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Independent Study Projects

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Healing Across Cultures.

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INTRODUCTION

“Healing Across Cultures” is a series of artwork illustrating the healing traditions and beliefs of various cultures from around the world. The purpose of this project is to promote cross cultural understanding and appreciation through art.

Humans, being susceptible to diseases, have relied on some form of medicine ever since ancient times. The role of a healer was pivotal to many, if not all, cultures. Healers were known as shamans, apothecaries, and many other names, but they all served similar function within their respective societies. Patients sought their help and guidance against both physical and mental ailments. The knowledge and practices concerning cause and cure of diseases have constantly evolved with time, but nature and spirituality have played a role in both for many cultures throughout history. The implementation of evidence based medicine and the advancement of technology over the past centuries has transformed the practice of medicine. However, since these changes occurred relatively recently, many traditional beliefs and practices still influence individuals within our society today. For instance, certain therapies of traditional medicine are based on the belief that hot-cold imbalances make a person susceptible to disease, and the use of food to treat and prevent illnesses by correcting the hot-cold imbalances is still practiced by many Asians and Latinos today.

It is important for healthcare providers to understand how a patient’s culture can influence his perception of health and disease to ensure better communication and provide effective medical care. Since I have been living in San Diego for the past five years, I wanted to focus on the cultures found in the county. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in 2011, the United States admitted the highest number of refugees (51,500 among all countries), and the majority of refugees resettled in Texas (10%) and California (9%). Of all counties in California, San Diego County had the highest number of admissions. Of the refugees that resettled in California, the majority originated from Iran, Iraq, Burma, and Somali (Figure 1).

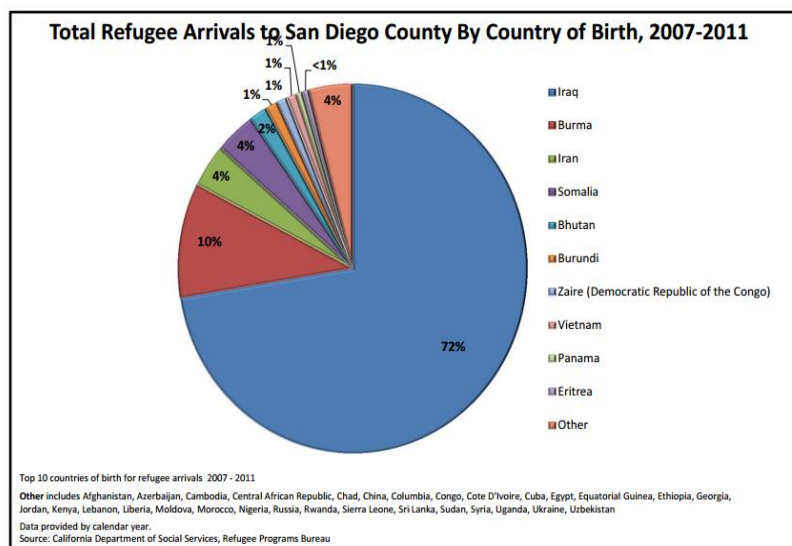


Figure 1. Total Refugee Arrivals to San Diego County by Country of Birth, 2007-2011

There were many sources of inspiration that resulted in these paintings –patients, scientific literature, physicians, fellow medical students, and also members of the San Diego community. Please find below descriptions of the healing beliefs/practice, the painting, and also the inspiration behind each piece. I hope you will enjoy my artwork and find them inspirational and enlightening.

ARTWORK

Steaming

The postpartum period is an important time for recovery in the Cambodian culture along with many Southeast Asian cultures. Pregnancy is seen as a “hot” state. After labor and delivery, the heat is lost and the mother is in a “cold” state. Many cultures believe 10-45 days of confinement is necessary to restore the mother’s health. Steaming and roasting are two common traditional postpartum practices. During roasting, the mother lies above a bed of burning coals. Roasting is done to heat up the body, restore the mother’s energy, and strengthen the whole body. For steaming, a mixture of herbs is boiled in a pot, and the steam is released by lifting the lid off the pot. Steaming causes perspiration, which is believed to remove impurities. Other therapeutic activities practiced during the confinement period include staying inside, eating “hot” food and avoiding “cold” food.

Painting



In the painting, the blue represents the “cold” state that mothers are in after pregnancy. On the right hand side, steam from boiling a mixture of herbs is released.

