Finding Refuge

The Comforts of Culture in grief, trauma, death and end of life for Refugees resettled in Southern Arizona
Grief finds us in many ways. It enters through our hearts, when we encounter personal loss. For those facing a dire human crisis like forced refugee relocation, grief also tears through our entire being, as physical and mental trauma shatter lives or force us to feel hopeless and alone.

Refugees are victims in a crisis of significant global proportion. They face a form of cultural bereavement in an often painful and difficult relocation process that could include navigating a new healthcare system, or following new social restrictions when burying their dead.

In five years of Continuum fieldwork, the Southwest Folklife Alliance has documented and discussed the multicultural practices of diverse communities in end of life. For this Continuum program, we call upon the Noor Women’s Association of Tucson to help us more deeply explore the many faces of grief that are compounded by a refugee’s trauma.

Caught between the dangers that rip people from homelands, and the feelings of identity loss in a strange new land, refugees seek relief in their traditions as they begin resettlement.

We invite you to join us as we enter what is always a safe and unifying space — the universal comforts of cultural tradition. We acknowledge our differences as we honor the common humanity that binds us, and always heals.

— Dr. Maribel Alvarez
Untitled Poem

I miss my country
I miss my flag
I miss my friends
I miss the mountains
I miss my house
I miss my story
I miss what I was

— written in a Tucson Owl & Panther workshop
by middle school student Walter Hernandez, refugee
from Guatemala, learning English as a third language.

See Resource Listing for Owl & Panther
contact information
Although resettlement statistics are never static, Arizona is reportedly sixth in the U.S. in resettling refugees. Refugees with diverse cultures and traditional ways come here from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Caribbean as well as the Middle East. The Arizona Department of Economic Security estimates that 675 refugees may be approved for resettlement in Tucson/Pima County this year (FFY 2018 Arizona Projected Arrivals, Arizona Department of Economic Security). But reductions are anticipated in response to the “arrival ceiling” now being imposed. Non-profit organizations that contract with the state to serve as resettlement agencies — including Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest, Arizona Immigrant and Refugee Services, and the International Rescue Committee — will see funding cuts because of government restrictions on the dwindling number of refugees being allowed to resettle.

Behind the numbers, real people are affected — particularly those already-resettled refugees awaiting family members still in camps, or new refugees trying to learn a strange language while finding jobs or accessing education and healthcare. The funding cuts also mean less money for a refugee’s food security, affordable housing, job training and family programs.
Migration involves so much “loss of the familiar,” says Dure Nomaan, chairwoman of the Noor Women’s Association of Tucson. “The loss of country experienced by refugees is devastating. But so is grief made complicated when an uprooted family can’t adhere to traditional practice because they don’t have the proper foods, or are unable to perform their comforting rituals, or there is a lack of appreciation in neighborhoods for cultural differences,” says Dure.

The word, Noor, essentially one of the attributes of God in Islam faith, means guiding light, and “Noor’s mission is to offer light in the darkness, to diverse refugees who come to our communities after having experienced such great loss,” Dure explains.

She learned the power of a guiding light from her mother, Dure Shari Raina, who arrived from Pakistan in 1990. “My mother was touched by the Bosnian crisis and the plight of refugees who had been torn from their homeland, or who had family members die as a result of the crisis. So, in 1995, my mother called upon friends* to bring the community together around food for both fundraising and refugee comfort.” (*See Masthead, inside back cover, for the list of Noor Founders.)

“Of course the community gathering involved sharing recipes and cooking together,” Dure continued. “We had a picnic and we raised $100. We used the money raised to help the refugee families — to buy them shoes, to bring them blankets or school supplies for the children.”

Over the years, the neighborly gatherings in kitchens for fundraiser picnics continued, as did refugee family assistance. What began as a small group of volunteers helping refugee neighbors, quickly evolved into a 501(c)3 organization that now has helped thousands of refugee families in their transition, through multi-faceted assistance that gives back 100 percent of monies collected to needy refugees.
“When God wants something good to happen, He makes it happen, no matter what we do,” Dure remembers hearing her mother say.

Visits, including when a Noor volunteer sits with a family to attend a funeral when the refugees were resettled without nearby family to support them, are all part of Noor’s mission of comfort. Dure especially knows the importance of the visits in times of grief, when Noor volunteers pray with refugees in community circles that would have been common back in the refugee homelands.

