi với. Khẩn cấp!*" (We are here. Please save us. SOS). In the midst of prayers and shouting, there came a big ship approaching their little boat. That was a duty ship of the Malaysian government and they picked all Vietnamese boat people onboard, and dragged the boat alongside until they reached Bidong island of Malaysia.

Since the first Vietnamese boat people arrived in Bidung in 1978, the Malaysian government had turned this island into a refugee camp. That summer 1981 when Bà Ngoại arrived, the small island was already crowded with thousands of people. As she stepped onto the land, she did not even need to walk because other people in the crowds kept moving fast to ask for food and water; and she was pushed forward with the little infant in her hands. Then she was arranged to stay in the fourth longhouse with three other people from the boat. Volunteers from international organizations came to give her baby and her a small bamboo bed while the other two men and three ladies each got a piece of sedge mat to put on the floor for sleeping. With the loose porridge supplied from the camp, Bà Ngoại gradually felt better and recovered milk feeding for her baby. However, there was an enormous shortage of doctors and medicines at the camp so Bà struggled a lot whenever her little daughter got fever and coughing. She started to learn from the senior refugees about using several native plants on the island as herbal medicine as treatment for her child.

Finally, after eight months surviving on the refugee camp, Bà and her little baby were sponsored to landing in Nanaimo, a western island of Canada. Everyone was so happy to put their first steps on the new land of “a cold country and warm hearts”, and amazingly, they could apply to catch fish in the sea for their meals and for making fish sauce in the summer. After years surviving the chaotic war back home and the traumatic journey on the sea, Bà has sustained her habit of storing essential needs for family. She might have not enough money to buy meat but she always stored dry fish, fish sauce, cooking oil, salt, and especially rice in her kitchen. Keeping a lot of rice as well as fish sauce and other basic essentials in her kitchen storage has not only meant for the family’s needs but also for Bà’s feeling of food security for many years, even until now when her family sustain good health and prosperity. I have been so grateful to learn from Bà’s sharing her ways of storing those foods for not only their physical health but also their mental health and well-being.



Bidong Island in Malaysia (Photo from the unknown author on the internet)

SHAPING A RESEARCH PUZZLE

Soaking myself again within the stories of my family as newcomers struggling with access to our cultural foods in Canada, of the possibilities of cooking homeland foods that bring back to me the sense of transcendence and belonging, of the Grandma who used to be a war refugee surviving the food shortage on the escape boat and in the refugee camp, and of other refugee/immigrant families who found some certain foods intrigue their physical remnants of major tragedies in the past, I am more inspired to carefully perceive the meaning of culturally relevant food offerings of newcomer children, youth, and families. What contributes to my perception of culturally relevant food offerings to newcomer populations? What do culturally relevant food offerings allow me to see and bring me forward to respond? And when I am about to take a step forward into my inquiry, I ask myself how I should curate a meaningful space where I hope to inquire into the experiences of newcomer, immigrant, and refugee children, youth, and families in relation to their culturally relevant food offerings (Carr, 1986).

Recently in Canada, there has been much research evidence about food insecurity among immigrants; for example, a survey from recent Latin American immigrants in Toronto showed that 56 percent of their sample were food insecure despite the research participants' educated background (Vahabi et al., 2011). In another example, Edmonton's food bank conducted a survey with their clients in May 2015 and it was said that one in five clients reported that they or one of their family members had not eaten for 2 to 5 days. Here I learn that food insecurity is already a concerning reality among the immigrant population; and that food insecurity could be their worry about having enough food for daily eating or their ability to buy quality and healthy food for their household. Taking this learning as an anchor, I look closer and think deeper about the capacity to access not only quality food in general but also the ethnic foods in the immigrant and refugee people's culture. I am very much linked back with my experiences as a food security and dignity advocate when my team believed food as not just for survival but also as an anchor to engage the cultural wealth and aspirations of racialized communities and an opportunity to approach socio-economic inclusion and wellbeing. I have come forth to look at the literature and see a big gap in research related to culturally relevant food offerings and their impacts on the newcomer, immigrant, and refugee populations' mental health and wellbeing. All of these together contribute to sharpening my emerging research puzzle. *I wonder how my perception of culturally relevant food offerings, as well as my vulnerable experiences with cultural food security and dignity as a newcomer to Canada, call forth new stories and resonances alongside other refugee and newcomer families, children, and youth who are my potential participants. I wonder how their stories of accessing their culturally relevant foods in Canada will unfold and be co-composed within our relational inquiry spaces. Where will my stories, their stories, and our stories of culturally relevant food offerings take us across time, places, and relationships (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000)? I also seek to understand the mental health impacts of culturally relevant food offerings for these refugee and immigrant families, children, and youth. I wonder how offering culturally relevant food contributes to these refugees and immigrants' holistic and long-term flourishing in Canada.*

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

1. Theory of Experience

This narrative inquiry takes Dewey's (1938) theory of experience as grounded because it has grown from the experiences of the refugee and immigrant families, children, and youth; and it will be for these people's experiences. Central in Dewey's (1938) theory of experience and education, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is his understanding of situations, which he sees as shaped by two criteria— interaction and continuity. Interaction refers to the intersection of internal and existential conditions. Continuity accounts for the temporality of experience. For Dewey, situations do not just happen but are historical and temporally directional according to the intentionality of the person in the midst of the situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). In addition, Dewey (1938) also emphasises the importance of growth as a crucial element of experiences, which later inspired my research in acknowledging the forward-looking hopes from the refugee and immigrant participants.

2. Culturally Relevant Food Offerings

Harper et al. (2020) conduct research on areas of cultural foods among newcomer populations and they see that

culturally relevant foods are food items that hold significance for a particular culture or subcultural group. Improving access to healthy culturally relevant foods may be important for improving diets of minority populations, who are disproportionately affected by poor diet quality, obesity, and chronic disease. However, few studies have carefully identified culturally relevant foods and evaluated their availability in retail stores. (p. 525)

From this work, I learned that culturally relevant foods for African Americans living in Baltimore (2020) “are widely available in large food retail stores, but only moderately available in medium sized grocery stores, and sparsely available in dollar stores” (p. 525). This learning inspired me to seek in their research if there is knowledge about the ability of this African Americans community to purchase the culturally relevant foods for their daily life, and the impacts of culturally relevant foods access on their mental health; however, this research has not touched these facets yet.

Coming to Canada, there has been little research conducted in the areas of culturally relevant foods and the refugees and newcomers' experiences. A project by Stelfox and Newbold (2019) revealed that refugees, particularly low-income refugees, find it difficult to obtain culturally relevant food due to lack of access to transportation. Another study in Nova Scotia found that youth who are advocating for their culturally relevant foods desire to be included in determination of school lunch policies yet are often left out of policy discussions (Spencer et al., 2019). It has made a strong sense for me that though many studies work on culturally relevant foods availability and accessibility, culturally relevant food offerings have received little attention in the food environment literature, which later inspired my research in acknowledging the forward-looking hopes from the refugee and immigrant participants.

