

## MYANMAR TO COFFS HARBOUR

### The role of food in regional refugee settlement

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#### *Abstract*

This paper is based on preliminary findings from research focusing on the sociocultural food experiences of Myanmar refugees (settlers) in Coffs Harbour, NSW, Australia. This qualitative, ethnographic study draws on ideas from anthropology and sociology to examine the factors that influence food choices for this particular group. The idea of ‘food as memory’ is well established and this is especially relevant for refugees who have fled their homelands with little more than ‘stories’ and ‘experiences’ from the past. Growing and cooking food (‘traditional’ foods in particular) can allow a settler to reconnect with their past and reassert their cultural identity, which is highly significant for a population experiencing extreme cultural dislocation. Initial interviews with key informants have revealed some of the food challenges faced by this group, but they have also highlighted the special role of food in fostering ‘community’ and how this is connected to attaining a sense of well-being. Gardening has also been identified as significant in promoting and strengthening identity, as well as providing a means of income and a form of ‘therapy’.

#### *Keywords*

Myanmar, Burma, refugee, food, Coffs Harbour

## Introduction

This paper provides a snapshot of my doctoral research-in-progress on the role of food in regional refugee settlement for people from Myanmar. The aim of my study is to explore and document the foodways of humanitarian migrants by investigating the social and cultural factors that enhance, or inhibit, the consumption of culturally meaningful, nutritious and desirable food. Poor nutritional outcomes for migrants, especially people from refugee backgrounds, have been noted in Australia, the United Kingdom and North America (Gallegos et al., 2008; Hadley et al., 2006; Hadley and Sellen, 2006; Larsen & Gilliland, 2008; Manandhar et al., 2006; Pereira et al., 2010; Renzaho et al., 2011; Renzaho et al., 2012). But, in order to understand food 'choices', we need to examine the sociocultural context in which they take place. This research goes beyond identifying the food challenges faced by this population, it also explores the positive experiences gained from food interactions such as cooking traditional food at home, community cooking and gardening. While my research focuses on the particular experiences of the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour, many of the same issues can be observed in settlement for former refugees from other cultures, and by migrant communities more broadly. At the time of writing, fieldwork was not complete but preliminary findings suggest a theoretical framework will incorporate ideas relating to placemaking, identity, power and agency.

A quick point of explanation before I begin. When I commenced my research I deliberately chose to use the name *Burma* over *Myanmar* because I felt this was an appropriate way to show support for democracy. However, I have since been urged by my research participants to use Myanmar because they feel it is more inclusive of ethnic minorities, and my research contributors come from a variety of ethnic groups.

## Research context

Migrants whose country of origin is Myanmar make up a significant proportion of applicants to the offshore humanitarian program in Australia. In the years 2012-2013, 2,352 such applicants were granted humanitarian visas for Australia, this represents 18.8 per cent of all applicants, from all countries (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2013). In recent years, around 20 per cent of humanitarian migrants to Australia have been settled in specifically identified regional areas, including Coffs Harbour (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2014). There are currently more than 300 Myanmar settlers now residing in the Coffs Harbour Local Government Area (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2015). Reasons for establishment of the regional settlement program include the desire to build community capacity, increase diversity, provide suitable employment opportunities and offer a welcoming community for new arrivals (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2014). Many settlers from Myanmar come from rural areas, therefore regional resettlement could potentially offer many favourable conditions and opportunities; and provide a more connected social and physical environment than that of a large western city.

Whilst regional settlement can offer hope of 'the good life', there are still many issues of concern for those who relocate to foreign and often distant countries. These include difficulties with language; the availability of appropriate support services; mental health and other health issues; and establishment of identity and community connectedness (Bird et al., 2012; Ewen, 2012; Hiruy, 2009; Schweitzer et al., 2011). In some cases, these issues are in fact more challenging in regional environments due to reduced infrastructure that may not adequately service emerging and diverse communities. Lack of public transport is one such issue that can potentially hinder a new arrival's integration and day-to-day functioning in their new community. The study of food choices is therefore just one (albeit a very

important one) of many possible topics of exploration that will assist in understanding the many challenges faced by this population.