Over the years, Dure recalls, no matter how many refugees move away because of successful resettlement, families still keep in touch. “We are extended family, especially for elders who have a difficulty because of language barriers,” she notes. “We are lifelong community.” Dure’s son, now a doctor in Phoenix, still travels back to South Tucson, to check in with families he visited years ago with his mother, as a young volunteer.

“They have to find their way through the darkness,” Dure continues. “Migration is a complex process, and Noor wants to help refugees hold on to their cultural identity, even as they work their way to successful resettlement.”

Dure believes there are keys to helping refugees advance positive, new lives in Tucson: “Each of us — whether we are neighbors, or medical providers, or teachers, or Noor volunteers — must foster a feeling of belonging instead of alienation. We may not fully understand all aspects of a culture, but when we share a respectful visit, when we listen and when we cook together, we appreciate each other. When we feel we belong...hardship is lessened.”

Noor hosts its traditional Fall Community Picnic this year on Saturday, November 10, from 12 Noon until 4:00 pm, at the Muslim Community Center of Tucson (MCCT). All are welcome for this refugee fun day, when refugee families cook, sell their goods, and are able to keep 100 percent of their profits from the event. Check the Noor website for additional information: https://www.nooraz.org/
Field Work: Cultural Comfort in Resettlement

Our narrators are two refugee families who followed similar and difficult paths to resettlement in Tucson. Both families warmly welcomed the SFA interviewers as guests to their apartments, and sat attentively as questions were asked. Both families generously shared refreshments with their guests that included a rice stew, home made pistachio cookies, and fruit drink.

**Family Algabry**
Includes husband, 50; wife, 45; son, 12, and daughter, 28. The family’s homeland was Aleppo, Syria. All in the family responded to questions, primarily through a translator. The family fled to camps on the border with Turkey, where they resided several years before resettling in Tucson 13 months ago.

**Family Mohammad**
Includes husband, 40; wife, 40; three sons: 16, 12, 5, and three daughters: 21, 20, 18. The family’s homeland was a farm in Afghanistan, but the family fled to Pakistan for seven years before resettling in Tucson, approximately two years ago. The family conversed with each other throughout the interview, although the 18 year-old daughter responded formally to the SFA interviewer’s questions.
Is being away from your homeland a form of grief for you?

Family Algabry – We were forced to leave our home because of the fighting and the bombs. Our community was destroyed. There were explosions every day on our streets. Our 15 year-old son died in the bombing. *(The family fell silent for a few moments.)* We were without a home and a country, and without our son. There was no time to mourn, we had to leave. There was no turning back. There was nothing left.

We had to wait a long time, and tried to learn a little English. We had been stripped of everything. After all the time and the paperwork, we were able to come to the United States. But, yes, the war and the sadness hang over you. We miss our community and our neighbors, even though the violence was every day. That is hard to forget.

Family Mohammad – We owned farmland outside of Kabul (Raqui), but the Taliban came to take our land. My father did not want to give it to the Taliban, and he tried to stop them. But they took it anyway. They said, ‘give it to us, it is our right.’ We had to leave everything behind. Our neighbors, our property, everything. We were in Pakistan many years. During that time one of our sisters died. My parents say she died because of the wars. We tried to tell my sister that everything was OK, but she said nothing. And she died. *(Not good, not good, the family repeated together.)* But here we are together in Tucson, and the family being together is what brings us happiness.
How did cultural tradition bring you comfort during times of grief in your homeland?

**Family Algabry –** The home was everything. Everyone was born and died in their home, back in Syria. Relatives were always all around us and we took care of each other. When someone died there was always someone to come visit, to bring food. We would gather for a minimum of two weeks to comfort each other. At home we also would slaughter the lamb, and stuff the dough (safiha) with a mixture of spices and ground lamb meat. Here we can’t do that...but we can still prepare similar foods and falafels.

**Family Mohammad –** Death is accepted as an inevitable part of life. It is not a stranger. When someone died, or when someone was ill, it was the responsibility of the community to read the Koran together. The Koran is composed of thirty parts. Each person would take a part. When a member of our community died, we would make donations to do something good for the departed soul. We can still do that here; we can still do things as a family to practice our traditions. But my mother misses her mother and her sisters very much, and this is a sadness because she can not share her traditions with those she loves.

What helps you to find comfort here?

**Family Algabry –** Everything is different! Work, foods, school...but I have community to encourage us, to help us, to bring us new clothes like the dress (abaya) for my daughter when it is needed. I hope we will have community around us to offer us consolations when there
Family Algabry – The mother responds: We worry about everything here — finding work, seeing the doctor and understanding all the papers, but as long as we are together we are happy. I would like to see my two daughters in Turkey again. A good death is to be together with family around us.