3. Food Security and Dignity and Mental Health of Refugees and Immigrants

According to the 2016 Census, there were 7,540,830 foreign-born individuals who came to Canada through the immigration process, representing over one-fifth (21.9%) of Canada's total population (Statistic Canada, 2016) (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025b-eng.htm?indid=14428-1&indgeo=0>). In a study on immigrant health in Canada, Kirmayer et al. (2011) mention the trajectory of immigrants and refugees' mental health:

The prevalence of specific types of mental health problems is influenced by the nature of the migration experience, in terms of adversity experienced before, during and after resettlement. Specific challenges in migrant mental health include communication difficulties because of language and cultural differences; the effect of cultural shaping of symptoms and illness behavior on diagnosis, coping and treatment; differences in family structure and process affecting adaptation, acculturation and intergenerational conflict; and aspects of acceptance by the receiving society that affect employment, social status and integration. (p. E959)

Talking about mental health is not always enough without the emphasis on roles of trauma in immigrants and refugees' life-making in transition to the new country. "Events that evoke elements of past trauma and loss can contribute to the re-emergence of anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder" (Kirmayer et al., 2011). This contributes to shaping our hope to explore the refugee and newcomer families, children, and youth's "trauma story" and "story of trauma" (Reid, 2019) in relation to their experiences with culturally relevant food offerings after transitioning to Canada.

Meaningfully, research has found the bond between food security and people's mental health. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2015), food security is defined as "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life". Unfortunately, for many Canadian families this is not the reality. According to Food Banks Canada (2021), "food bank visits have increased by over 20 per cent since 2019, with over 1.3 million visits to food banks in March 2021 alone", and "one third of food bank clients are children" (p. 6). Typically, Saskatchewan food banks provided 6,610 meals and snacks while Alberta food banks served 523,019 meals solely in 2021 (Food Banks Canada, 2021). Their HungerCount (p. 11) also revealed that the majority of food bank clients' source of income was from social assistance (44.1 per cent in Saskatchewan and 27.4 per cent in Alberta); and most of them lived in rental housing type (66.1 per cent in Saskatchewan and 68.1 per cent in Alberta). All of the facts together shaped a critical image of food insecurity in Canada.

The panorama has become even more gloomy under the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic when the “volatile combination of rising food prices, housing costs, and low incomes has created a “perfect storm” that is driving up the number of visits to food banks” (Food Banks Canada, 2021, p. 7). This reality of food insecurity is sending the alarm signal as food insecurity leads to reduced consumption of healthy foods as well as nutrient inadequacies (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2008). Vozoris and Tarasuk (2003) also emphasize that living without food security increases risk of poor health outcomes, including chronic disease and mental health issues. In this picture, although food insecurity affects many different types of households, newcomer households are at greater risks (Health Canada, 2012).

Research about linkage between food insecurity and mental health has been attentively conducted in global landscapes, especially in North America. Lachance et al. (2014) in a study with youth aged 13 to 19 at a community organization in Toronto found that “mental health effects of food insecurity and poor diet quality included sadness, stress, worry, anger, shame, impaired concentration, and fatigue” (p. 14). Additionally, not only food security impacts on refugees and newcomers’ mental health, food dignity also plays an important part. Jean Siegler at UN Right to Food in his definition of food dignity says The right to food is a human right. It protects the right of all human beings to live in dignity, free from hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. The right to food is not about charity, but about ensuring that all people have the capacity to feed themselves in dignity. Leaning on this understanding, I feel more encouraged to further know how food dignity means to refugee and newcomer people in order to imagine the opportunities, knowledge, and talents to make food dignity possible in communities.



4. Familial Curriculum Making in Integration with Intergenerational Reverberations

A remarkable conceptualization that strongly supports the foundation of this research is the knowledge of familial curriculum making (Huber et al., 2011), which gradually became visible and crucial in the everyday life-making of all the three families participants. When Huber et al. (2011) attended closely to the worlds of children in their narrative inquiry into the experiences of children, families, and teachers in an era of growing standardization and achievement testing (Tran, 2023), they saw another place of curriculum making that was different from school curriculum making; they conceptualized this as “familial curriculum making.” In their perspective, familial curriculum making is:

an account of parents'/families' and children's lives together in homes and communities where the parents and families are an integral part of the curricular process in which families, children/learners, subject matter, and home and community milieu are in dynamic interaction. (pp. 7–8)

Based on this understanding, I grew to see *lives* in curriculum making and that curriculum is continuously being made by the refugee and immigrant children and youth as they compose their lives at school and in their homes and communities.

As I lingered more deeply with these understandings of familial curriculum making, I was reminded of the lessons on intergenerational narrative reverberations (Young, 2015) that I was blessed to study with during my doctoral program. In her lifetime research and her living as an amazing Indigenous warrior woman, Dr. Mary Young taught me that the narratives reverberated across many generations are the ancestors' wisdom that contributes to sustaining the traditional and cultural knowledge and strengthening the young generation's identity and dignity.

Seeing the integration of familial curriculum making and intergenerational narrative reverberation, and expanding these two to include the values of “relational and spiritual practices” (Tran, 2023, p. 30) in newcomer families in Canada, I realized how all these wisdom offered me a good way to attend to the wholeness and complexity of sustaining culturally relevant food offerings in my family as newcomers to this country. In my thinking narratively with these experiences, I saw the urgency of also attending to the refugee and immigrant families' familial curriculum making in addition to their school curriculum making world. *I wondered if this multi-perspectival attendance could better support refugee and newcomer families, children, and youth who are facing the challenges of being able to afford their culturally relevant foods and strengthen their mental health amidst their families' economic, political, social, cultural, and educational challenges in the new land.*



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Narrative Inquiry

My journey of continuing to become a narrative inquirer has been shaped and reshaped by my ongoing attending to what narrative inquirers do (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as I have engaged in thinking narratively with my participants' experiences of/with culturally relevant food offerings and how those impact their mental health as newcomers to Canada. During my postdoctoral program at the Child Trauma Research Centre at the University of Regina, I continue keeping relational ethics as central in order to shape the culturally ethical, reciprocal, and respectful relationship with the vulnerable refugee and immigrant families, children, and youth. Gratefully, taking narrative inquiry as the foreground methodology helped sustain my hopes for this project. I learned from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) that

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply stated, ... narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (p. 20)

Significantly, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) uplifted the relational three-dimensional narrative inquiry space in narrative inquiry. These dimensions include sociality (social and personal relationships), temporality (time), and place. These dimensions play a vital role in my journey of understanding the resonant threads of parent, children, and youth participants' experiences of/with their culturally relevant food offerings and mental health impact unfoldings.

Research Participants and Data Collection

Participants of this project were invited based on their refugee and immigrant backgrounds. There are three families attending this project from September 2024 to September 2024. Family One has two parents, a youth and a child, and has resided in Saskatchewan as immigrants from Vietnam for one year. Family Two includes a single mother and three young children who have lived together in Alberta for three years as refugee claimants from Conakry in Guinea, a West African country. Family Three with two parents, a teenager, and six young children have landed to Saskatchewan for four years. This family has survived a complexity of their migration status as they first landed as immigrants and after a year, they claimed as political refugees due to the civil war in their homeland, Libya.

It has been challenging at the beginning to spend time with my refugee/immigrant participants to establish trust and care so that our relationships were gradually grounded as not only researcher and participants but also nourished to become friends of each other. In order to also protect my participants, I used the pseudonyms for all of them during this research.