Inspiration

I first became aware of the confinement period recently because my sister is currently pregnant. My parents usually do not practice any Chinese traditions, but the importance of the confinement period to restore the health and energy of the mother was something my mom firmly believed in. She is actually flying in from Asia to help my sister out for the month after her baby is born, and there are certain food that she wants my sister to eat during this time. As a result, I started researching postpartum practices in Southeast Asia countries, and that is how I came across steaming/roasting during the postpartum period.

Khwan

The belief in spirits is a very important part of Lao culture. Spirits are believed by many Laotians to play an important role in health and disease. Khwan is a term to describe the inner spirits within an individual. There are a total of thirty-two spirits that protect the body, and illness occurs when one or more of these spirits leaves the body. The spirits leave the body when it is frightened, sick, or when the mind is in a disturbed state. The spirits can be called back into the body with sukhwan basi, a ceremony where cotton strings are tied around the wrists of the participants to bind the spirits in place. This ceremony is performed on important occasions such as pregnancy, marriage, and childbirth.

Painting



The man in the painting is ill and he is surrounded by his khwan, which is on their way to leaving him.

Inspiration

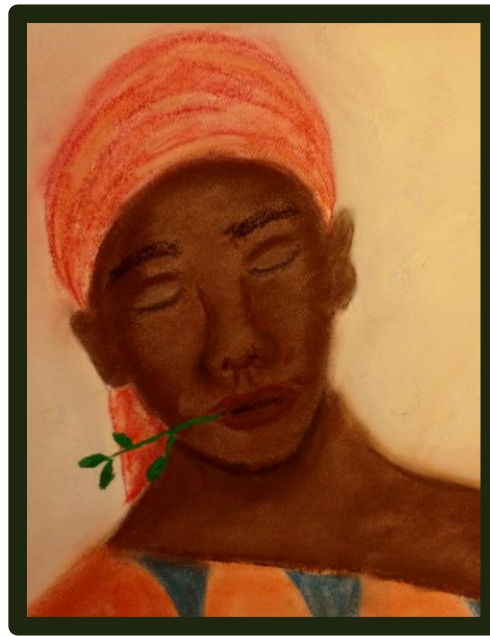
I selected the Laotian culture because I wanted to learn more about it. I have a very close friend who is Laotian, and I asked her about interesting healing traditions practiced in her home country. She told me the importance of spirits in her culture and their role in health and disease, so I proceeded to learn more about khwan.

Khat

Khat (also known as Abyssinian tea, African salad, Catha, chat, kat, and oat) is a 1-3 meter tall flowering shrub native to East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Dried khat can be made into tea or a chewable paste, it can be smoked, or it can be sprinkled on food. Most commonly, users chew the leaf to release active ingredients (cathine and cathinone) that produce a stimulant effect.

Khat chewing is a common, accepted practice in many African countries, but khat is illegal in the US. In the last few years, San Diego has seen an almost eight-fold increase in khat seizures due to the growing Somali population in the city. Nearly 6,000 pounds were seized in San Diego County in 2007. Khat is also used as a traditional medicine for depression, fatigue, and gastric ulcers, but its effectiveness to treat these conditions has never been demonstrated. Side effects include increased blood pressure, increased heart rate, insomnia, grandiose delusions, hallucinations, and hyperactivity.

Painting



Somali woman chewing khat to alleviate her fatigue.

Inspiration

I selected Somalia because there is a large Somalian refugee population in the United States. Since 1994, more than 46,000 Somali refugees have resettled in the United States, and San Diego is the city with the second largest concentration of Somalians, behind Minneapolis.

Stigma, Sickness, Silence

Iraqi refugees arrive to the United States with high rates of physical and mental trauma. The majority of them have experienced some sort of violence. 77% reported being affected by air bombardments and shelling or rocket attacks; 80% reported witnessing a shooting; 72% had seen a car bombing; and 75% had someone close to them who had been killed or murdered. In addition, many continue to worry about the safety and wellbeing of the loved ones they left behind in Iraq. It is not surprising that 89.5% of Iraqi refugees are suffering from depression, 81.6% from anxiety, and 67.6% from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Despite the high rates of mental illness, there is a strong stigma associated with mental illness among and a general belief that it is incurable.

Painting



The Iraqi pictured in the middle is suffering from depression and is suffering in silence, symbolized by the hand covering the mouth. The images around in the periphery represent stressors and trauma this individual has experienced/witnessed: air bombardment, loss of home, death of loved ones, and violence.