The husband responds: Before I die I want to spread good, to thank the people who have helped me, and make sure my children are taken care of. I want to die peacefully and naturally at home with family around me. They will encourage me and remind me about all the good deeds. No bombs. We will be at home together for prayer.

What does the notion of a good death mean to you?

Family Mohammad – Although it is not exactly like the community we had back at home, we can still share with the community who is always good to us. We can attend a festival, like the Nayrooz or Persian festival here in Tucson, even though it is not our festival. To find comfort, we also read the Koran together. And we go to the local shops, where we can find proper ingredients to bake the foods that bring comfort, like halwa, the suji or rice. We can buy our fruits, like the dates.

is a death. We can still do the baking of the ajwa (date) cookies, or the ghraybah with pistachios, sugar and butter — I still have my wood cookie mold that I brought from Syria. I am able to offer my cooking and share it with others. This all helps me to feel part of my community.
Family Mohammad - (Daughter speaks for father) I am not a burden. No one here knows the life we had lived before the Taliban took our home, but I am content here. The life I’ve lived is behind, I have survived, and now I am here with family and am happy.

(Daughter continues after much discussion among the family) My mother wishes to see her family again before she dies. The children - we are not thinking of death, but for us it will be to die in peace with family around us.

How can your needs be better addressed?

Family Algabry – I now have an Arab doctor who is close by and who I can understand better. This is good. This is a different world. I need to go to a class, to understand how things are different. And maybe the same for others, to go to a class, to better understand me.

Family Mohammad – We are grateful, because everyone is good to us. We would like to be able to go see a dentist as we get older. Respect for each other and our ways will always be most important. We all need to share respect -- whether that be when we visit the doctor, or when we attend school.
For the Syrian, Afghani and Somalian refugee cooks who prepared the Continuum dinner shared in June 2018, food is a memory and a vehicle to stay connected to community. Cooking is a gesture of friendship in times of happiness or sadness.

Meals served during mourning are an important part of the ritual in observance of death, in all cultures. Baked in large quantities, food is brought to the grieving home as a symbol of togetherness. Each culture may have its special delicacy but, in general, a mourning meal for refugee families usually includes a flavored meat and rice dish, a vegetarian dish, and a sweet dessert to take away the bitterness of death.

Al Kabsa is a fragrant traditional chicken dish, symbolic of the dishes served by many Tucson refugees during local gatherings to mourn a death.

Our refugee cooks encourage us to try their recipe. They say it will be hard not to enjoy their food, full of love like in the old days!
Noor’s Chicken Kabsa

Ingredients:
- 4 cups rice
- cut up chicken
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 tsp all spices - coriander, Aleppo pepper, fennel, dried lime, cumin
- 1 small chopped onion
- 1 chopped tomato
- 4 Lowra (bay) laurel leaves
- 1 tsp ground hal or hay in somali — spice (fragrant like ginger)
- 1 tsp korkom (a fragrant form of turmeric)
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 4 hale seeds
- 1/2 cup oil
- mixed nuts for garnishing

Preparation:
Brown the onion lightly in oil, add tomato, lowra leaves, all spices, salt, and leave to cook for 10 minutes, then add enough water to boil the chicken.

When cooking is complete, remove chicken from soup and place in a baking dish in oven to brown.

Add the rice to the soup of the boiled chicken till cooked (15 minutes)

Brown the nuts.

Serve the rice in a serving platter add the chicken on top and garnish with nuts.
Resources

Arizona Department of Economic Security

IRC Tucson
https://www.rescue.org/united-states/tucson-az
(520) 319-2128

Iskashitaa Refugee Network
http://www.iskashitaa.org/
(520) 440-0100

Noor Women’s Association of Tucson
https://www.nooraz.org/contact-us/
(520) 327-0449

Owl & Panther
https://www.owlandpanther.org/
(520) 222-7042

Arizona Welcomes Refugees
(closed Facebook page. Must request invite to join)
https://www.facebook.com/groups/1498283150502014/
Resettlement Agencies

Catholic Community Services of Tucson
https://www.catholiccharitiesaz.org/all-locations/refugee-resettlement
(520) 670-0821

Lutheran Social Services of Tucson
http://www.lss-sw.org/refugeeservices/
(520) 623-2106

Arizona Immigrant and Refugee Services
http://airsaz.org/
What cultural or shared practices bring you comfort in times of grief? Write below any thoughts, expressions or ideas.
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