In data collection, researcher and participants firstly went from "field" to "field texts". Starting by sharing my autobiographies with participants, I shared my interest in listening to their stories. Research "fields" varied from their home, community centres, church, pagoda, language school, library, community gardens. When selecting the fields, I carefully discussed with the participants about their favourite places as well as the commitments of ensuring their privacy and confidentiality in public spaces. Secondly, we moved from field texts to interim research texts. Field texts (or data) were gathered from transcribed conversations, artifacts, field notes, and participants' journals. Data were collected from six conversations (two to three hours each) for each family in the period of one year. Later, we continued to attend closely to field texts within the three-dimensional space and negotiate with participants on the multiplicity of possible meanings. In the final step, we moved from interim research texts to final research texts, in which there was no linear unfolding of data. Instead, the final research texts were negotiated, again and again, and co-composed by both researcher and participants.

A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF LIVING ALONGSIDE FAMILY ONE (Shortened)

Mother: An Trinh, 48 years old

Father: Hai Tran, 50 years old

Son: Nam Tran, 17 years old

Daughter: Annie Tran, 10 years old



*Family One's planting lot with Vietnamese and Canadian vegetables at their
neighbourhood Community Garden.*

During the journey of telling, retelling, and reliving the stories of An and Ben's experiences with culturally relevant food offerings when they first came to Canada, I came to learn five significant pieces of knowledge reverberated across their time, relationships, and places.

1. Sustaining Cultural Identity and Dignity Through Cuisine

In the intricate tapestry of this family's experiences with culturally food offerings in Canada, the threads are as vibrant and meaningful as the connection between food, family, and cultural identity. The story of this Vietnamese family reveals how culinary traditions serve as a profound bridge between generations, geographies, and personal memories. Each dish becomes more than mere sustenance; it is a living narrative, carrying within it the essence of family history, regional nuances, and deeply personal emotional landscapes. The conversations with An and her son, Nam, illuminates how food transcends its basic nutritional purpose, emerging as a powerful medium of cultural preservation, emotional expression, and familial bonding.

2. Family Connections and Intergenerational Relationships Matter

Migration introduces a complex layer of culinary experience, where traditional recipes become both a comfort and a challenge. For this family, moving to Canada does not mean abandoning their culinary heritage, but rather reimagining it with creativity and resilience. The son's attempts to recreate Pho in Canada, the careful discussions about sourcing authentic ingredients, and the nostalgic memories of home-cooked meals demonstrate how food becomes a critical tool of cultural continuity. Their narratives reveal the delicate art of adaptation – maintaining the soul of traditional cooking while navigating the practical constraints of a new environment. The longing for familiar tastes, the disappointment with restaurant interpretations of beloved dishes, and the determination to cook authentic meals all speak to the deep emotional significance of culinary traditions.

3. The Experiences of Adaptation and Nostalgia in Migration

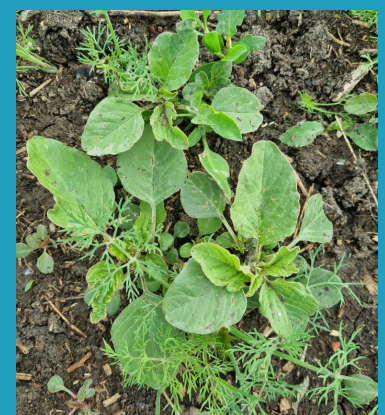
Regional diversity emerges as another crucial theme, highlighting the rich complexity of Vietnamese cuisine. The conversations beautifully capture the distinctions between Northern, Central, and Southern cooking styles, with each region contributing its unique ingredients, techniques, and flavor profiles. From the grandmother's Northern-style sour soup to the aunt's Western regional specialties, food becomes a geographical storyteller, mapping cultural nuances through taste and preparation. This diversity is not just a culinary curiosity but a source of pride and connection, allowing family members to celebrate their multifaceted cultural identity through the simple act of cooking and sharing meals.

4. Personal Growth and Learning Amidst Transitioning to the New Country

The emotional dimension of food is perhaps the most profound aspect of their narrative. Cooking and eating are deeply intertwined with love, memory, and personal connection. In Ben's description of his Aunt Tu's cooking – how her dishes carry not just flavor but her life experiences and familial dedication – it illustrates how food can be a form of emotional communication. Each recipe becomes a repository of family stories, a way of expressing care, preserving memories, and maintaining connections across time and distance. The passion for cooking, the careful sharing of techniques, and the joy of creating meals together reveal food as a language of love that transcends verbal communication.

5. Challenges of Culinary Preservation and a Wish for More Supports from Organizations and Communities

Ultimately, family one's story is a testament to the transformative power of culinary traditions. Their approach to food embodies a philosophy of continuous learning, cultural pride, and adaptability. The mother's optimistic outlook and the son's curiosity create a dynamic relationship with their culinary heritage – one that honors tradition while remaining open to innovation. Their conversations about food become a microcosm of broader human experiences of migration, identity, and belonging. Through each carefully prepared dish, each shared memory, they demonstrate how food is far more than what we consume – it is a vital, living connection to our roots, our families, and ourselves. Last but not least, An also linked her stories with memories of how struggling she faced during the first year of immigration of not being able to manage culturally responsive diets for her family. In this area, she was not only brave to share her traumatic experiences vividly but she also wanted her voice to be heard by the related stakeholders. She was hopeful that centres for newcomer would develop comprehensive orientation package with resourceful information on cultural relevant food access and cultural dietary practices. She wished to see community centres organize more programs like community gardens or neighbour-shared-gardening, and that newcomer families could be well connected with local food banks so that their complimentary food hampers would be healthy for their both physical and mental health.



The vegetables of Asian culture that An was happy to be able to plant in Canada (from left to right: mồng tơi-malabar spinach, su hào-kohlrabi, rau dền-amarant).

My name is Nam.
I came from Vietnam last year.
I'm a noodle boy.
I love Pho.
My mom brought me to a small restaurant.
Because we didn't have things to cook yet.
I asked for a bowl of Pho.
The waiter served me a big bowl.
I couldn't wait more, I took a big spoon.
But...no...wait...oh...this is not Pho!!
The bowl looked the same as one back home.
But the broth, the taste, the spices, the herbs
... they are all different.

So much disappointment.
I felt lost!

Nam's found poem of his experiences with traditional cultural foods when first landing to Canada.

