

SOULFOOD: THE ROLES OF FOOD, FAITH, FAMILY AND ARTS IN SELF AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Philippa Keaney

In late 2012, Toitū Otago Settlers Museum will reopen to the public. A component of the reopening exhibition is a project called "OurVoices," which presents audiovisual 'snapshots' of migrants' experiences of arriving and settling in Otago. This project follows a general international trend which has shown a shift by museums towards increasingly representative and reflective exhibition spaces. Like a recent series of cross-cultural community projects initiated in Cairns,¹ "OurVoices" moves away from a dominant focus on Anglo-Celtic settlers and opens the space for multicultural settlement stories.

For three months, I have been speaking with a diverse range of migrants who, although they hail from very different points of origin, share certain commonalities. They have all left family and friends behind, some of them with the knowledge that they may never see them again. They have all developed new friendships and received support, often from unexpected quarters. They have also experienced differing intensities of loss and alienation. This article explores the ways in which family, faith, food practices and traditional art and craft recur frequently in the conversations shared with migrants to Dunedin, highlighting the importance of these in maintaining self and community identity. These practices and ways of being help mitigate loss and alienation and provide the strength for individuals to sustain themselves while experiencing what it is to be considered an 'outsider' – different because of language, accent, clothing, culture or religion. As the stories recounted below demonstrate, these values also have the potential to break down arbitrary, culturally defined borders and challenge assumptions about difference. They afford a space in which it is possible for both migrants and non-migrants to engage in new ways of nourishing self and the wider community. They suggest that there are more ways than we have yet imagined to work collaboratively, to create and to celebrate our increasing diversity.

As New Zealand television programming reflects, we are increasingly captivated by food preparation as entertainment. Food programmes from the United Kingdom, Australia, USA and New Zealand often constrain the preparation of food to a competitive art form. Rather than a collaborative and generous approach to food, these programmes discourage working together. They pit individuals against each other and culminate in translating the act of eating prepared food into an act of judgment. This focus on individuality and competition is not limited to the search for the 'best' cook or chef, but also permeates shared experiences of food, such as dinner parties at which guests criticise the host's personality, food, décor and hospitality. While these attitudes are not representative of entire populations, they indicate a substantive shift towards the increased commodification of food and its preparation, with the nominated winners spawning ranges of merchandise and re-entering the entertainment cycle as judges of the next series. In contrast, the stories that migrant people share about food celebrate community and collaborative endeavours. For the Lebanese community in Dunedin, food was, and still is, an integral part of family life. The preparation of Lebanese ingredients and food is labour intensive. This allows space for social and familial closeness and support; hours in which stories can be shared, gossip told, jokes enjoyed, support and advice given. The eating of food is a meaningful and social space where families gather together and friends and guests are welcome, further strengthening community. Like Ngāi Tahu's concept of manaakitanga, hospitality is inherently extended without question to newcomers and extended family alike.

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While the passage of time and new geographic and cultural locations may change traditions to some extent, it is possible that the real value of food lies within the collaborative approach to its preparation and its shared consumption – the process rather than the outcome. For example, today when there is a Tongan community celebration in Dunedin, it is far more likely that the men will just buy a pig, rather than going out to hunt for one. Similarly, the spit-roast equipment is usually hired, not built. Yet the men will still get up as dawn tinges the sky and gather around the roasting pig for the duration of cooking time because it is the act of *being together* that is significant. Watching the pig cook might have replaced hunting for it, but it still creates an opportunity for men to assemble together to share news, ideas and support. Women and children will be preparing other foods or undertaking other food-related tasks during this time, also enjoying each other's company. The shared meal at the end of preparation cements the social interactions of the day and brings the whole community together.

This adaptability around food procurement and preparation is one of the ways in which borders can be crossed. A Cook Island couple relate how difficult they found being in Dunedin initially, because they were unaccustomed to food preparation and eating being an individual experience.² The husband was working at a local steel foundry at the time and, after some observation, realised that the giant slabs of steel that came out of the foundry would provide a perfect hotplate – once they had cooled from red-hot – to cook crayfish on. To the amazement of his colleagues, he acquired a sack of crayfish and proceeded to cook and share the crayfish during the lunch hour. Although some workers ridiculed him initially, they soon became addicted to what became a regularly shared meal, enjoying a traditional Cook Island food cooked in a novel way for a diverse 'community'.

