

---

# Presentation 1

## **Foods, Roots and Routes: Gendering Memory in the Age of Displacement**

---

**Khatharya Um**

(Associate Professor, Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California Berkeley)

## **Foods, Roots, and Routes: Gendering Memory in the Age of Displacement**

**Khatharya Um**

(Associate Professor, Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies Department  
of Ethnic Studies University of California Berkeley)

Discourse about intangible cultural heritage is anchored on the question of memory, which has become a topic of great interest today not only within academia but also in popular culture. America's newfound taste for cupcakes and macaroni and cheese, for instance, is not so much about society's gastronomic craving for these foods, as it is about society's craving for history and the comfort of things past. In essence, it is about restorative nostalgia and the memories that these foods evoke and make possible through the imaginary. Our preoccupation with memory and remembering, in large part, is driven by our recognition of the fragility of memory, a fragility that is underscored by this age of mass displacement in which we live. As the Iranian American writer Roya Hakakian notes in her recent memoir, "When you have been a refugee, abandoned all your loves and belongings, your memories become your belongings." In a world where over 80 million people are currently forcibly displaced, amounting to one person being forcibly dislodged from his or her home and lifeways approximately every two seconds, dislocation, uprooting, and rupture are as much a facet of our lived experience as are connectivity and interdependence. Exilic condition is an unfortunate but undeniable feature of modernity.

Even within living memory, Asia has had her share of tumultuous histories. Colonization, conflict, war, and other calamities have engendered mass dispersal. Over 2 million Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians fled their homelands in the aftermath of war, revolution and genocide, and many more Southeast Asians continue to be displaced in varied contexts and conditions as we speak. The genocide in Cambodia left deep wounds and ravaging effects on the cultural memories of the nation that is now bifurcated between Asia and the diaspora. Even without the trauma of war and mass atrocities, globalization, modernization, and urbanization have progressively divested traditional knowledge of its merits, and peripheralized certain memories into oblivion.

As the body moves, where does memory live? Food has always signified home and heritage, two things that people on the move carry with them, often only in their imaginary, but at times also in actuality— the chili pepper seeds tugged away in the band of a sarong, the memory of home in blended smell and taste that travels into and through the diaspora, the spices from distant colonies that made their way to the tables of the métropole. Food signifies "home" in its fullness, not just of place and belonging but of all elements of sociality that transform space into place, and place into home. It is a site where social memories are enshrined, and through which they are transmitted. Where these memories are absent in textbooks and other narratives, food-centered practices and rituals are the remaining containers of cultural memory, hence important sites for excavation, preservation, and transmission. For the younger

generations, it is often through these quotidian experiences that they find their way not only to their own cultural identities but also their connections to others of shared traditions.

In 2016, UNESCO- Bangkok launched an important project on Southeast Asian Shared Histories that yielded innovative curricular materials for secondary schools, which have since been adopted by various countries of Southeast Asia as part of their national curricula. One of the more popular units is on rice and spice that has also been made into two recently published children's books. In looking at rice and spice, we were not only looking at food as a cultural archive but as a thread that connects multiple places and domains, namely the various countries of South East Asia, Southeast Asia and the world, the micro experiences of the everyday and global political, economic and social forces and processes. As such, we not only viewed rice and spice in terms of Southeast Asian countries' shared culinary traditions and experiences, but also as lenses for understanding migration, science and medicine, spirituality, sociality, and cultural practices that connect the peoples of Southeast Asia, as well as the region with the rest of the world. Commonly known dishes such as curry reveal not only the particularities of each country's culinary traditions but also their creative adaptive evolution, and a different and richly illuminating cartography of the region's histories of movements and encounters. The *mi kola* that was a pre-war culinary specialty of Cambodia's northwest, for instance, is a cultural register of the presence of the ethnic Shan community from Burma in the gem mining provinces of Cambodia. Bread exposes French colonial imprint on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, while the iconic *banh mi* that is now a common feature on the menu of New York and San Francisco's eateries reveals the *longue durée* of militarized dislocation, and serves as a reminder of the importance of situating the post-1975 Southeast Asian diaspora within the larger histories of war and empire. When we trace the genealogy of the egg desserts so popular in Thailand and Cambodia, we not only can chart the circuitous routes of encounters and conflicts through which memories travel— in this case connecting Portugal, Cambodia, Thailand, and Brazil among other nodes— but also put into sharper relief the humanistic ties and intercultural connections that are often buried and obscured by the more visible legacies of war and conquest.

In highlighting regional and global connections in our study of rice and spice, we also underscored the multi-directionality of cultural flows, not just within Asia, and not just from the West to the East, but also from Asia to the rest of the world. In addition to the history of global trade and exportation of culinary influence, Southeast Asian food cultures also represent the wisdom and scientific knowledge acquired and transmitted through generations, particularly as they relate to the science and philosophy of healing. Some of these traditional knowledges have traveled to the West and shaped notions of health and wellbeing as well as informed research and development in the fields of medicine and nutrition. Understanding of the origins of these knowledges and traditions allows for a deeper appreciation of the global flows of ideas and influences from Asia, of our interconnectedness, and the importance of intercultural exchange.