Inspiration

Before the political unrest in Iraq, Iraq's health care system was one of the highest functioning in the Arab Middle East. Unlike many other countries with large refugee populations, Iraqis believe and trust Western medicine. However, there is a strong stigma associated with mental illness even though it is very common found in Iraqi refugees given the physical and emotional trauma they experience prior to their emigration to the US. I selected this topic because I believe this is very important for healthcare practitioners to be aware of both the high rates of mental illness among Iraqi refugees and the stigma associated with the disease.

Kun-ya

Areca nut chewing is a common custom in Burma dating back to thousands of years. It results in bright red-stained teeth and lips. Areca nut contains alkaloids, including arecoline, which are believed to have stimulatory and toxic effect in humans. Ripe nuts have a higher concentration of arecoline. To make a betel quid (kun-ya), slaked lime (calcium hydroxide), a white powder that forms when calcium is mixed with or “slaked” with water, is wrapped with the areca nut in a betel vine leaf. The slaked lime acts as a catalyst to enhance the stimulatory effects of the areca nut. Areca nut chewing can lead to health problems such as oral cancer and dental problems. More recently, areca nut has been shown to have adverse effects on the newborn and pregnancy outcomes.

Painting



The main ingredients needed to make a quid: areca nut, slaked lime, and betel vine leaf. Other substances are often added to the betel quid, such as tobacco, cardamom, saffron, cloves, aniseed, turmeric, or mustard (pictured).

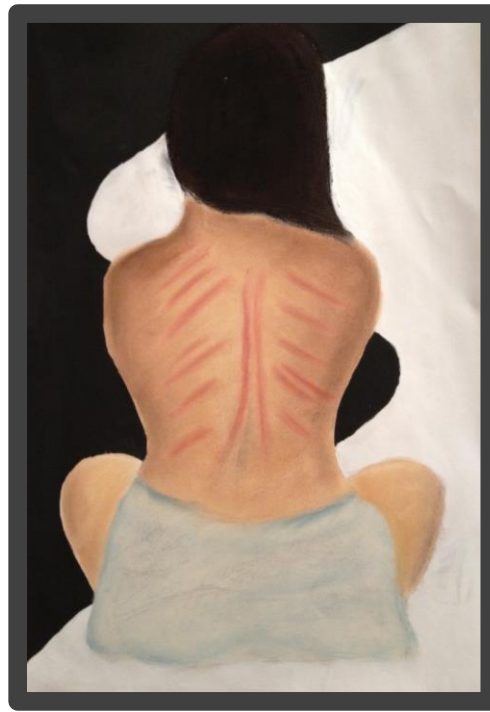
Inspiration

I had the opportunity to meet a family of 6 individuals from Burma when I spent time at the San Diego County Department of Refugee Services. In the two elderly brothers of that family, we noted red stains on the teeth as a result of areca nut chewing. The physician that I was with told me that this is commonly seen in refugees from Burma. Although it is a common practice, many people are not aware of the health risks associated with areca nut chewing.

Cao gio

Cao gio (also known as coining and coin rubbing) is a dermabrasive therapy that is practiced by the Vietnamese and other ethnic groups from Southeast Asia to treat minor ailments. In traditional Vietnamese culture, health reflects a balance of two basic elements in the body: Am and Duong. Illnesses occur when there is an imbalance of Am and Duong in the body. The traditional health practice of cao gio is believed to release excess "wind" or energy and help restore balance. In cao gio, the skin is first lubricated with medical oils or balms such as tiger balm or liquid herbal medicines that contain camphor, methanol, eucalyptus oil, or other similar oils. The edge of the coin is then rubbed firmly against the skin to produce ecchymoses. The bruising is usually found on the back or chest but may also be seen on the arms, legs, or abdomen. It is important for healthcare providers to be aware of this traditional practice because the red marks can be confused for the physical findings of abuse. The most common complications associated with this procedure are minor burns from the use of heated oil.

Painting



The characteristic Christmas tree-like pattern produced by coin rubbing with two long vertical marks along the spine and several horizontal parallel lines on each side. The black and white background represents Am and Duong; the balance of these two elements is important for health in the Vietnamese culture.

Inspiration

I chose this traditional healing method because it is commonly practiced by many Asian cultures.

