



## A Community-Grounded Approach to Understanding Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of Refugee Communities

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### Research Article

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#### ABSTRACT

Project APRCH (Agency in the Preservation of Refugee Cultural Heritage), is an effort to ask refugees to speak in their own voice, attaining agency, about the direction they wish to take in the preservation of their (refugee) cultural heritage. Project APRCH focuses on learning from/about the refugee population in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina, USA, as a microcosm of similar communities across the United States. It seeks to understand the relationships of particular community members to their intangible cultural heritage as a process for authentic cultural heritage preservation.

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, Refugee, Montagnard, Community grounded approach, Guilford county.

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### I. Introduction

Living and working in central North Carolina in the United States (U.S.), it is impossible to escape the fact that many refugee communities make up our rich cultural diversity. Refugees are those who were forcibly displaced from their homes due to war, famine, or natural disaster (UNHCR, 1951) and those who have settled in this area, have done so after some time spent in refugee camps in another country. Relatively little is known about their cultures by the community of settlement and the younger generation may be experiencing a disconnect from their cultural heritage. For example, in describing the experiences of Hmong refugee writers who grew up in Fresno (California, U.S.), Brown (2011) notes how through writing they are trying to connect to their culture. The stories that they write may involve a cultural heritage that may be revealed in traditional clothing that is now an “object of exile” or a cultural practice that is suppressed because it is not being manifested. In a new homeland, having been displaced, refugees such as the Hmong may suffer from “traumatic memories of wartime atrocities [which] are often compounded by language issues, poverty and social isolation” (Brown, 2011). Whether the lack of transmission of refugee cultural heritage is a conscious or unconscious act, the need to preserve it is

unmistakable. According to Chu (2008), the following responsibilities rest on libraries and museums as stewards of cultural heritage:

- To develop digital, community-based libraries of material relating to under-represented groups including publications, photographs, artwork, artefacts and multimedia from one to a range of collections;
- To provide access to essential cultural and community information to individuals and communities of concern and the world at large;
- To strengthen individuals and communities through knowledge and pride in who they are, where they come from and what they have contributed;
- To strengthen identity and culture through making material available that is often difficult to access for lack of documentation, rareness and fragility of materials, and physical reach.

Specifically, “multicultural and globalized digital libraries would guarantee the right for all cultural voices to be included, would acquire the necessary funding to pursue multicultural projects, and would enable underrepresented voices to speak for themselves, to determine what cultural heritage and community (including individual) experiences are to be digitized, and how the information will be accessed (limited or full access, language, interface, etc.)” (Chu, 2008). The goal of the present project is to use a community-grounded

approach to understanding preservation of intangible cultural heritage of refugee communities and to explore the application of Chu's (2008) framework. Project APRCH aims to learn what these elements are from the refugee communities themselves and to allow them to inform and assert their need for documentation, perpetuation, and dissemination of cultural heritage on their own terms.

## **II. Project Design**

Our approach to preservation of cultural heritage, especially of refugees, is community-grounded and learner-focused. The project team has been interested in the culture and everyday life circumstances of refugee communities in the city of Greensboro and the surrounding cities.

The following steps were undertaken to design and refine the project:

### **a. Learning about the Refugee Communities in the Triad**

To gain a better background of the refugee communities in the area we sought to learn more about the initial settlement and make-up of refugees in the Piedmont Triad, an area named for the neighboring cities of Greensboro and High Point in Guilford County, and Winston-Salem in Forsyth County. Refugees comprise a special group of immigrants whose main driving force for migration is not by choice (e.g., economic reasons) or voluntary, but one of necessity. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as someone who has fled their country and is unable to return due to "a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR, 1951). The U.S. accepts far more refugees than other industrialized nations in the world.

About one-third of all refugees coming to North Carolina come to the Piedmont Triad. Outsiders often refer to Greensboro as "little Ellis Island" because of the large influx of refugees resettled in the area, starting in 1979 following the establishment of the Lutheran Family Services, an affiliate of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (Bailey, 2005). Other voluntary resettlement agencies began their services in the area in the 1990s. Guilford County is now home to North Carolina's largest and most diverse refugee population.

The distinct characteristics associated with the refugee community of the Piedmont Triad include:

- A refugee resettlement area since 1979;
- Guilford County is home to the largest Montagnard community (approximately 10,000) living outside of Vietnam, whose culture consists of at least 5 major language groups and various dialects;
- Home to refugees from all over the world including South East Asians, Africans, East Europeans, and Russians;

- The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, has more ethnic Hmong students than anywhere else;
- Over 50,000 refugees live in the Triad and nearby cities (about 8% of the Triad population); an average of nearly 500 new refugees arrive each year;
- Over 150 languages from 142 different cultural and ethnic groups are represented in the Guilford County School District which is more than the state's most densely populated area, Mecklenburg County, where 118 languages are represented in the school system (Faces of Change, 2010).

### **b. Learning through a Series of Meetings with Stakeholders**

In order to learn first-hand from refugees or those who work with them, various meetings were scheduled, including:

1. Community leaders and members – The project team met with members and leaders of various refugee communities with different ethnic backgrounds including Montagnards, Hmong, and a number of African nations and tribes.
2. Library and archives institutions – Meetings were held with library and museum administrators and staff who have ties and interact with refugee communities.
3. Community organizations – There are a number of community organizations who serve and work with refugee communities in the Triad area, including the Center for New North Carolinians, Refugee and Immigrant Network of Guilford (RING), and North Carolina African and World Services Coalition (NCAWSC).