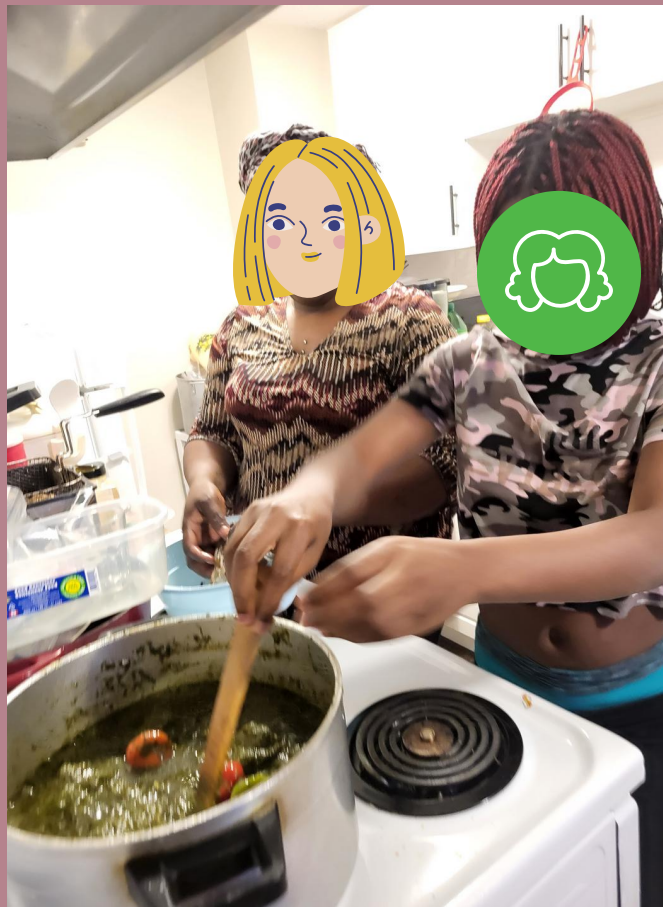
A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF LIVING ALONGSIDE FAMILY TWO (Shortened)

Single mother: Fahah, 40 years old

Daughter: Marieh, 12 years old

Daughter: Glodia, 6 years old

Son: Sullivan, 4 years old



The photo capturing the familial intergenerational cooking teaching and learning of cassava leaves soup between mother (left) and daughter (right).



The relationship with Family Two was strongly rooted on trust and care from the date I got to know Fahah, who came to receive the support food hampers at a local food bank where I worked as a volunteering packer. She always smiled with me whenever we met, and always shared "thank you, a lot of thank you" to me. After my research ethics was accepted, I kindly asked Fahah if she and her children would love to build conversations about their experiences of culturally relevant food offerings. Without any hesitation, she agreed to participate in this project as she mentioned her trust in me as not only a researcher but also a friend and a sister to her. I felt so thankful for our relationships that paved a welcoming door for my learning from Fahah and her children, as seen in the following key points.

1. Refugee Experience and Displacement Reverberating Across the Time and Place

The journey of displacement leaves indelible marks on those forced to flee their homes, as evidenced by the interviewee's harrowing story. After witnessing her father's murder and the destruction of their family home, Fahah spent more than five years in a refugee camp in Guinea, where both her mother and brother later died. These compounded traumas have created an insurmountable barrier to returning to her homeland, even for a visit: "I cannot go there because if I go there, my memory keeping telling me this trauma happened to my parents." The lengthy resettlement process ultimately brought her to Canada in 2018, yet the psychological effects of displacement continue to shape her daily reality. The abrupt transition from a "good life" with her wealthy father to statelessness and dependency illustrates the profound economic and social dislocation that characterizes the refugee experience, creating ripple effects that continue long after physical resettlement.

2. Cultural Food Practices and Identity

Food emerges as the primary vehicle for cultural preservation and identity maintenance in the interviewee's new Canadian context. She steadfastly prepares African dishes daily despite significant financial constraints, viewing these culinary traditions as essential connections to homeland and heritage. "My house is African food. I don't have any of that food here when I first arrived," she explains, emphasizing how her children—even the son born in Canada—strongly prefer these traditional dishes over Canadian alternatives. The specific preparation of cassava leaves, potato leaves, particular varieties of rice, and distinctive cooking oils represents not merely nutritional preferences but embodied cultural knowledge. Through daily cooking practices, she recreates a sensory landscape of home that counterbalances the disorientation of displacement, transforming her Canadian kitchen into a site of cultural continuity and resistance against complete assimilation.

3. Economic Challenges for Refugees

Financial precarity underlies every aspect of the interviewee's resettlement experience, particularly affecting her ability to maintain cultural food practices. The rising costs of essential ingredients create impossible choices between cultural needs and economic survival. As a single mother of three living in government housing, she stretches limited resources to afford specialized ingredients from African markets, where prices significantly exceed mainstream Canadian groceries. Her economic vulnerability is compounded by caring for a child with disabilities: "One life-making is very difficult. You have to lose your personal hobby such as favourite traditional foods to support each other." Despite receiving government assistance, she repeatedly expresses determination to become self-sufficient—"I cannot put my life on government, I need to study for a job, and I did it"—revealing both pride and pragmatic recognition that external support remains insufficient to meet her family's cultural and material needs in their new context.

4. Parenting in a New Cultural Context

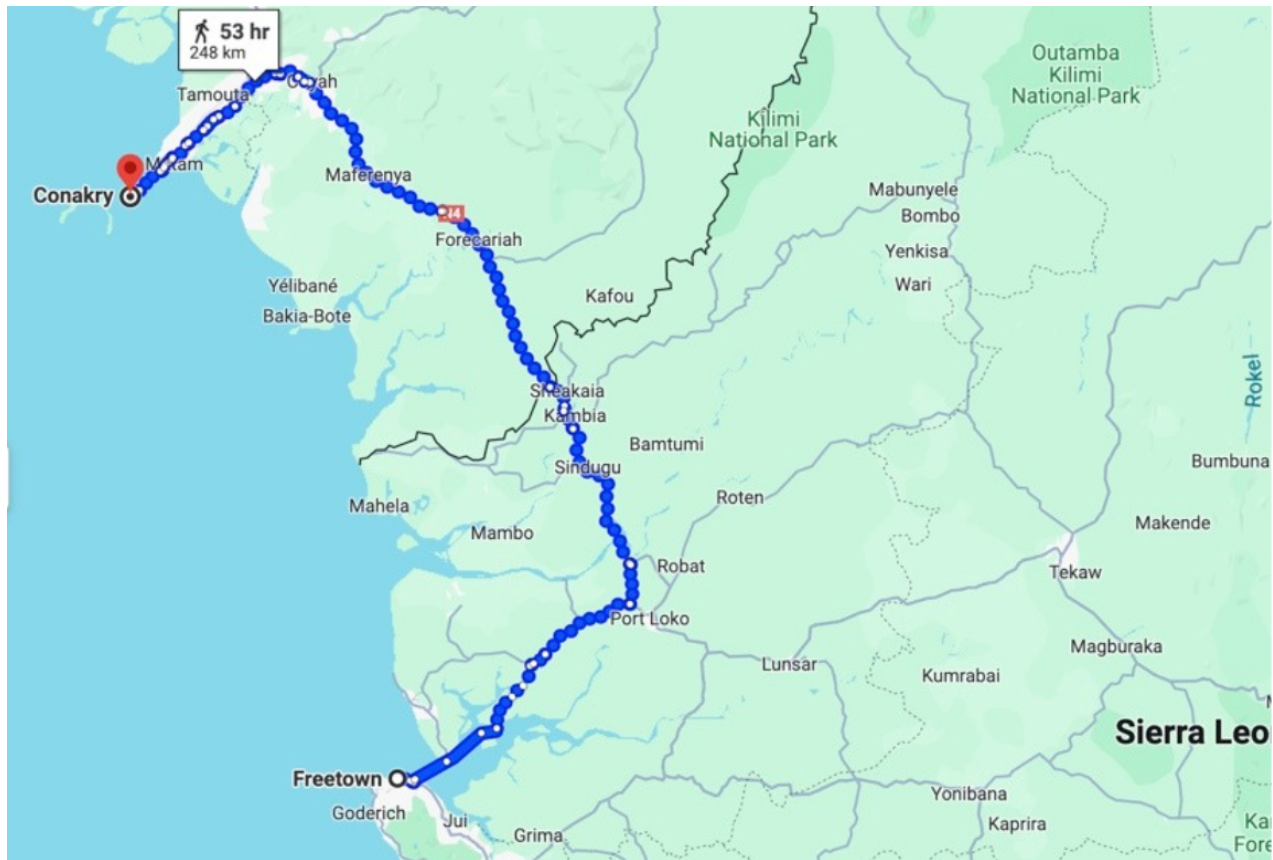
The complex negotiations of parenting across cultural contexts emerge powerfully in conversations between the mother and her daughter Marieh. While the mother prioritizes cultural continuity through food, seven-year-old Mariam navigates the social challenges of bringing traditional lunches to school: "Sometimes I don't like meeting lots of people, only with my best friend, because I feel uncomfortable eating my ethnic foods around them." This tension between home culture and peer acceptance represents a common struggle for refugee children, who must develop bicultural competence at young ages. The mother's limited resources create additional parenting challenges when her children desire consumer goods typical of their Canadian peers: "I talk to her, like be patient, because mummy is not earning much and we need to save money so we can buy cassava leaves and dried catfish for your birthday occasions." Despite these constraints, our conversations reveal Fahah's strong commitments to transmitting cultural knowledge to her children while simultaneously preparing them to navigate [Canadian society](#).