REFLECTION

This project was inspired by my love for art, my appreciation for diversity, and my interest in international medicine. For me to be able to practice medicine in different parts of the world and effectively deal with people from various backgrounds, it is important that I become culturally competent. I strongly believe that cultural awareness makes a better doctor. This project is a small step towards broadening the cultural knowledge of both myself and my viewers.

This project allowed me to gain a better understanding of various cultures and to translate and share what I have learned into art. However, given the limited amount of time I have, I was only able to touch the surface of understanding a culture, but I hope my artwork will help my viewers recognize that we live in a culturally diverse society and that people have different social and cultural factors that influence their attitudes and outlooks on their health.

I really enjoyed working on this project not only because I learned so much from it, but also because it gave me the opportunity to talk to people in the community and my friends and family about their culture and the traditional healing methods practiced within their culture. In addition, this project showed me that there is still so much for me to learn about cultural awareness, and that is something I intend to work on throughout my career.

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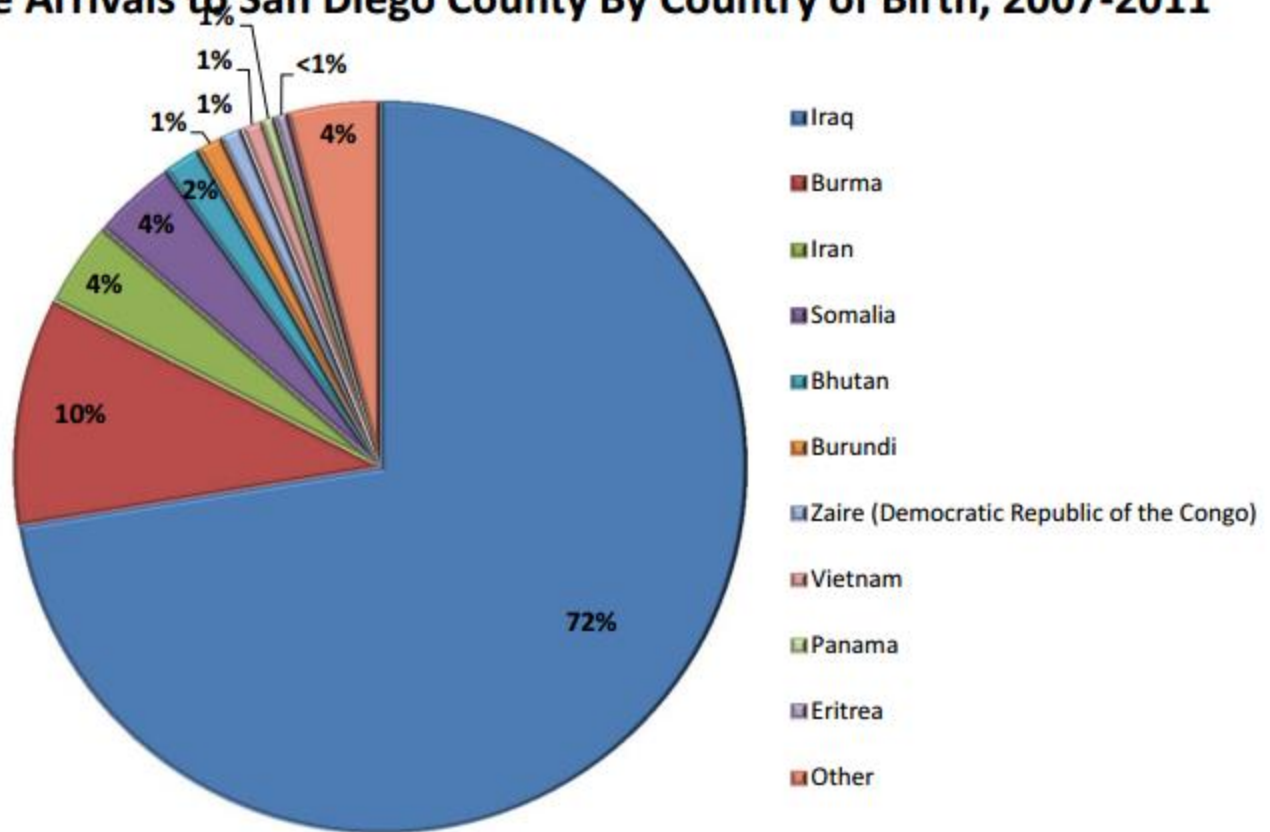
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Healing Across Cultures

Janet Lee, MS IV

Total Refugee Arrivals to San Diego County By Country of Birth, 2007-2011



Top 10 countries of birth for refugee arrivals 2007 - 2011

Other includes Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, China, Columbia, Congo, Cote D'Ivoire, Cuba, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Georgia, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Moldova, Morocco, Nigeria, Russia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan

Data provided by calendar year.