Local artist Simon Kaan recently mentioned how his "Kai Hau Kai" project afforded an opportunity to reconnect with Ngāi Tahu whānui and had the potential to allow or trigger memories that are currently unknown.³ This is an interesting point because much of the practical wisdom that we no longer have access to is related to food practices. Another Cook Island woman remembers that her grandfather always knew when and where to fish through tuning into signs evident in the physical landscape, his own body and the shifting patterns of life on the island. Similarly, her grandmother could accurately forecast the type of banana yield for the approaching season through 'reading' the rhythms and timing of fecundity or scarcity in other plant-life.⁴ Other migrants share similar stories. A Ukrainian woman shared her knowledge of plant and herbal remedies for common childhood and adult ailments, pain relief and fever control. In a country where drugs are not readily available over the counter, this earlier practical knowledge has maintained a foothold well into the twenty-first century.⁵ There is potential here, not just for information sharing, but for taking journeys together; to reinvigorate our own personal knowledge and to intersect with other cultural knowledge. For some time, we have been aware that in order to care for our increasingly agitated planet, we need to reconnect with some of the practices and knowledge of the past. Cross-border conversations and collaboration allow us the space to do that – to forge new paths into the future while drawing on the wisdom of the past.

Traditional arts and crafts also open up spaces for migrants to gain nourishment from traditional enterprise as well as affording a space of adaptation in which to explore or reflect on their new home. Like food, many traditional forms of art and craft are labour-intensive, collaborative enterprises. The *tivaevae* quilts of the Cook Islands are traditionally worked on by several women at once, each woman being assigned a particular role suited to her strengths, such as designing, cutting, preparing the underside of the cover or sewing.⁶ The finished product is an opportunity for the many contributors to get together and celebrate their work and to start thinking about the next project. These works are not produced for individual benefit, but are gifted to family members on significant

occasions, including marriage. Like food, this art form continues a tradition of giving. One Cook Island woman recounts how she didn't really enjoy learning the skills of tivaevae manu at 14, when her Nana started teaching her. Now, though, she says, "no money can pay for what you make from your own hands," and she is proud that she can perpetuate the knowledge and skills of her forebears by teaching her own children.⁷ In everyday Dunedin life, finding the time for six or more women to get together to work on a tivaevae is almost impossible. One way this woman adapted is by designing a method of tie-dyeing the tivaevae in the manu style. This process means that she can make a finished product in one day. Adaptation is also reflected in her changing designs which weave together traditional Cook Island motifs with local imagery, such as incorporating a koru into the design of a tivaevae manu made for her daughter-in-law, who is tangata whenua.



Figure 1. Detail from traditional stitched tivaevae manu.



Figure 2. Detail from tie-dyed tivaevae manu.

Traditional Lebanese embroidery, with its incredibly fine thread and intricate patterns, has been a shared occupation of Lebanese women for centuries. The finished products are intended as significant gifts: christening garments, tablecloths as wedding presents or items for trousseau, lace for wedding gowns and trains. Although this time-consuming industry has waned over the years, there are always some who are willing to share their knowledge and skills, not only within their own community but beyond. A few years ago, a group of Cook Island women worked with a group of Samoan women, teaching them the art of tivaevae. The finished products were displayed in an exhibition at Burns Hall, First Church. One of the Cook Island instructors noted that the work of the Samoan women was "amazing and beautiful" and brought something different to the form.⁸ A Korean woman teaches traditional paper-cutting and paper-folding craft to children and adults through education programmes and night classes, piquing an interest in a form that lends itself exceptionally well to interpretation and adaptation. At the same time, she uses the opportunity to constantly improve her English skills by immersing herself in an environment in which she is more at her ease, working with something she is skilled with and passionate about.⁹ While these stories have been relayed predominantly by women, one of the ways in which cultural traditions are evolving is that there is increasing interest and participation in art and craft forms by men, even as the division of labour in food practices is becoming more fluid and less strictly gender-discrete.

Faith and family are two other important cohesive factors in self and community identity, and they are closely intertwined. A distinction needs to be made here between faith and religion. One of the observations that frequently recurred during my discussions with migrants was that they were drawn to, and supported by, people of faith even though their religions may have been different. For example, a Lebanese woman fondly recalled her best friend as a teenager, a young Tongan woman.¹⁰ She explained that even though they attended different churches, her friend just 'got it.' She had the same fundamental appreciation of the importance of faith within family and communal life. There was a tacit understanding that faith and family came first. Contrary to the individualism inherent in the modern Western tradition, these young women took their obligations within the family sphere seriously.



Figure 3. Detail from Lebanese hand-stitched linen cloth, late 19th century. Note similarities of form with Cook Island *tivaevae manu*.



Figure 4. Detail from Cook Island *tevaevae manu*.



Figure 5. Lebanese embroidered man's velvet pouch, c. 1850.



Figure 6. Intricate hand-stitched Lebanese lace work. Detail from sleeve of laying out garment.