For refugees, their long journeys fleeing persecution are often characterised by significant food transitions that link directly to their overall health, well-being and sense of identity (Renzaho, 2002). This has relevance starting in their country of origin, in the case of food insecurity in Myanmar (Shwe and Hlaing, 2011), and is also present in the temporary host countries where large numbers of Myanmar people reside in refugee camps and independent housing for many years awaiting determination of refugee status (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 2006). Food aid provided in camps might be informed by nutritional best practice but availability does not necessarily mean food will be consumed. Goods may be traded or deemed culturally inappropriate or undesirable due to the monotonous nature of such food aid (Renzaho, 2002). Participants in my study have also indicated there are significant food insecurity issues in transition cities like New Delhi and Kuala Lumpur where no assistance is provided to asylum seekers. Families can go without eating for a number of days, and when food is available it is usually watered down rice (porridge) or vegetables that have been scavenged from markets after closing.

Food security issues are also prevalent in the final settlement destination but it is important to note that, again, access does not necessarily equate with consumption. Few studies have explored the necessity of moving on from the notion of access as the key to food security. Food represents a complex and precarious commodity, it is so much more than meeting nutritional targets and its links to social life, identity and belonging cannot be underestimated (Germov and Williams, 2010). Neither can notions of empowerment. This is particularly relevant for refugees, who may flee their homeland with little except their stories, their cultural practices and a long history of disempowerment. This is where a food sovereignty approach can be useful

because it:

*is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. (Viva Campesina 2007)*

The significance of empowerment must be acknowledged in the context of food for people seeking refuge both during their extended time in 'transition' (in this case in Thai border camps, or in cities in India or Malaysia), as well as in their settlement destination. It is important to note there is an increasing desire to promote asylum seeker participation in the day-to-day running of refugee camps, including food distribution and growth (The Border Consortium, 2015). But, the vision of truly empowered food provisioning remains unachievable for many in asylum limbo. Settlers might be able to achieve empowered food provisioning in their destination countries and I can happily report that some participants in this study have experienced this.

Previous research has highlighted the potential negative impact of living in a 'food desert' (an area where there is little access to nutritious and affordable food) (Larsen and Gilliland, 2008; Manandhar et al., 2006; Nelson, 2000). This, however, should not be an issue in areas of Australia capable of significant food production due to favourable environmental conditions and social values that embrace the importance of nutritious, local food: such as northern New South Wales. Nonetheless, some studies (Pereira et al., 2010) suggest that even in areas where nutritious affordable food is readily available to newly arrived refugee households, dietary intake of fruits and vegetables in particular, is still relatively low. Therefore, in some cases, the issue is more about food 'choice' as opposed to 'availability'. It is variously stated that for refugees, food represents a complex and precarious commodity, it is so much more than meeting nutritional targets. For migrants in particular, food is "...helping us remember who we are" (Vue et al., 2011: 3) and envisaging who 'we' might become in our new homeland.

## **The social role of food**

The idea that food contains significant social and cultural meaning is not new, as Appadurai in 1981 declared food to be “a highly condensed social fact” (494). This theme is continued in Kalcik’s work on foodways and the migrant experience in the United States (1984). More recently Wessell and Brien (2010: 1) confirm that food is much more than sustenance, it is “crucial to life, both for physical and cultural nourishment, eating is fundamental to how we experience and make sense of identity and place, as well as how we construct it”. Germov and Williams’ (2010) edited text on the sociology of food has further explored the multiplicity of food in its meaning, consumption and identity creation.