These interactions revealed that sustaining such a rich level of cultural diversity developed in the Triad over the past thirty years is under threat in the face of the growing political, economic, and social challenges these communities experience. There is a need for employment, health and social services, and as noted earlier, poverty, social isolation, trauma and language and cultural loss are everyday realities. Moreover, there is no structure or plan in place to assist these communities to themselves document, perpetuate, and disseminate their intangible cultural heritage. Refugee communities lack the resources to preserve and pass down their oral traditions, rituals and language to the new generation as they economically struggle to survive in their new homeland and their children adapt and develop a new identity.

More specific to working with refugees and the success of any project are the following issues that community leaders, refugees and community workers raised:

- the researchers need to schedule different meetings, and not assume common issues for refugees;
- there must be trust, built by having the researchers to become involved in community activities;

- in the Montagnard community, specifically, there may be different tribes, loyalties, religions and languages;
- the refugees may share the same culture but be from different religions;
- there may be a need for healing because refugees may have experienced culture shock, post-trauma, or stress;
- the younger generation needs to feel success and to not deny their culture;
- activities recommended for community engagement included participation in a soccer team, cultural activities, or a craft group;
- some of the first generation that resettled early are getting older so there exists an impending cultural loss;
- work with cultural or religious organizations and service agencies to connect with communities;
- some cultures are oral or pre-literate;
- serious issues include: poverty and its corollary impacts on education and health, social isolation, trauma, and the family power structure.

**c. Learning about the potential loss of cultural heritage and identity**

Refugee communities are not only facing the many traumas associated with being displaced, having fled persecution, if not violence, but are resettling with little else but their culture and memories. More specifically, refugee intangible cultural heritage is very fragile against such powerful forces (“UNESCO”, 2012). Intangible cultural heritage refers to “traditions and living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants” such as voices, traditions, and oral history (“UNESCO”, 2012). Therefore, it is essential to document, perpetuate and disseminate intangible cultural heritage of refugee communities for constructing and “cementing their sense of common identity in the face of cultural disruption” (UNESCO, 2001).

Intangible cultural heritage has four dimensions (“UNESCO”, 2012):

- Traditional, contemporary and living at the same time: intangible cultural heritage does not only represent inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part;
- Inclusive: expressions of intangible cultural heritage are passed from one generation to another, evolve in response to their environments and they contribute to giving the community a sense of identity and continuity, providing a link from the past, through the present, and into the future.
- Representative: intangible cultural heritage is not merely valued as a cultural good, or for its exclusivity or its exceptional value. It thrives because of its base in communities and depends on those whose knowledge of traditions, skills and customs are passed on to the rest of the community, from generation to generation, or to other communities;

- Community-based: intangible cultural heritage can only be heritage when it is recognized as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it. Without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage.

**d. Learning about prior refugee cultural heritage and cultural memory projects**

Searches were conducted to learn about refugee and ethnic cultural heritage preservation activities, and other available information on these communities was learned along the way. There is some social studies research and online information on specific refugee communities; health research and services information on specific refugee communities are available, refugee experiences are covered in the media, and socio-demographic data are provided by government agencies. There have been limited local refugee cultural heritage preservation efforts, and these have been in the form of videos, websites, museum exhibits and research, some of which are documented on our project website as well as cultural memory projects of ethnic communities <http://aprch.wordpress.com>. Although some cultural heritage preservation activities are being conducted by refugees themselves, many tend to be led by non-refugees who gather the information from the communities but do not necessarily have them drive the process.

**III. Intended Results and Impact**

Activities undertaken in the development of Project APRCH have contributed to solidifying partnerships, developing project work plans, and understanding culturally respective and appropriate practices. The products resulting from the Project will be:

- Process Recommendations: Recommendations for conducting intangible cultural heritage preservation practice with refugee communities will be created, identifying those appropriate across refugee communities, and those specific to the ones being studied.
- Cultural Heritage Preservation Profiles: A profile will be created for each refugee community of their stated cultural heritage preservation priorities with will assist the project team, the respective communities and others to advance the cultural heritage preservation work for those specific refugee communities.
- Blueprint for Cultural Heritage Organizations: The recommendations will lead to a blueprint for how to provide services to the described populations and considerations for work with other groups.

The project will have the following local, national and international impacts:

- Diaspora Connections for Groups Studied. Connecting the refugee group members to web-based information systems will facilitate communication between ethnic groups and their

roots and also across refugee communities across the country and globally.

- Educational Resources for the Wider Community. Educational institutions will be able to help youth identify with their heritage through teacher resource guides and other materials uncovered in the creation of the blueprint. Undergraduate and graduate students will be asked to engage with the communities as the work on the project goes forward.
- Model Program of Authentic Preservation Practices. A model program of authentic preservation practices designed and driven by refugee community members will aid the design of local digital libraries and exhibits and contribute to UNESCO programs and the Digital Public Library of America (<http://dp.la/>). Its creation will be informed by the cultural heritage preservation profiles created for each refugee group studied.

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