### **ORAL HER/STORY AND GENDERED MEMORY**

The initiative's inherent importance notwithstanding, the Rice and Spice Project is significant in that it opens up new ways of looking at quotidian practices as archives of cultural heritage, and suggests even wider possibilities. Despite the tendency to approach it as a monolith,

memory is not undifferentiated but is inflected by class, gender, and generations among other factors, hence must be considered in its plurality. Yet in research, writing and other forms of documentation, memory is often flattened. Because of the assumption that all memories are the same, women's stories, experiences, and perspectives, for one, are rarely documented in their own right, despite the fact that women are essentially the keepers of memory, entrusted with critical tasks such as preparing and performing important rituals, and of transmitting cherished cultural memories. In the many food-centered activities that fill a Southeast Asian life— from cooking for the family to preparing daily alms and ceremonial offering— it is women who shoulder the tasks. In the same vein, Southeast Asian agricultural practices, rites, myths, legends, and harvest songs as they relate to rice and spice are all imbued with gendered elements. Even in the context of rice and spice, so much remains to be uncovered.

The Rice and Spice Project, thus, serves an invitation for thinking more broadly about gendered memory and about the importance of capturing them through stories, narratives, and artifacts of the everyday. In Southeast Asian families like mine, “food heritage” is the feminine gift from mother to daughter. What is transmitted in the almost exclusively female space of the kitchen, however, is not just the art of cooking. Growing up, much of what I and other female members of my family learn about the healing properties of food, recipes for women's health and beauty, and above all, what it means to be Khmer, and a Khmer woman, were bequeathed to us organically through instructions, scolding, stories that are always laced with life lessons, and banter among elders that we were permitted to “overhear,” all shared in the warmth and nurturing chaos of the kitchen and other feminine spaces where cultural memories are performed and transmitted by our elders.

While foodways, as intangible cultural archives of the everyday, is an important and accessible platform for thinking more broadly about gendered memory, there are many traditions and practices that are passed on to women by women. What, for instance, do we still remember of the rituals, meanings, and customs of “entering the shadow” (choal maloob) that marks a Khmer woman's rite of passage into maidenhood, or the various beliefs, taboos and practices associated with pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum, and other female self-care? What gendered memories are embedded in female tattoos? In reference to lacquer, which is a theme of the conference, what do we still remember of the lacquer pounding ceremony that is part of the traditional Khmer wedding ritual, or the process and signification of teeth lacquering? What about other usage of the lacquer producing tree such as in silk thread dying in Cambodia, which is also gendered labor? These are memories and knowledge that often lie below the threshold of visibility, in gendered spaces already on the margin. And they are rapidly disappearing.

Women's memories, however, are not only confined to cultural memories. They extend into other realms such as history, education, and politics. What, for instance, do we and what will subsequent generations know of Southeast Asian women's experiences under colonialism and war? What do we know of the first cohort of Southeast Asian women to attend modern schools? Who were the women trailblazers in different sectors of Asian societies?

Memories are unequal, not in terms of their absolute importance, but in terms of their perceived importance, and of the means to act upon that importance. Some of these memories are being preserved in some communities, but not in others. The imperative of gathering and preserving these and other gendered memories is particularly acute in communities that have been fractured and dislocated, and where memories, already marginalized and relegated to the intimate confines of families and homes, are further threatened by dispersal, by the precarity of

life in displacement and, in many instances, by generational and linguistic disconnect. For these communities, with the passing of the generations, the losses are irretrievable.

This is where external institutions like UNESCO can play critical roles, for the losses are not only for a particular nation or community; they are losses for humanity. The tasks of safeguarding cultural heritage can be undertaken in different places and involve many institutions, especially educational institutions. Projects such as the one led by our community health students at Berkeley to compile postpartum recipes from different parts of the world, many of which were gathered through interviews with elders, for instance, not only engage the younger generations in the construction and preservation of their cultural histories, but also promote intergenerational communication and engagement with the larger community. Especially important, these women-centered projects instill and affirm, for all generations, the valorization of women's knowledge, skills, experiences, and contributions. By integrating these initiatives into school curricula, and anchoring learning in lived experiences, we also make it more meaningful. For public educational institutions, such initiatives also provide opportunities to engage the larger community in the production of knowledge that is meaningful to them, and in the process to bridge the gap between the academy and the community. Equally important, by moving preservation efforts beyond certain domains such as museums, we transform cultural preservation from being the privileged task of certain institutions to being a more widely shared, societal undertaking. The foundational knowledge, tools, and skills that students acquire through critical inquiries allow them to better understand both the past and the present world in which they live, and their connectedness with their environments and with other peoples and communities. These knowledge, skill sets, and insights will help prepare them to be critically engaged citizens not only of their own countries and of the Asia region but also of the world in the 21st century.