The role of food in migration is of particular interest and has been widely documented (see Dudley, 2011; Hadley et al., 2006; Kalcik, 1984; Vue et al., 2011). Food has the capacity to invoke memories of home, to help establish a sense of place and identity, and to re-create and re-invent culture in a new and unfamiliar environment. The experience of eating traditional food can be recognised as a form of embodiment where the textures, smells, and of course the taste of certain foods can reconnect you to a place, a time, and a community. This is of special significance for refugees whose culture has been interrupted through many years of dislocation. This is especially the case for participants in this study who have spent between four and 24 years awaiting refugee status. However, food can also be a way of expressing your culture in your new home. This might involve establishing a market stall, a garden, or even a restaurant offering food from your country of origin.

The sociocultural role of food can be seen in Hiruy’s (2009) research on African refugee settlement in Tasmania. Although not Hiruy’s explicit intention to examine the role of food (both negative and positive) in re-settlement, food is mentioned frequently in comments by his participants in

connection to their capacity to establish and maintain identity in their new home in Australia. Examples of this include the way in which food is instrumental in bringing communities together; the way in which the offering of 'ethnic' food can promote pride ("I'm not just selling food, I'm selling culture" Hiruy, 2009: 94); the role of food in re-producing 'the familiar'; and the sensory nature of food in triggering emotions and feelings about home.

This is also exemplified in the successful Burmese Community Garden program in Werribee Park, Melbourne, Victoria, where community members are coming together to grow, cook and share produce that re-connects them to their food memories and cultural identity, as well as deepen connections to their community (Parks Victoria, 2012). According to Bethaney Turner (2011: 516), "community gardens provide the opportunity to bring together these aspects of food, place-making and belonging".

Food therefore has a very distinct role in migration. Anthropologist Sarah Dudley (2011) documents the importance of continuing links with cultural traditions in times of uncertainty in her studies with refugees on the Thai - Burmese border. For people living in camps, especially for an extended period, food can be a precarious commodity and also therefore a source of psychological stress, which can impact on well-being. However, food can also represent a coping mechanism through the maintenance of cultural traditions such as gardening and creating a sense of 'home'. Dudley (2011: 749) states that "satisfaction of hunger is important too: not solely in a biological sense, but as culturally constituted notion made more acute by displacement".

### **Food and refuge**

For some, food-related issues can in fact be a part of the reason behind seeking refuge in the first place. The documentation of food issues, especially food scarcity, in Myanmar can be found readily in reports by various human

rights and other non-government organisations. Reasons for the food security 'crisis' include the negative impact of the flowering bamboo crop, lack of access for NGOs to provide food supplies and seizure of arable land for cash crops by the military junta. This offers an explanation as to the motivation of some ethnic minority Chin people to seek refuge in India. Many refugees, including those now in Coffs Harbour, have fled famine and associated systematic human right abuses (Chin Human Rights Organization, 2008). These experiences are outlined by a participant in this study in the following vignette:

*And sometimes there is famine...like in the month of August, September, October...During these months famine because there is no business in my place, when we need money we have to sell our corn and our rice, then we get money, then we pay for our school fees. When the bamboo flowers, mouse and wolf and some animals come...so they went to our farm and eat rice, corn, millet, all vegetables. So we say 'Bamboo famine'...there is no human rights, and military rule, they raped some girls and some women, and if some people not obey the military, the army put inside a cell. There's no human rights. There's no freedom...Yes, they took their land. For example, some farm the military took but they didn't give any money, they steal... when they want something they take, they never give any money. This also very big problem in Burma.*

## **Research approach**

My research methodology is qualitative and utilises tools from ethnography in order to create a "thick" description (Geertz, 1973) of the lived experiences of participants. During fieldwork I have conducted formal and informal interviews with individuals, families and small groups. I have also engaged in participant observation in various natural settings including homes, gardens and community events. Throughout the project I expect to have in-depth



involvement with approximately twelve to fifteen adult community members. These participants have been recruited after extensive consultation with community leaders and members of the Myanmar community association. An information session was also held for potential participants to outline the objectives of the study, as well as to allow the participants to meet me and make an informed decision about whether or not they would like a role in the project. In the initial stages of my fieldwork I also consulted key informants with experience working with people from refugee backgrounds, in particular those with close connections to the Myanmar community through educational, health, religious or settlement affiliations.