5. Food Insecurity and Assistance

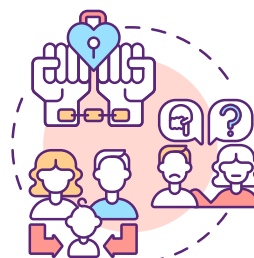
The inadequacy of food assistance systems for meeting culturally-specific needs creates particular challenges for refugee families. Our storytime shared out loud the difficulties with food banks that primarily offer canned goods—items viewed with suspicion in her back home community due to perceived health risks. Fahah one time cried while sharing: "When I was in the camp, we received free canned food, but later many people got cancer after consuming those. I wasn't sure that's because of expired cans or because we as African people were not familiar with eating canned food." This cultural mismatch between available assistance and acceptable foods exacerbates food insecurity, as donated items may remain unused or given away. As Fahah continued to receive canned food from a local food bank in Canada, her experiences highlight how conventional approaches to food insecurity often fail to account for cultural food practices, nutritional belief systems, and the psychological importance of familiar foods for displaced populations. It has been clear to her family that standard metrics of food access may therefore significantly underestimate the actual food insecurity experienced by refugee families when culturally appropriate options remain financially or logistically out of reach.

6. Adaptation and Integration

Our ongoing conversations reveal family two's intricate balance between cultural maintenance and adaptation that characterizes the refugee integration process. While food practices remain strongly tied to homeland traditions, the interviewee demonstrates pragmatic adaptation to Canadian systems—accessing government housing, navigating disability services, and developing support networks that include the interviewer. Her limited English nonetheless facilitates functional communication, representing successful linguistic adaptation. Most significantly, her perspective on Canadian society reflects appreciation for its social safety net compared to her experiences in Africa: "Here is much better than in the past as Canadian people are good, because they help refugee asylum like me and my family." This positive framing of her new country alongside cultural preservation demonstrates the multidimensional nature of integration, where adaptation occurs alongside—rather than [replacing—homeland attachments and practices](#).



The journey of approximately 250 km that Fahah and her family travelled on foot from hometown to a refugee camp in Conakry.



7. Memories and Nostalgia

Food serves as a powerful vehicle for memory and nostalgic connection to homeland throughout the interview. When Mariah recounts her grandmother's cooking, such culinary memories create intergenerational continuity despite displacement and family separation. At the same time, this teenager girl told and retold her stories of the school's lunchtime with traumatic moments when her peers uttered negative comments on her lunch box filled with cassava leaves and dried fish soup. Mariah's earlier excitement to share with friends about her mother's delicious meal, an iconic dish of West African people, soon was replaced by Mariah's feeling of shame and disappointment that brought her to the corner of the classroom and finished her lunch sadly and lonely. Moving to Fahah, this mother's detailed descriptions of cooking methods and ingredients evoke sensory landscapes of home, transforming food preparation into a form of embodied remembrance. Yet these food memories also carry ambivalence, as they simultaneously evoke both comforting familial connections and traumatic losses. The contrast between remembered abundance in her father's home and current scarcity in Canada further complicates this food nostalgia. These layered emotional associations with homeland foods explain their psychological importance beyond mere nutrition—they constitute tangible connections to places, people and prosperity otherwise irrevocably lost through forced migration.

8. Cultural Attitudes Toward Food

Distinctive cultural attitudes toward food preparation and consumption underpin the interviewee's approach to feeding her family. Her insistence on fresh cooking—"I don't keep food for one week, not two weeks more"—reflects deeply held beliefs about the relationship between food practices and health. The strong preference for freshly prepared dishes over preserved or packaged alternatives stems from cultural understandings about proper nourishment: "If he eats fresh food, he will be healthy. But if he eats expired food, he can't be healthy." These beliefs inform her skepticism toward Canadian food practices that rely more heavily on preservation and convenience. Similarly, her detailed account of cooking cassava leaves stews with carefully seasoned fish, chicken and meat demonstrates cultural knowledge that transcends written recipes. These distinctive attitudes toward proper food preparation and consumption represent not merely preferences but fundamental cultural frameworks for understanding how families should be nourished—frameworks that remain central to her identity and parenting despite geographical displacement.



The iconic African cassava leaves dish (centre) made from fresh cassava leaves (left) and dried catfish (right) by Fahah and Mariah at their kitchen in Canada.

My first year in Canada was tough.
My first time visiting a local food bank,
I was so excited to receive free foods for family.
When I came, the staff gave me a full box.
I couldn't wait more, I looked inside:
breads, rice, lentils, oil bottles, and potatoes.
Then my hands touched the items underneath,
I recognized something familiar - the food cans.
My body suddenly held back,
I ran outside as fast as the wind
leaving the food box and the staff's surprising eyes.

How can I?
Tell the people that ??
My body has no physical allergy with the canned foods???
But it's indeed my mental allergy????
My brain hurt
Because the canned foods reminded me of the tough time in refugee camp.
Over there, people were scared of canned foods
As canned foods have caused cancer to many.....
Here in the new land, I know canned foods may be different
But still, I can't

*The found poem that Fahah and I co-composed on her experiences of mental
allergy with the canned foods.*

A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF LIVING ALONGSIDE FAMILY THREE (Shortened)

Father: Shahan, 51 years old

Mother: Sara, 45 years old

Daughter: Maged, 14 years old

Son: Mohammed, 12 years old

Daughter: Weist, 10 years old

Daughter: Kindeley, 8 years old

Son: Hassan, 4 years old

Daughter: Rosana, 2 years old



"We came to Canada as refugees of the war so we are still feeling unsafe. I don't want my family's personal information to be disclosed. I don't want people to recognize our voice in any audio files. I need you to promise that you will never share our audio voice to the public. I respect you and I hope you will protect our family."
(Shahan's sharing, personal communication, Jan.-Aug. 2024)

In the period of nine months between December 2023 to August 2024, I was grateful that Family Three generously shared their time for my six visits at their home. Despite the busyness of taking care of six young children and hard working to "have enough bread for the kitchen" (Sara's words), Shahan and Sara always welcomed me to their loving family space and shared so many stories of their cultural practices with Libyan cuisine as well as their experiences amidst the social, political, cultural, economic, and educational challenges. My knowledge has been widened with eight keystones that I learned from our conversations.

