



Cambodian Genocide: Recipes for Survival

Time: 60 - 120 Minutes (the lesson that follows is designed for use in either a 60- or 90-minute class; see “Supplemental Resources” at the end of the lesson for suggestions on how to expand)

Audience: 9 - 12th Grade. May be adapted for 8th Grade.

Student Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to...

- Identify how food and its preparation help preserve historical, cultural, community, and social identity.
- Explore Cambodian culture through its culinary traditions.
- Understand how preserving traditional recipes and ingredients can serve as a form of resistance to genocide and cultural erasure.
- Recognize the challenges refugees and genocide survivors face in preserving their cultural identity, especially through food.

Aligned Standards (California Common Core)

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2, Identify and evaluate key ideas in historical documents and analyze their development.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6, Analyze authors’ points of view in historical texts, focusing on rhetoric and evidence.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6, Evaluate authors’ perspectives in historical texts and how style and content reflect bias.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.2/WHST.11-12.2, Write informative texts that clearly convey complex historical, scientific, or technical ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.4/WHST.11-12.4, Produce clear and coherent writing appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9 / WHST.11-12.9, Use evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1, Initiate and participate in collaborative discussions, building on others’ ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 / SL.11-12.4, Present information clearly, using appropriate organization and evidence for the audience.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2, Determine central ideas in historical texts and summarize them without personal bias.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1, Engage effectively in group discussions, expressing ideas clearly and responding to others.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2, Write informative/explanatory texts that examine topics and convey ideas clearly.

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Context: This lesson plan is inspired by Chantha Nguon's dynamic memoir *Slow Noodles: A Cambodian Memoir of Love, Loss and Family Recipes*. *Slow Noodles* incorporates recipes to help communicate her experiences of survival, loss, despair, hope, and perseverance. In this way she adds flavor to her story and in so doing fosters creative ways for readers and learners to think about the impacts of genocide, life as a refugee, how gender informs one's experiences, family dynamics, and the legacy of trauma as represented by food and its preparation. This lesson plan uses her recipes and excerpts from *Slow Noodles* to show students how food can be a form of resistance to the attempts of genocide perpetrators to destroy a victim's life, culture, and identity. Chantha says it best, "[I]f Pol Pot had erased our culinary past...I was determined to remember."¹

She begins by describing her peaceful childhood in Battambang, Cambodia, as the youngest child in a prosperous family. During the Civil War (1970-1975) that took place in the leadup to the Cambodian Genocide (1975-1978), she and her family fled to neighboring Vietnam where she lived as a refugee for the next fourteen years, primarily in Saigon (modern day Ho Chi Minh City). After spending an additional four years in a refugee camp in Thailand, a total of twenty years outside of Cambodia, Nguon repatriated to a Cambodia she hardly recognized.

The title *Slow Noodles* refers to a lesson her mother Mae taught Chantha before her sudden death of stomach cancer in Saigon, which ultimately left Chantha alone and having to fend for herself. Before her death, Mae had instilled in Chantha a love for food and its preparation. While others would use pre-made package bought instant noodles in their cooking, her mother preferred to make her own "slow noodles." This became a metaphor for life in their family: don't take shortcuts and take your time to make something great. In the years after Mae's passing, Chantha expressed frustration and anger towards her mother for not making her tougher or stronger. The "slow noodle" philosophy Mae imparted to Chantha felt of little use as she struggled to survive alone in Vietnam. To communicate the frustration she felt, she includes the following recipe:

How to Change Cloth into Diamond Ingredients:

*1 pampered little girl
2 communist revolutions
2 civil wars 1 genocide*

Take a well-fed nine-year-old with a big family and a fancy French-Catholic-school education. Fold in 2 revolutions, 2 civil wars, and 1 wholesale extermination. Separate her from home, country, and a reliable source of food. Slowly subtract small luxuries, life savings, and family members, until all are gone. Shave down childhood dreams for approximately two decades, until only subsistence remains.

Nguon, Chantha. *Slow Noodles: A Cambodian Memoir of Love, Loss, and Family Recipes* (pp. 148-149). Kindle Edition.

¹ Nguon, Chantha. *Slow Noodles: A Cambodian Memoir of Love, Loss, and Family Recipes* (p. 256). (Function). Kindle Edition.

When Chantha says “only subsistence remains,” she is expressing that nothing about her upbringing prepared her for the struggle to survive as a refugee and genocide survivor. During this period of her life, a “slow noodle” approach could not feed or sustain her.

After the genocide, eventually Chantha makes her way back to Cambodia. The journey was not easy. But she comes to realize that while her mother did not (and perhaps could not) prepare her for the difficult life she ultimately led, her mother did impart essential wisdom about how to survive.