My project includes a visual research element in the form of a short documentary depicting several participants' food journeys. Documentary was chosen as an appropriate medium to disseminate this research because visual methods can enhance a study in a multitude of ways. These include: the ability to produce sensory accounts of every-day life (MacDougall, 2006; Pink and Leder Mackley, 2012); the capacity for the creation of visual archives (Jackson, 2014); the ability to capture the reflexivity of the researcher (MacDougall, 2006); enhanced "close reading" of a particular social phenomena (Jackson, 2014); and the possibility of engaging a broad audience (Jackson, 2014; Mitchell, 2011). All of the features are relevant to food studies whereby a multi-layered and sensory representation of the foodways of the Myanmar community can communicate traditions, culture and identity to a broad audience.

I have also employed a participatory and collaborative approach in my research where community consultation and liaison has become an integral part of progressing the project. Such an approach is especially appropriate for working with people from refugee backgrounds. It is embedded in the notion of reciprocity that seeks to transform:

*people from subjects of research to participants in research. It moves from the notion of 'harm minimisation' as the ethical base of research to the notion of reciprocal benefit, and from researcher-directed projects and outcomes, to participant- and community-directed outcomes. (Centre for Refugee Research, n.d.)*

This has been realised through regular meetings with community leaders and members, as well as routine member checking of findings. Although some participatory approaches may identify participants' names, anonymity has been used in this study as participants prefer to be identified as members of the Myanmar community, rather than as individuals.

### **Findings to date**

In the scoping phase of my research, the first theme to emerge from interviews with key informants was the outright importance of food-related issues in the lives of people from refugee backgrounds. Several key informants suggested that grief in settlement can materialise through lack of access to traditional ingredients and ways of cooking. All key informants emphasised the importance of food engagement to their client groups. This set up the tone for the subsequent interviews where all key informants and participants acknowledged the significance of challenges, connections and celebrations in the context of food.

### **Food challenges**

Many food challenges were mentioned in interviews with participants and key informants. These included lack of knowledge about certain 'Australian' food types; unfamiliar ways of packaging; inability to locate 'traditional' foods; unfamiliarity with the supermarket environment; lack of English skills to negotiate shopping; and lack of targeted public health information, specific to food choices. One participant stated that food shopping was "very scary" and that it made her worry", so only her husband went shopping for the first

year. Another informant told of the disappointment when a whole pig was purchased for a special event but it arrived without the highly prized 'insides'. Another anecdote was about the confusion of a new arrival when he saw pictures of dogs on tins of food and commented that Australians seemed to eat a lot of dog. Several informants stated the culture shock in food is horrific.

Negotiating food shopping can be a difficult task for new arrivals. Although most participants initially commented that it was not 'too challenging' due to a brief orientation session from settlement services; further conversations revealed some commonly faced challenges. Those settlers with more confident English language skills certainly found the task of shopping easier but some commented on their struggle to be understood due to their pronunciation. One participant searching for condensed milk struggled to be understood. Many participants stuck to foods that were easily identifiable, including vegetables like potatoes. A common occurrence has been for community members to accidentally purchase lamb when they were seeking pork. This was met with disappointment because "we don't know how to eat lamb...we eat goat, because lamb we no like". Another participant who had made a similar accidental purchase, laughed and said they did not eat it because it the taste was so unfamiliar.