1. Curating Cultural Identity and Food Practices in a Libyan Refugee Family

The preservation of cultural identity stands as a central pillar in Shahan and Sara's family life in Canada. Despite geographical displacement, this Libyan refugee family demonstrates unwavering commitment to maintaining their cultural heritage through multiple avenues. Daily preparation of traditional Libyan dishes forms the cornerstone of their cultural preservation efforts, with Sara meticulously recreating the tastes of home in her Canadian kitchen. This dedication extends to language maintenance, evidenced by their decision to send their children to an Arabic-English bilingual school located seven kilometers from their home, requiring significant logistical effort and time investment. Their adherence to religious dietary practices, specifically consuming only halal foods despite their higher cost in Canada, further reinforces their cultural identity. Perhaps most significantly, the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge occurs through Sara's careful instruction of her eldest daughter Maged in traditional cooking techniques, ensuring these practices continue into the next generation even as they build new lives in Saskatchewan.

2. Valuing Food as Essential Cultural Connections

Food transcends mere sustenance for this family, serving as a powerful medium for cultural connection across multiple dimensions of their transplanted life. When Sara prepares specific Libyan dishes, these culinary creations become tangible links to her mother and homeland, evoking memories and maintaining emotional bonds despite physical separation. The act of sharing traditional meals with other Libyan families in their community creates solidarity and mutual support networks that help mitigate the isolation often experienced by refugee families. Sara's participation in multicultural events at her children's school, where she proudly contributes traditional Libyan foods, demonstrates how culinary traditions become vehicles for cultural expression and education in their new country. Perhaps most striking is the family's determination to maintain daily Libyan cooking despite the numerous challenges this entails—from sourcing ingredients to managing higher costs—revealing how food preparation becomes a daily affirmation of identity and resistance against cultural erosion.

3. Navigating Immigration and Adaptation Challenges Is Not Simple but Possible

The family navigates a landscape fraught with settlement challenges that touch every aspect of their daily existence in Canada. Economic insecurity looms large, with Shahan working a minimum wage job while Sara manages their large household of eight children, making them heavily dependent on government support through the Canada Child Benefit program. Housing stability remains precarious with monthly rent consuming approximately \$1,700–1,800 before utilities, a substantial financial burden for their single-income household. Their refugee background has instilled persistent safety concerns, evident in Shahan's repeated insistence that their recorded voices never be shared publicly, revealing lingering trauma and fear. The practical challenges of maintaining cultural food practices prove considerable, with Sara struggling to source authentic Libyan spices and ingredients in Saskatchewan's limited international food market. Furthermore, the significantly higher cost of halal meats and other cultural staples in Canada creates ongoing tension between financial necessity and cultural-religious adherence, forcing difficult daily compromises.

4. The Significance of Resilience and Resourcefulness in Sustaining Cultural Food Practices

Despite these formidable obstacles, Sara and her family demonstrate remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in maintaining their cultural practices and navigating their new environment. When unable to find the specific spices essential to Libyan cuisine, Sara painstakingly recreates them from scratch using available herbs, showing ingenious adaptation despite the additional time and effort required. The family strategically brings spices and other hard-to-find ingredients from Libya during visits, maximizing their limited transnational mobility to support their cultural food practices. Sara's deliberate teaching of traditional cooking methods to her eldest daughter Maged serves both cultural preservation and practical necessity, ensuring family meals continue even when Sara is sick or unavailable—a forward-thinking adaptation to their current circumstances. Perhaps most significantly, the family actively cultivates connections with other Libyan families in Canada, creating a supportive community network that shares resources, cultural knowledge, and the emotional comfort of shared experience, demonstrating how social capital becomes a crucial resource in their adaptation journey.



The Libyan traditional cookies that Sara made to welcome guests at her home.



Maged 's showing the authentic noodles that she used to cook Libyan pasta with her mother's guidance.

5. Intergenerational Role Expectations and Intergenerational Knowledge Matter

The family structure reveals clearly defined intergenerational role expectations that shape daily interactions and future trajectories. As the eldest daughter, Maged carries significant responsibilities beyond her fourteen years, from supervising her five younger siblings to learning complex cooking techniques that will eventually position her as a cultural knowledge bearer. Sara's emphasis on teaching Maged cooking skills explicitly connects to future expectations of marriage and independence, revealing how culinary knowledge transfers intertwine with gender socialization. The transcript demonstrates numerous instances of sibling caretaking, with older children routinely watching younger ones—from Maged monitoring her siblings in the backyard to ensuring they handle household items carefully. These established family roles provide structure and continuity in their transplanted context while creating stability amid the uncertainties of refugee resettlement. Importantly, these role expectations don't appear to be questioned but rather are embraced as natural components of their cultural identity and family functioning in their new Canadian context.

6. Facing the Reality of Uncertainty and Future Planning as a Refugee Family

The family exists in a state of perpetual liminality, constantly balancing between commitment to their new Canadian life and preparation for a possible return to Libya. Their settlement ambivalence emerges clearly in Sara's reflection that if government support decreases or housing costs continue rising, the economic pressures might force their return to Libya—revealing how their refugee journey lacks the finality often assumed in immigration narratives. This uncertainty drives their emphasis on cultural preparation, particularly their determination that all children maintain Arabic fluency in speaking, reading and writing, creating linguistic flexibility for potential repatriation. Their focus on children's education across both cultural contexts—sending them to Arabic-English bilingual schools while embracing Canadian educational opportunities—demonstrates strategic navigation of dual possibilities. This constant orientation toward two potential futures creates unique stresses but also motivates their cultural preservation efforts, as maintaining Libyan practices isn't merely nostalgic but pragmatically necessary for potential reintegration into Libyan society.

7. Honouring Cultural Traditional Food as Medicine for Health and Healing

Traditional foods serve crucial health and healing functions that extend far beyond mere nutrition in this family's life. Sara prepares specific medicinal soups with carefully selected vegetables and chicken when family members fall ill, incorporating traditional healing knowledge that connects physical wellness with cultural practices. Her belief that traditional Libyan ingredients provide superior nutrition for her growing children influences daily food choices, with Sara explicitly choosing cultural foods with their health benefits in mind rather than adapting to more accessible Canadian alternatives. Perhaps most significantly, traditional cooking provides profound mental health benefits through emotional comfort and homeland connection—when Sara prepares dishes from her mother's recipes, these sensory experiences temporarily collapse the distance between Canada and Libya, offering psychological nourishment alongside physical sustenance. In this way, cultural food practices become multidimensional health interventions addressing physical, emotional, and social wellbeing simultaneously, demonstrating how traditional knowledge systems help refugee families navigate the mental health challenges of displacement and adaptation.



The welcome corner with Libyan traditional treats during my visits (left) and "the kids' happy garden" with the children's herb plants, marigold, and sunflower plants (right).