For so long, I was consumed by the idea that Mae had failed to toughen me for the world outside her kitchen. In my twenty-fourth year, when I was newly alone (and dreaming of a sack of rice), I needed an Instant Noodles strength—a thief’s ingenuity that would feed me right away. Instead, my mother gave me a Slow Noodles recipe, with ingredients that would need years to simmer and meld. Little-girl heaven tempered with Buffalo Girl luck. A healer’s hands and a puppy’s nose. A silken rebel’s patient resistance, behind a mask of diplomacy. A toolkit for transforming something rotten into deliciousness—lemongrass fish. A decades-long recipe for cooking pain into strength.

Nguon, Chantha. *Slow Noodles: A Cambodian Memoir of Love, Loss, and Family Recipes* (p. 266). Kindle Edition.

Chantha now resides in Cambodia and is practicing the “slow noodle” approach to repairing the broken society that the Khmer Rouge perpetrators left behind.

Post-genocide Cambodia was a shadow of itself. In less than four years the Khmer Rouge had murdered up to 3 million persons, or about 30 percent of the entire population. Given the Regime’s determination to destroy all alleged intellectuals during the killing, only a handful of doctors, teachers, veterinarians, nurses, lawyers, and business professionals remained to help rebuild crucial industries. Chantha is doing her part to help repair her home. She is the co-founder of Mekon Blue and Strung Treng Women’s Development Center (SWDC), a social enterprise that offers a living wage, education, and social services to women and their families in rural northeastern Cambodia.

Glossary:

“Boat People”: The term “boat people” typically refers to refugees or migrants who flee their home countries by boat, often in search of safety or better opportunities. The term gained significant prominence during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly referring to people escaping Vietnam after the war. Many Vietnamese refugees, along with others from Southeast Asia, took perilous journeys by boat to reach neighboring countries or further destinations, sometimes facing dangerous conditions and abuse. Over time, the term has been used more broadly to describe people who make similar journeys by sea, often fleeing conflict, political persecution, or economic hardship.²

Bobor: Bobor is a traditional Cambodian rice porridge, typically made by simmering rice in water or broth until it becomes soft and mushy. It’s commonly eaten as a comfort food, especially for breakfast or when someone is feeling unwell. The dish can be savory or sweet, depending on the preparation and ingredients.

² Throughout the 1980s, some 900,000 Vietnamese “boat people” were resettled, but Cambodian genocide refugees did not get that same level of international support. Instead, only 10 percent of Cambodian genocide refugees were given refugee status. The majority of refugees were put in camps under control of Cambodian Armies, including Khmer Rouge army members (Becker, *When the War was Over*, 448-49).

Civil War: From 1970 to 1975 Cambodia was mired in a bloody civil war between two warring factions representing two ideologies. On one side was the Khmer Rouge, a communist regime backed by the Soviet Union and China. On the other side was the Khmer Republic, led by Lon Nol and backed by the US and other western democracies. Both sides murdered civilians in their attempt to win the war.

Genocide: The intent to destroy, in whole or in part, an ethnical, racial, religious, or national group. (This definition of genocide is extracted from the United Nations Genocide Convention, 1948. The drafters of the term created it with the goal to prevent and punish what is now an internationally recognized crime.)

Khmer Rouge: A radical communist group that ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 under the leadership of Pol Pot. The regime sought to create a classless, agrarian society, and went to extreme lengths to do so. Ultimately, the Khmer Rouge and its ideology resulted in the death of up to 2 million people through starvation, forced labor, and executions.

Refugee: The United Nations defines refugees according to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. In short, a refugee is someone who has crossed international borders fleeing their home country owing to a well-founded fear of persecution. Due to the fear of persecution, refugees are unable or unwilling to go back to their home country.

Saigon: Saigon is the former name of the city now known as Ho Chi Minh City, located in southern Vietnam. It was the capital of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War (1955-1975). After the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese forces on April 30, 1975, which marked the end of the war and the reunification of Vietnam under communist rule, the city was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in honor of Ho Chi Minh, the leader of North Vietnam. Despite its name change, many people still refer to it as Saigon.

Vietnam War: The Vietnam War was a long, violent conflict in Southeast Asia between communist North Vietnam, supported by the Soviet Union and China, and non-communist South Vietnam, backed mainly by the United States and other Western allies. The war began as part of the global struggle between communism and democracy during the Cold War (1947-1991). It became one of the most controversial and costly wars for the United States, leading to widespread protest at home. The war ended in 1975 when North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), and Vietnam was unified under a communist government.

Materials:

- Ability to stream videos online
- [Handout 1](#): "Our Family's Memory Keeper"
- [Handout 2](#): "Free will is a muscle."
- [Handout 3](#): "Restoring flavor...an act of rebellion"
- [Handout 4](#): "It tasted like home and happiness, like a past I chose to remember as perfect"³
- [Handout 5](#): "Bobor will always soothe us"
- [Exit Activity/Homework](#) (Optional)

³ Please be advised that "Handout 3" includes an excerpt that talks about Chantha's time working at a food stall that served brothel clients in Thailand. This content may not be appropriate for 8th graders, so please review before using it in class.