All interviewees stated that there is not enough food education provided to new arrivals from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in Coffs Harbour. It was asserted that although there are health promotion programs in place, the relatively small size of the CALD community in Coffs Harbour means that they do not get programs specific to their needs in terms of food orientation. Health Promotion workers are also under pressure to meet specified outcomes in existing programs and despite the good will and the clear need to offer programs specifically for people from refugee backgrounds; this is currently not in place in Coffs Harbour. An area of

concern for several key informants was the lack knowledge about the negative impact of sugary drinks on nutrition and dental health; and such drinks are commonplace in some settler homes. This may suggest a desire to assimilate by “doing what Australians do” or eating “white persons’ food” (Renzaho, 2004). I assumed there might also be a desire to be seen as having higher status by drinking western drinks but when I asked key informants about this they felt it was more about trying something new, then liking it. However, pressure to fit in to western ways of eating is an issue of concern for some people. One participant stated: “we have to change what we eat, definitely. I have never eaten a meat pie, so I have to try a meat pie”.

Some other food concerns relate to potentially dangerous health threats. One example given was where a new arrival in Coffs Harbour was poisoned from eating puffer fish; another from eating unsuitable, non-edible plants that resembled herbs ‘from home’; with a further case where plants treated with pesticide had been foraged from roadsides. Fortunately, the later cases led to consultation between Council weed workers and the Myanmar community in order to learn more from each other about desirable foods and ‘weeds’.

Previous studies (Renzaho et al., 2012; Renzaho et al 2011; Hadley et al., 2006) on settler food related issues highlight the increased incidence of obesity and type 2 diabetes. Although this is not yet a wide spread concern for the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour, a key informant discussed the increasing incidence of obesity in young women from African backgrounds. Interestingly, a health worker reported high levels of gestational diabetes in pregnant women from Myanmar. The cause is unknown and warrants further investigation.

Some key informants and participants in this study have observed individuals who consume both traditional foods and western foods such as MacDonald’s in one meal. One participant said he has tried burgers but must

always have rice after to feel satisfied. He stated “if we eat Burmese food we have more energy...if we eat something like burgers or steak we will be hungry again after half an hour. If we eat rice with our Burmese food we can work”. A Canadian study (Ewen, 2012) has also documented this phenomenon where participants say they do not feel content without eating rice and other traditional foods. In some instances, both foods are consumed and hence the calorific intake is doubled potentially leading to obesity in the long term.

Procedures around food engagement are also cause for concern for the Myanmar community. Several key informants mentioned lack of knowledge about how to obtain a fishing license (and in fact, the need to attain one). This is particularly problematic for people who come from a culture where fishing is important and easily accessed. It was also suggested that settlers who participated in initiatives like formal community gardens experienced confusion over the bureaucracy applied to this activity. The need to apply to become a member, pay a fee, fulfill obligations, only attend at certain hours, and follow the rules and regulations was viewed by several key informants as being overwhelming and somewhat discouraging for people from refugee backgrounds. This is reflected in the low numbers of Myanmar settlers engaging in a local community garden. However, it also seems that some new arrivals are not aware of such facilities and expressed an interest to learn more.

A certain amount of food-adaptation has taken place in the Myanmar community. In some cases traditional fruit, vegetables and herbs have been grown or sourced but in other cases practicalities have meant that it is not possible to eat the ‘Myanmar way’ all of the time. Breakfast time poses such a problem. One participant had a preference for a very time consuming ‘hot soup’ made from beef or goat bones. In Myanmar such a soup would be purchased from a neighbourhood stall, or would be cooked up for a whole

family by a mother, grandmother or aunty. In Coffs Harbour this participant now has Weet-bix for breakfast.

Another challenge for this community is the lack of choice in purchasable Asian food products. One participant stated:

*I got information from Malaysia, they said to me if we want to find Asian food we go to the Asian market but we don't know where the Asian market is?...In Coffs Harbour not much Asian food but when we go to Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne we can get a lot.*

Although there are now several Asian grocery shops in Coffs Harbour, there are still many items that must be purchased in larger cities including special items for festivals and everyday items like 'Burmese tea'. Community members take regular trips to these food destinations and these journeys are reported to be quite a social event.