Source: California Department of Social Services, Refugee Programs Bureau

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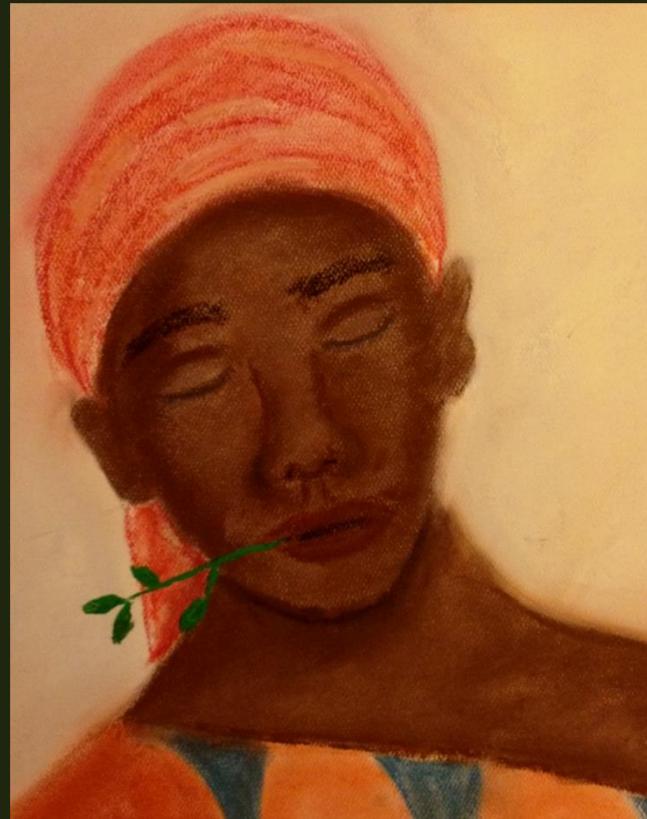
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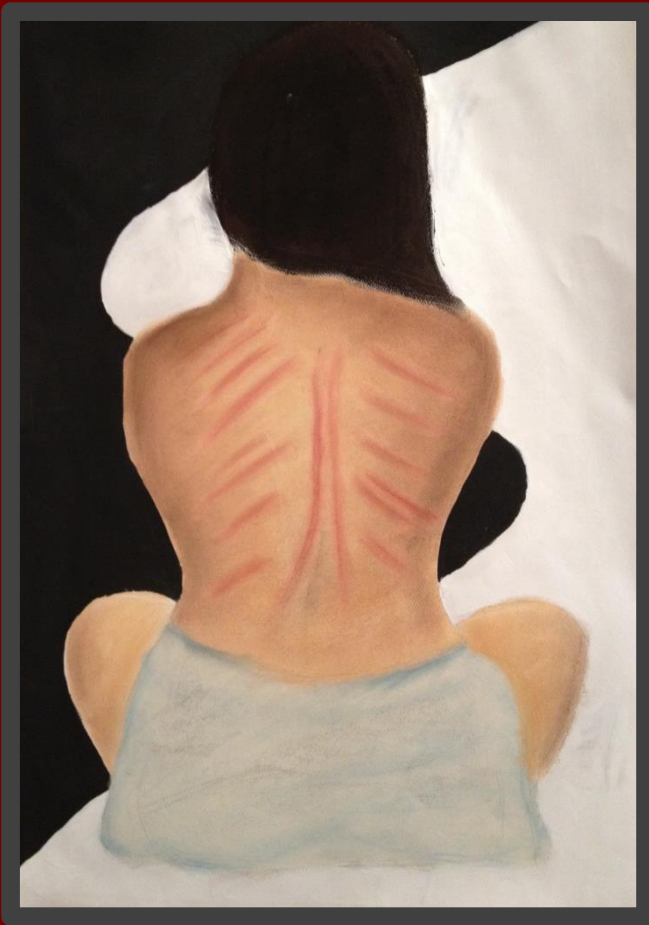
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