

CAMBODIAN AMERICAN – ORAL HISTORY OF THE 1.5 GENERATION PROJECT DESCRIPTION

By
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The Cambodian American – Oral History of the 1.5 Generation (CAOH) was funded by the Los Angeles County (LAC) Department of Mental Health (DMH) as a UsCC Project under the Mental Health Service Act (MHSA) awarded to Pacific Asian Counseling Services on March 23, 2022 and amended to end on August 15, 2023

The implementation of the CAOH began in April 2022 with the selection of the CAOH Executive Team made up of Mariko Kahn, Project Coordinator, Robert Carleton, Videographer, Dr. Susan Needham, academic researcher and Sithea San, community advisor and translator.

PACS recruited and hired Akara Films to record all the oral histories, translate the Khmer oral histories to English and subtitle them, transcribe each oral history, complete the project summary video and assist with supplemental research. Akara Films signed on July 12, 2022.

Dr. Susan Needham was hired as the academic researcher effective July 2, 2022. She is a professor of Anthropology at CSU Dominguez Hills and co-founder and co-director of the Cambodian Community History and Archive Project (CamCHAP). She has studied Cambodian culture and history and worked in the Cambodian Community of Long Beach since 1988.

PACS hired Mariko Kahn as the CAOH project coordinator starting June 10, 2022. She was responsible for the overall coordination of the project, recruitment and hiring of staff, oversee the outreach and recruitment of narrators, scheduling all the recordings, securing recording space, scanning and logging all the narrators' archival photos, refreshments, responsible for oversight of all the administrative and financial matters and completion of the DMH SOW requirements.

The CAOH Executive team reviewed research to determine the parameters for a 1.5 generation applicant, how to recruit applicants, how to conduct the online application process, and the best practice protocols for oral histories. By July 31, 2022, the research was completed as well as the development of the pre- and post-surveys and questions for the oral histories.

Recruitment and interviews were conducted to find three oral historians to conduct the oral histories. They were put under contract by November 2022. They were: 1) Suzanne Im, a librarian at the Los Angeles Public Library. She established the Memory Lab programs at LAPL, which brings personal archiving and digital preservation tools and skills to community members; 2) Tola Livesey, a trained archivist turned librarian. She has been working at the Rancho Cucamonga Public Library as a Library Assistant for the past year and recently accepted a position with the Arcadia Unified School District as the Highland Oaks Elementary School librarian. Her background in cultural preservation and passion in community archives led her to

connect with CamCHAP; and 3) Dr. Karen Quintiliani, a Professor of Anthropology at California State University, Long Beach (and Chair of the Department of Human Development). She has conducted ethnographic and applied research in the Long Beach Cambodian community since 1988. She co-founded the Cambodian Community History and Archive Project with Dr. Needham.

The CAOHS team met with the oral historians on two occasions as part of their training curriculum to review the protocols for the oral history recording, what to cover during the pre- and post-interviews, how to handle the word logs, and how to handle the IT demands of the project.

By the end of September 2022, the protocol to conduct an oral history were completed and the questions to cover in the oral histories were tested. The team decided the following: 1) the oral histories would be conducted in English unless requested in Khmer due to the overall fluency of the applicants; 2) narrators would determine the venue for the filming of their oral histories; 3) the oral historians would conduct pre- interviews to prepare the narrators and build a comfortable relationship; 4) oral historians would conduct a follow-up post-interview to ensure that any emotional needs, concerns about content or additional comments would be addressed; and 5) AI software would be used to do a rough transcription of the oral histories and subtitles would be only for those done in Khmer due to the amount of time and cost associated with this process.

Outreach and recruitment of applicants started in October 2022 with press releases, local newspaper ad and use of social media on PACS and Cambodia Town websites and Facebook. In addition, key community leaders and Cambodian organizations were approached to spread the work. It took longer than expected to have sufficient applicants and several of them did not meet the age or time of emigration to the U.S. requirements to be 1.5 generation. A number of applicants lived outside of SA8 because people moved out of Long Beach as their financial status improved. They may have grown up and gone to school in SA8 but they no longer lived there. Using Cambodian American community people to ask family, friends and colleagues to participate was the most effective recruitment method. One-on-one assistance to help applicants apply online was crucial and implemented by Sithea San, CAOHS Executive team member.