**RESONANT THREADS OF REFUGEE
AND IMMIGRANT FAMILIES, CHILDREN,
AND YOUTH'S EXPERIENCES OF
CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOOD
OFFERINGS AND THE IMPACTS ON
THEIR MENTAL HEALTH**

A month went by from the last research conversations with the three families, I enjoyed countless time listening to our sharing with each other again and again with my deep gratefulness for the families' stories that were told, retold, and re-lived in so many meaningful ways. My work of transcribing more than three hundreds pages of audio recordings was not exhausting; but rather, it came as a treasure to my learning. After the three narrative accounts were successfully co-composed by the participants and me, I spent almost five months to read and re-read our works in a slowly, careful, and respectful attitude. Every piece of their shared knowledge and even their non-verbal languages (their tears, their deep sighs, their silence, and their wandering eyes when sharing traumatic memories) altogether contribute to building a holistic and ethical home of six threads that resonate across the experiences of these parents, children, and youth amidst their survival, adaptation, and development.

1. Cultural Preservation through Culinary Traditions

In the profound landscape of immigrant experiences, food emerges as a powerful lifeline of cultural survival, transcending its basic nutritional purpose to become a living archive of memory, identity, and resilience. Each carefully prepared dish carries within it the weight of ancestral stories, the complexity of displacement, and the nuanced emotions of those who have journeyed across geographical and cultural boundaries. Traditional recipes become more than mere instructions for preparing a meal; they are intricate maps of cultural heritage, carefully preserved and lovingly transmitted from one generation to the next. For immigrants and refugees, cooking is an act of resistance—a defiant preservation of identity in the face of potential cultural erasure, a way of declaring "We are here, we remember, we survive" through the universal language of taste and preparation.

2. Survival and Adaptation: The Economic Dimension of Food

The economic dimensions of maintaining cultural food traditions reveal a complex navigation of survival and adaptation. Immigrants face profound challenges in sourcing authentic ingredients, managing the high costs of culturally specific foods, and balancing economic constraints with the deep-seated need to maintain culinary connections to their homeland. These challenges transform cooking into an elaborate act of creativity and resilience. Families develop intricate networks for obtaining ingredients, learn to recreate traditional flavors with locally available alternatives, and make strategic decisions about which culinary traditions to maintain, modify, or temporarily set aside. The kitchen becomes a site of economic negotiation, where the limited resources of displacement meet the rich cultural knowledge carried across borders.



3. Intergenerational Knowledge Transferred in the Familial Curriculum Making and Identity Formation

Intergenerational knowledge transfer emerges as a critical mechanism of cultural preservation, with cooking serving as a powerful educational medium. Parents and grandparents become cultural educators, sharing far more than mere cooking techniques—they transmit entire worldviews, family histories, and cultural values through the act of preparing traditional meals. Young immigrants learn to navigate dual cultural identities, finding a delicate balance between honoring their ancestral traditions and adapting to new cultural contexts. Cooking becomes a hands-on classroom where language, history, and emotional connection are shared, where children learn about their roots not through abstract lessons, but through the tangible, sensory experience of preparing family recipes.

4. Culturally Relevant Food Offerings and Emotional Landscape of Displacement

The emotional landscape of displacement finds its most profound expression through food, transforming cooking and eating into a complex mechanism of healing and memory. Each meal becomes a journey through trauma, loss, and hope—a way of processing the profound emotional upheaval of forced migration. Traditional dishes evoke memories of lost homes, departed family members, and vibrant communities left behind. Yet simultaneously, these same dishes offer comfort, creating a sense of continuity and stability in the midst of radical change. The act of cooking becomes a form of emotional resilience, a way of maintaining connection to a sense of self that transcends geographical boundaries.

5. Community Building and Cultural Negotiation

Community building emerges as another critical dimension of culinary experiences, with food serving as a powerful bridge between cultures and individual experiences. Immigrants create new social networks through shared meals, participate in multicultural events, and use cooking as a form of cultural diplomacy. Traditional dishes become a means of sharing one's culture, of creating understanding and connection in new and often challenging social environments. Cooking classes, community gatherings, and informal food sharing transform into spaces of cultural exchange, where the boundaries between "us" and "them" become more fluid, more nuanced, more human.

6. Supporting Cultural Food Ecosystems for Refugee/Immigrant Families

The systemic challenges facing immigrant communities demand a holistic approach that recognizes food as a critical component of cultural identity, mental health, and social integration. Support systems must move beyond mere provision of sustenance to create comprehensive ecosystems that honor the complexity of immigrant experiences. This means developing culturally sensitive food support programs, creating spaces for culinary knowledge sharing, supporting access to traditional ingredients, and recognizing the profound role that food plays in mental health and community well-being. In the end, each meal tells a story of survival, adaptation, and hope—a testament to the human capacity for resilience, creativity, and connection in the face of profound challenges.

In the intricate narratives of immigrant and refugee experiences, food emerges not just as sustenance, but as a powerful act of survival, resistance, and hope. It has been so meaningful for telling, retelling, and reliving the stories of displacement and renewal, of loss and adaptation, of maintaining identity while embracing new possibilities. Through the multicultural and multilingual narratives on culturally relevant food offerings, refugee and immigrant families, children, and youth shaped continuous threads of cultural meaning that honour their identity, dignity, sense of belonging, transcendence and also, connect their past, present, and future.

**"SO WHAT?" AND "WHO CARES?":
A HOLISTIC RETURNING
AND
FORWARD-LOOKING
HOPES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**



“As this research comes to an end (for now), I keep thinking narratively and travelling backward and forward in my understandings of the experiences of the refugee and immigrant participants who I was blessed to “living alongside” within a year. My practices of deep thinking and “world-travelling” (Lugones, 1984) to understand their experiences in ethical and respectful ways are later well connected with my earlier experiences as an immigrant mother living alongside two young children across many difficult landscapes culturally, socially, economically, educationally. My knowledge is also resonated with the Vietnamese Grandma's memoir as a war refugee from Vietnam that was narrated at the beginning of this research journey. These all together contribute to shaping the extraordinary meanings of this narrative inquiry, a challenging journey but the forward-looking hopes and recommendations are significant.

1. Towards Shaping an Integrated Support Framework for Culturally Relevant Food Offerings

At the heart of supporting newcomer families lies an Integrated Support Framework that fundamentally reconceptualizes food as more than mere sustenance. This approach recognizes culinary traditions as vital lifelines of cultural identity, emotional well-being, and intergenerational connection. By understanding food as a complex language of survival and adaptation, support systems can move beyond basic nutritional assistance to create holistic, meaningful interventions that honor the profound emotional and cultural significance of cooking and eating. The framework acknowledges that every recipe carries within it a story of displacement, resilience, and hope—a narrative that deserves careful, compassionate understanding.

2. Recommendations for Newcomer Support Organizations

Newcomer support organizations play a critical role in bridging cultural experiences through comprehensive, culturally responsive orientation programs. These initiatives go far beyond simple information sharing, creating robust support networks that guide families through the complex landscape of food in a new country. Detailed orientation packages become roadmaps of cultural navigation, offering practical guidance on finding international grocery stores, understanding local food systems, and sourcing culturally specific ingredients. Workshops transform into vibrant spaces of learning and connection, where newcomers can adapt traditional recipes, learn economic meal planning, and receive nutrition guidance that respects their cultural food practices. By inviting community elders and cultural leaders to facilitate these sessions, organizations create powerful intergenerational learning experiences that validate and celebrate culinary heritage.