### **Positive food engagement**

There are many positive experiences relating to food for this community, starting with the role of gardening in resettlement. In fact, some refugees living in camps in Thailand have experienced empowered food provisioning and the benefits of gardening pre-settlement (Dudley, 2011). On the Thai-Burmese border, some Karenni Burmese have vegetable plots, small animals including chickens and pigs, and some capacity to forage for food. All of this contributes to broaden their meager food staples, as well as provide a sense of identity by evoking memories of 'home'. Similarly we observe the benefits of having access to gardens in destination countries (Anderson, 2010; Bishop and Purcell, 2013; Cummings et al., 2008; Turner, 2011). Such spaces can potentially empower participants to have an autonomous role within the food production system; promote better health through consumption of fresh food; and facilitate improved mental health and wellbeing (Anderson, 2010; Cummings et al., 2008; Turner, 2011).

Home or community gardens fulfill another important function by enabling users to grow culturally significant or otherwise rare foods unavailable in mainstream shops. In the case of the Myanmar community, fried roselle (a type of hibiscus, known as ‘rosella’ in Australia) leaves are part of the traditional diet, however access to the key ingredient is not easy, as rosella leaves are not stocked in the average Australian supermarket. One participant stated: “easy things were okay like potatoes and tomatoes but I want rosella leaves and I can’t find in the supermarket”. Growing your own food thus allows culinary traditions to continue, and this can be an essential part of maintaining a sense of identity in the resettlement process. A visit to a private garden of a Myanmar family confirmed this. Here the gardener grew multiple varieties of small, multi-coloured eggplant not easily available in Australia; as well as an extensive range of unusual beans and herbs. From a practical perspective, the importance of gardening was summed by a participant who quoted a Burmese saying: “Make a shop behind your house”, which means make your own garden. He added, this provides fresh and healthy eating but also saves you money. The majority of participants in this study have some kind of garden in their home, be it a series of pots in a small outdoor area or bigger plots on larger blocks of land.



Figure 1: Rosella growing in a Coffs Harbour home garden (photo by author)

There is considerable research on the psychological benefits of gardens and green spaces to promote positive feelings (Anderson, 2010; Brook, 2003; Kaplan, 1995). Brook (2003) asserts people who are surrounded by plants are healthier and have higher levels of well-being than those without exposure to nature. This emotional and sensory connection could provide necessary therapeutic benefits for people from refugee backgrounds who have experienced significant trauma. This was acknowledged by a participant who stated: “if I hadn’t been doing gardening it would be so bad. So I love my gardening. It helped a lot with my mental health and well-being”.



Figure 2: Finding solace in a garden (photo by author)

Other connections to gardens for this community include access to several informal community gardens that have been or are being established. This includes access to private land in a rural setting, as well as a new initiative to set up a garden in a transitional property owned by a refugee settlement service. Furthermore, private gardens in homes are rapidly expanding and are providing for their community, as well as supplementing incomes by sending specialised produce, such as rosella leaves, off to market locally and interstate. Sought after seeds are exchanged amongst the community and horticultural knowledge is highly valued and passed on. Several Burmese



gardeners are currently employed at a local school and many from within the community work in the local blueberry industry.



Figure 3: Myanmar jungle foods thriving in Coffs Harbour (photo by author)

All participants in this study remarked on the social and cultural significance of food and its connection to their homeland. In relation to growing traditional foods, one interviewee stated “it’s about taste”, but more significantly “it’s about home”. Taste, is then, not simply a physical experience, it occurs in the context of embodiment that connects us to memory, most commonly memory of place. Food also connects us to place by bringing people together to share a meal. One key informant from a migrant background concurred stating “most of our ceremonies and rituals are always around food, so yes, initially food was always part of my socialisation or assimilation into the Australian community”. This was observed recently at a Myanmar Buddhist festival where people came together to celebrate and share a meal. For the Myanmar community social activities often take place in the context of food sharing, although surprisingly this is not always traditional food. One example offered was where an ‘Aussie’ BBQ is used as means to bring people together socially to share a meal. However, during an observational visit to a Myanmar orientation session, traditional food was

cooked and proudly served by a community leader. Food then is about identity and pride; connection to the past and the present; the old and the new lived experience.