Differentiation:

- For English language learners
 - Pre-Teach vocabulary: Go through the glossary in advance and include images to help students gain a better understanding of the terms.
 - Allow English learners to listen to excerpts from *Slow Noodles* (if available through your institution's library) and use the closed-caption feature on the videos shown in class.
- For gifted and advanced learners
 - Ask students to conduct research of food as cultural resistance in other contexts. This may include asking them to look for cookbooks/recipes by other groups (Native Americans; Holocaust survivors; Cookbooks by enslaved Americans; etc.)
 - Ask students to flex their creative writing skills and write a fictional "slow noodles" recipe for a modern struggle or personal experience.
- For diverse learning styles
 - Invite students to create symbolic recipes or "cookbooks" with mixed media collages
 - Let students record reflections and listen to interviews or podcasts featuring the author. ["Food with Mark Bittman"](#) has a good podcast with Chantha that will work for this.
 - Let students choose how they show understanding—essay, poem, art, presentation, or recipe.

Assessment(s):

- Have students write and design their own metaphorical "Recipe for Resistance" for a world or personal issue.

Disclaimer: Please note, due to the challenging themes of war, violence, and genocide, it is recommended that you give students a trigger warning about the challenging nature of the subject, frame the lesson as a continuing conversation, and remind students of their options if they feel they need to take a break. Ultimately, you know your students best and what they are capable of handling, so please take that into consideration. Please be advised that "Handout 5: Bobor will always soothe us" discusses brothels and sex-workers in post-genocide Cambodia. If you do choose to use this handout, we recommend giving a trigger warning.

Lesson/Activity:**1. Introduction to Context (10 minutes)**

- Start by helping students think about all the ways food, meals, and recipes relate to them, their family, and or their culture. This will set the scene for the lesson that follows.

Begin by asking students to think about their favorite comfort foods, the things that they make, buy, or someone prepares for them that makes them feel at ease and or happy. Is there a particular food that makes them think of a family member or friend? How does the taste, aroma, and/or preparation inform your relationship, if at all, to this food? Is there a special dish or recipe that they feel represents their culture or traditions? Why? Are there certain ingredients that make it more representative? You may find it easiest to prompt this discussion by sharing an example of your own.

To get the conversation rolling, you could invite students to start by answering these questions for themselves (give them 2-4 minutes to jot down their answers). Then, in small groups (ideally

3-5 students per group), go around and share their answers with their classmates. If you have a less talkative class, a fun way to do this would be to ask each student to draw to the best of their (in)ability a picture of the food. Then, have them one at a time show the image to their group and see if their classmates can guess what it is. This can be quite funny, and a nice way to get students laughing and engaging with each other.

2. Introduce students to Chantha Nguon and her connection with food (4 minutes)

- Explain to students that today we are going to use food and recipes to think about refugees, genocide, and culture. Chantha Nguon is the inspiration for this approach. Her memoir *Slow Noodles: A Cambodian Memoir of Love, Loss, and Family Recipes* uses food and recipes to help readers understand her experiences as a victim of genocide, refugee, and a survivor.
- To help introduce Chantha to your students, [stream this video](#) (2:21) in which her daughter describes her mother's story.

3. Introduce students to the history of the Cambodian Genocide (7 minutes)

- The TED-Ed [six minute video "Ugly History: The Khmer Rouge Murders"](#) (6:32) offers a tidy summary with animated graphics. For eighth grade students, we recommend the educator pre-views to determine whether it is appropriate for their students.

4. Frame the lesson for your students: recipes as resistance to destruction (5 minutes)

- Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge perpetrators responsible for the annihilation of up to 30 percent of all Cambodians in just less than four years, sought to turn the country into a peasant society and in so doing destroy much of Cambodian's rich culture and history. Cambodians were forced to eat rice and little else. In response to this, Chantha writes, "[I]f Pol Pot had erased our culinary past...I was determined to remember."⁴
- Write this quote on the board for your students. With Chantha's powerful quote in mind, explain to your students that for the rest of class, we are going to take an opportunity to think about the ways food and recipes can act as resistance during and after genocide.