Community building emerges as a transformative approach to knowledge transfer, recognizing that food is a profound medium of cultural exchange and connection. Regular community cooking events become more than social gatherings—they are living archives of cultural memory, where recipes are shared, stories are told, and new social networks are woven. Mentorship programs pair newcomer families, creating support systems that extend beyond immediate practical needs.

Digital and physical resources—multilingual recipe databases, video tutorials on traditional cooking techniques, and community forums—provide ongoing support mechanisms that allow families to maintain their culinary traditions while adapting to new environments. These initiatives acknowledge that cooking is a form of storytelling, a way of maintaining cultural identity in the face of significant life transitions.

3. Recommendations for Food Banks and Community Centers

Food banks and community centers must evolve to become truly inclusive spaces that recognize the deep cultural significance of food. This requires a radical reimagining of food distribution models, moving beyond standard offerings to develop diverse, culturally sensitive inventories that reflect the rich culinary landscapes of immigrant communities. Comprehensive cultural competency training becomes essential, educating staff about the emotional weight of food, the importance of respecting dietary restrictions, and creating genuinely welcoming environments. These centers transform from mere distribution points to cultural exchange hubs, where food becomes a medium of understanding, respect, and community building.

The integration of mental health support with food-related services represents a critical innovation in supporting newcomer families. Recognizing that food carries profound emotional and psychological significance, these programs develop holistic approaches that view culinary experiences as vital to emotional well-being. Counseling services incorporate food narratives, creating safe spaces for discussing cultural adaptation, loss, and resilience. Trauma-informed nutritional counseling acknowledges how cooking and eating can be powerful mechanisms of healing, allowing individuals to process complex emotions of displacement through the familiar, comforting rituals of food preparation.



The happiness of Marieh after successfully making a delicious cassava leaves dish with teaching from her mother.

4. Significant Messages for Refugee and Immigrant Parents

For newcomer parents, food becomes a critical tool of cultural transmission and family resilience. Workshops and support programs focus on empowering parents to document and share family recipes, create meaningful cooking traditions, and develop strategies for teaching children about their cultural heritage. These initiatives recognize the challenges of navigating dual cultural identities, providing practical skills in budget-friendly cultural cooking, nutrition planning, and ingredient sourcing. By valuing parents' culinary knowledge and supporting their ability to maintain cultural traditions, these programs strengthen family bonds and support children's sense of cultural identity.

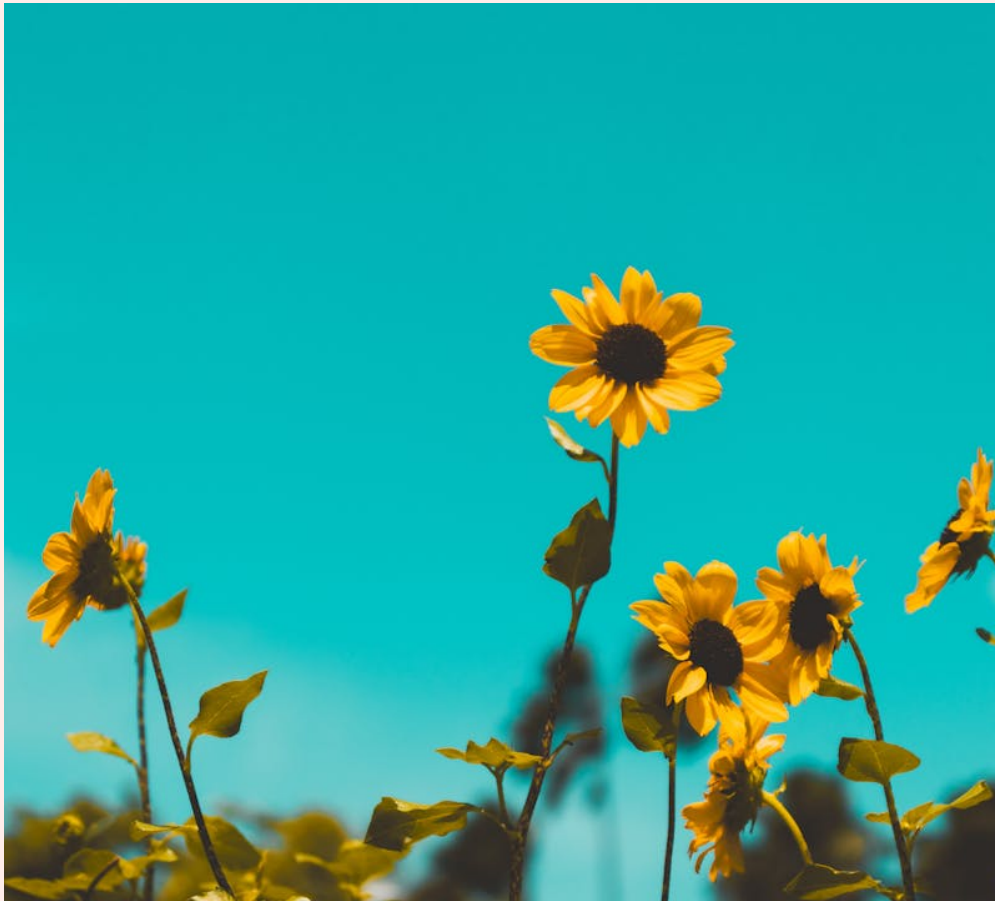
5. Suggesting School and Educational System Support

The educational system emerges as a crucial site of cultural inclusion and support. Schools must develop lunch programs and food-related activities that celebrate cultural diversity, creating safe spaces for students to bring and share their traditional foods. Multicultural food education programs help all students develop cultural understanding, while providing support for children experiencing food-related cultural anxiety. Youth engagement initiatives that connect young people with their cultural food traditions become powerful tools of identity preservation, offering mentorship opportunities and creating spaces where cultural heritage can be celebrated and explored, which at the same time contributes to reducing traumatic experiences such as the ones that young learners may have because of the traditional foods of their cultures at the lunchtime.

6. Towards the Long-Term Strategic Considerations and A Holistic Vision of Support on Culturally Relevant Food Offerings and the Mental Health of Refugees and Immigrants

Long-term strategic considerations demand a dynamic, adaptive approach to support. Continuous community consultation becomes paramount, with regular feedback mechanisms and participatory research approaches ensuring that support strategies evolve with changing community needs. Policy advocacy focuses on systemic change, pushing for policies that support cultural food diversity, inclusive food security programs, and economic initiatives for immigrant food entrepreneurs. The ultimate vision extends beyond immediate support, aiming to create a comprehensive ecosystem that recognizes food as a fundamental human right, a form of cultural expression, and a powerful mechanism of community building and individual resilience.

At its core, this project shapes a hope for an approach representing a profound reimagining of support for refugee and immigrant families—a holistic vision that sees food as a vital, living connection to identity, memory, and hope. There have been valuable support resources for immigrants and refugees in areas of housing affordability, health care system, and education but still very few attention is paid for their needs of culturally relevant food offerings. By creating supportive frameworks that honor the complexity of immigrant experiences including their cultural foods access, we can build long-term pathways of cultural preservation, community connection, and individual thriving for their best mental health and well-being.



The sunflowers, "the flowers of hope" that the children of Family Three planted with me during the summer 2024.



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