Figure 4: Cooking reconnects me to my culture (photo by author)

The Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour is multi-ethnic, representing all of the main ethnic groups. Although, this community comes together in cross-cultural cooperation, their distinct cultural heritage is also celebrated. This can be seen through the diverse cooking styles and ingredients used by each group. For example ‘Burmese’ (or Bamar) food is characterised by use of chili, deep-frying, and a preference for fish. By comparison the ‘Zomi’ prefer to cook with water and favour ingredients like chicken over fish. One participant summarised the key differences between the two:

*Burmese food and Zomi food is very different. They fry and they like most fish dry but our Zomi people like chicken and pork...boiling with water and we have soup, soup is very important in our food.*

This further strengthens specific cultural identity through the embodied process of eating and memory: “Yes, I eat our Zomi food, we make every day...when we cook our food we remember our hometown, our culture, our past life, we remember”.

## Theorising findings

At the time of writing, this research is still developing. Fieldwork is not complete and so thorough theoretical analysis has not yet taken place. However, at this early stage, it is clear that the many examples above provide pertinent illustrations of the way in which food can be examined through many different sociocultural lenses. The exploitation of land and produce by the Myanmar military, as experienced by some participants in this study, can be examined in a Marxist or critical sense in terms of control over means of production, land and unequal distribution of resources (Marx, 1978). But we can also conceptualise the exercise of power in a Foucauldian sense, whereby we can observe the networks reproduced through power relations (Foucault, 1980; Hardy, 2003). In this case access to food networks can demonstrate power from 'above' and 'below'. Authoritarian power is present in food distribution (food security), as well as in access to information and tools needed to source desirable foods. But power from below - hence agency - can also be seen in initiatives such as growing your own foods and sharing these amongst your community. If agency can be defined as "the capacity of human beings to shape the circumstances in which they live" (Locke, 1978, in Emirbayer and Mische 1998:964), then the initiative shown by the participants to source and cook traditional foods in a highly social context demonstrates that agency can be exercised by marginalised people. This can apply in the many phases of relocation including flight, temporary settlement and permanent settlement. Resistance is indeed possible and agency can be identified in the initial decision made by some families to escape.

In further work, the positive role of food will be examined in its clear links to placemaking (making 'here like there') (Brook, 2003) and in its capacity to continue, recreate and perform identity. Placemaking occurs for these participants through manipulating the landscape (i.e. garden), in the smells of familiar foods and in the technology used in homes to prepare traditional

meals, amongst many other examples. Such placemaking can assist in the settlement process by creating familiarity and continuing positive traditions and cultural practices.

The role of food for people from refugee backgrounds is intrinsic in enhancing healing and promoting community connectedness. It is important to remember that although food is important, and culturally specific foods are desirable; the need for safety is understandably of more immediate relevance to these settlers who have spent many years in violent and traumatic conditions. This was summed up by a participant who stated: “yes, food is important in our culture but it’s not as important as peaceful living”.



Figure 5: Food and peaceful living (photo by author)

## Conclusion

In reiterating the importance of the social and cultural role of food in everyone’s lives, this study seeks to go beyond this by asserting that continuation and adaptation of food culture is more significant for people from refugee backgrounds, given the considerable displacement and trauma that has impacted them. Food can indeed present many challenges post-

settlement and these include navigating foreign food systems like supermarkets; sourcing traditional foods; and negotiating messages about healthy food intake. Access to these can prove more difficult in a regional environment with less infrastructure and smaller CALD communities. However, the positive association with food can also provide a means for enhancing settlement and achieving well-being in a new and foreign land. This can be done by performing identity through growing and cooking traditional foods; and establishing and maintaining community connections through food sharing. The food landscape for the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour and elsewhere is a complex and multi-dimensional one; that presents a unique case study into the lived experience of settlers in regional Australia. For this group, investment in the promotion of appropriate food engagement programs could potentially offer a means to reassert power and control over food choices, and hence control over lives.

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