5. Activity (20 - 30 minutes)

- This lesson plan includes 5 handouts, each of which has an excerpt from Chantha's memoir *Slow Noodles*, a recipe from the book, and three discussion prompts. For the rest of your class, the goal is to get students reading and engaging with these handouts. This can be done in any of the following ways, or come up with your own ideas! Feel free to get creative; you know your students best. You are welcome to make use of all the handouts, or just a few depending on your timing and need.
 - Option 1: Print the handouts and glue them onto a large piece of construction paper. Place them around the room. Have students go around and read and interact with each handout. They are encouraged to highlight the parts they like, star certain words, write comments and/or ask questions on the construction paper border, etc. You can assume that it will take a minimum of 10 minutes to read the handouts and longer if you want them to use the discussion prompts, so time accordingly. If you have a 60-minute class,

⁴ Nguon, Chantha. *Slow Noodles: A Cambodian Memoir of Love, Loss, and Family Recipes* (p. 256). (Function). Kindle Edition.

you may want to use just 3 of the handouts and have groups rotate every 15 minutes or so depending on your timing.

- o Option 2: Break the class into 5 groups (depending on class size you can do less, or more). Assign each group one of the handouts and have them read it alone or out loud in their small groups. Then answer the discussion prompts on the handouts.

Give them 15-20 minutes to do this. Assuming an average reading pace of 150 words per minute, it should take about 7-10 minutes to read the handout. This gives them 5-10 minutes to answer the three discussion prompts. If your class is longer than 60 minutes, you can give them more time. When each group has done this, ask your students to stand up and partner with a student from another group. Give them each 5-10 minutes to share what their handout was about and what they learned about the subject (e.g. refugee life, Cambodian Genocide, Vietnam war, etc.) from it.

[If your lesson time is 60 minutes, stop here and skip to step 8]

6. Cultural Reflection and Sharing (10 minutes)

- As a class or in small groups discuss the following:

What do you think the author is trying to convey through the food and culture in the excerpt?

7. Resistance to Genocide (10 minutes)

- Either show and read the class the definition of genocide as defined by the United Nations (which can be found [online here](#)) or print it out for them to read independently first. After doing this, discuss the following as a class:

Do you think Chantha's care for food and cultural preservation through food is a form of resistance to genocide? Why or why not?

8. [Optional] Either in class as an exit activity, or as homework, ask students to create their own recipes for resistance. What ingredients would they include and how would they prepare it? (10-15 minutes)

Supplemental Resources

- To best engage with this lesson plan, students will benefit from an **introductory lesson or pre-assigned reading** on the Cambodian Genocide. The Cambodian Genocide Resource Center has created [additional lesson plans for this purpose](#), all of which are available on our website and via the California Collaborative for Holocaust and Genocide Education. For a 2-page [concise overview of the Cambodian Genocide](#), visit our organization's website. For a more robust overview of the Cambodian Genocide, we recommend having students explore the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's online exhibit entitled "[Cambodia 1975-1979](#)". This could be assigned as homework to prepare students for the lesson.
- To learn **more about Chantha Nguon, Cambodian Cooking, and Slow Noodles**, you can visit the [Slow Noodles website](#). We also recommend her [interview](#) with the Transnational Literature Series at Brookline Booksmyth and LaLa Books in Lowell, Massachusetts.
- To learn more about Chantha [Nguon's work empowering women and girls in Cambodia](#), we recommend visiting Mekon Blue and Strung Treng Women's Development Center's homepage.

- You may want to **expand this class to two lessons**, first watch this documentary, then in the second do this lesson plan. The documentary [“Angkor Awakens: A Portrait of Cambodia”](#) directed by Robert H. Lieberman (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca Filmworks, 2017) is a 50-minute documentary on the history of Cambodia, the genocide, and its traumatic aftermath. This video is *not recommended* for 8th graders but can be viewed by 10-12th graders.
- This lesson plan would be complimented by a focus on **Southeast Asian Refugees** at large. The [Asian American Education Project has created a great lesson plan](#) that centers on Cambodian refugees in America. To read more about a study conducted on Cambodian refugees who came to the US, we recommend reviewing [“Mental Health of Cambodian Refugees 2 Decades After Resettlement in the United States”](#) by Grant N. Marshall.
- The focus on refugees in this lesson plan can be expanded with videos and resources created by the United Nations High Commission Refugee Agency. Start with their webpage [“Teaching about Refugees.”](#)
- You can help students prepare for class or design additional homework around Chantha’s memoir by assigning them readings from the book, some of which have been published online for free.
 - [“The Gradual Extinction of Softness”](#)
 - [“Forced to Flee Her Home, This Writer Remembers Her Family Through Recipes”](#)
 - [“In Phnom Penh, Slurping Noodles and Tasting Home Again”](#)
 - [“Silken Rebellion Fish Fry: How to Make Your Unfresh Fish Rations Taste Rather Delicious”](#)

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This lesson plan was created by the Cambodian Genocide Resource Center. Join us in our mission to ensure that the stories of genocide survivors are heard, the lessons of history are learned, and the atrocities of the past are not forgotten. Together we can empower the next generation to build a more compassionate and just world.

<http://cambodiangenocideresourcecenter.org>