The daughter of a migrant from Lebanon recounts an incident in her father's life.¹¹ In Lebanon, during the First World War, her father who was then just eight years old was escaping from institutionalised life after being orphaned. Sick and exhausted, he took shelter in a cow barn which belonged to a Muslim family. The family nursed the boy to health and cared for him as a son for eight years, all the while encouraging him to continue practising his Christian tradition, appreciating its importance to his identity. Stories of such kindness are too numerous to recount here. However, what is crucial from cross-border conversations, is that a basic tenet of their faith is behaving ethically and accepting responsibility to contribute to the well-being of others. Faith, whether or not we subscribe to a particular religion, is what prompts us to nourish the well-being of others, even though it may require effort and sacrifice for ourselves.

The importance of family recurs repeatedly in conversations with migrants. Many have chosen to relocate here because of the possibility of a better life for their families. Concomitantly, these same individuals may be separated from their wider family network through this choice. It comes as no great surprise that often other family members will follow, if it is at all possible. Conversations about family are often shadowed by sadness. Even those who have brought young families here, settled and made lives that reflect their success, are often tearful when they consider those they have left behind. As one Malaysian Chinese man put it, you are always left with an 'imprint,' a pull towards the familiar that is linked to the preverbal experiences of childhood.¹² Several older migrants from various places commented that this 'pull' becomes stronger as they age. Those migrants who are fortunate enough to have wider family networks here value them enormously. A Chinese woman who comes from a family who settled in Otago generations ago says that family is one of the most important things.¹³ She knows all of her cousins and all of their children and makes a point of keeping the wider family together. Many Egyptian parents and grandparents will accompany their university-aged children to Dunedin to set up homes and make sure they are well cared for so that the young people can concentrate on their study and still experience the close support of their families.

Perhaps one of the challenges that we face as we become increasingly culturally diverse is how we can fill the gaps that are left by an absence of family networks. In part, cultural groups and societies help to alleviate loss of family through organising events and celebrations. Multiple initiatives within Dunedin's Pacific Island communities aim to provide cross-generational support in areas such as health, social activities, dance and music, craft and education. The Otago Southland Chinese Association is similarly active in providing support for the local established community and in seeking ways to engage with the newer wave of Chinese migrants. Organised church and community groups provide a range of supports and services for migrants. Many migrant families settle and bring their children up in Dunedin only to see them leave for greater professional opportunities, adventure or love elsewhere. Parents and grandparents left behind in this way are often disconnected from the community supports that are available, having been focused for a period of years on their own family.

Like practices around food, there is potential for us to engage – not only cross-culturally but cross-generationally – in dialogue about how we can draw together and satisfy the hunger for family connection that is increasingly evident among the entire population of Dunedin. The past decade has seen an increase in the number of artists who have emerged from migrant backgrounds exploring ideas about what it is to be at 'home,' with oneself, one's family and one's community. It is vital that their works, along with collaborative cross-cultural projects, are given public space because it is through such interrogations of ourselves and our place that we can perceive the placement of borders and reach beyond to the shared experience of humanity.

Listening to the stories of people who have invested energy, time, money, body and soul into relocating to another place in the world is a humbling experience. I have seen groups of elderly women transform before my eyes into giggling, sparkling teenagers as they are infused with the joy of shared memories. I have shared tears and laughter. I have experienced genuine hospitality and openness. These are gifts that I will treasure a long time after "Our Voices" finds its way into its designated exhibition spaces. But, what I'm really left with is the question: where to from here? As this reflection has shown, food, faith, family and arts may provide a platform from which we can begin to explore the potential for greater connectivity and collaboration across cultures and communities. New ways of seeing and working together will create new lifescapes and artscapes for all of us. These will draw on multiple forms of knowledge and act as a restorative to the soul, a reinvigoration of our potential as human beings to coexist peacefully and creatively with each other and with our environment.

Philippa Keaney is a writer, facilitator, sometime teacher and eternal student. Her studies in political science and gender have augmented her passion for working to promote equitable access to the things that make a fulfilling life possible. She is increasingly drawn to stories from the past as a way of making sense of the present and of reinterpreting our responsibilities as human beings sharing a planet. She is currently completing a short-term contract with Toitū Otago Settlers Museum to produce the audiovisual "OurVoices" project.

- 1 Maria Wronska-Friend, "'Why Haven't We Been Taught All That At School?' Crosscultural Community Projects in North Queensland, Australia," *Curator*, 55:1 (2012), 4-19.
- 2 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 21 March 2012.
- 3 Simon Kaan, pers. comm., June 2012. Plus full reference to Kai Hau Kai online.
- 4 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 20 June 2012.
- 5 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 13 June 2012.
- 6 L Rongokea, *Tivaevae: Portraits of Cook Island Quilting* (Wellington: Daphne Brasell Associates, 1992).
- 7 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 15 May 2012.
- 8 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 29 May 2012.
- 9 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 9 May 2012.
- 10 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 14 May 2012.
- 11 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 16 April 2012.
- 12 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 8 July 2012.
- 13 Anonymous, interview by author; Dunedin, 11 June 2012.