Because the number of applicants was low and slow, the team revised the age requirements and arrival in the U.S. from being born between 1963-1969 and arriving between 1980-1986 to no birth year required and arriving in the U.S. between 1976 to 1987 between the ages of 6-17 years old. During the first quarter of the project, there was a great deal of discussion about the age for those who are the 1.5 generation. Different studies used different time periods. In addition, there is a great deal of grey for the age of Cambodians from that time period. Many Cambodians did not place importance on the month, day or even the year of birth. They often used the Asian zodiac years. One colleagues noted that all seven of his siblings were given December as their birthday month by his parents. During the chaos of the Khmer Rouge and the dangerous flight to refugee camps, people lost their papers so it was difficult to provide

documentation. Last, when the refugees arrived in the U.S. and the children started school, ages were given based on their size or English speaking skills. Given these factors, the team decided to accept the age that the narrator used.

Initially, registration was to end in November 2022, but in reality, it continued through February 2023. At that point, there were 17 accepted applicants with completed pre-surveys so scheduling the oral histories began. Each applicant had to complete the written pre-survey online which was reviewed by the oral historian and then a zoom or phone call pre-interview took place between the narrator and oral historian. If there were any questions or concerns, they could be addressed at that time and the parties could develop some rapport. It was also a time for the oral historian to prepare the narrator for what would happen during the oral history recording. It was important the pre-interview did not become the oral history.

The first oral history recording was completed on February 5, 2023 and the last was recorded on April 23, 2023. Due to personal conflicts, two applicants decided to drop out in April so the final number of completed oral histories became 15. In addition to the oral histories, archival photos were scanned sometimes numbering over 30 for a narrator. They added a visual impact that enriched the oral history process. A few narrators requested family members be part of the recording and they were included at the end of the oral history. Refreshments or a shared meal were provided at each session.

The recordings were done on Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays to accommodate those who worked full time. Several times, there were two recordings in one day. On average each oral history was about three hours long but the crew always remained as long as the narrator wanted to continue. We also built in at least one break for crew, narrator and oral historian. Mariko Kahn, project coordinator was present at all sessions and as a LMFT, could provide mental health support if needed. She also checked in with the oral historians for indications of compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma after the oral histories.

The oral historian completed a post-survey with the narrator usually within a week after the oral history recording. This was important as a debriefing process and quite often the narrators had additional memories. The post-interview was audio-recorded and are included in written format in the post-survey form.

Akara Films used an AI software to do a rough transcription of the oral history but given the many foreign words and sometimes the accent of the speaker, a transcriber also reviewed it. The transcription is not the same as subtitles but is very helpful to researchers with its time stamps. Akara Film used a translator for the two oral histories done in Khmer and this was checked by another Cambodian, then reviewed by the project coordinator for the English transcription. This was completed in late July 2023.

On June 10, 2023, the CAOHS team invited participants to a two hour community presentation of the project at the Historical Society of Long Beach located at 4260 Atlantic Ave. Long Beach, CA 90804. There were about 90 attendees including 10 of the narrators, DMH staff and Long

Beach City Councilmember Suely Saro. A buffet luncheon was provided. The program included history and background by the API UsCC co-chair, Richer San, UsCC project funding by Dr. Luis Guzman and the structure and goals of the API UsCC projects by Alan Wu. There was a 20 minute project summary video and a Q&A session with the narrators. Overall, the feedback was very positive and the community clearly wanted more projects like this. It was evident that preserving the memory of one's history is important to this community.

The project coordinator completed the analysis of the oral histories in early August. Dr. Needham and Mariko Kahn completed the comparison of the pre- and post-surveys by August 7, 2023. The final project reports were completed by August 15, 2023. The oral histories will be archived at the Historical Society of Long Beach website **www.hslb.org/collections** and managed by the Cambodian Community and History Project (CamCHAP). DMH will post the project summary video on its website which will link viewers to the HSLB website to view all the oral histories.

CAOH – COMPARISON OF THE PRE- AND POST- SURVEYS

18 prospective narrators completed the pre survey. Three dropped out before their oral history could be scheduled.

15 narrators completed the oral history and post survey.

Pre and post surveys included both quantitative and qualitative questions.

PRE SURVEY RESPONSES: N = 18

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I have found that the values and traditions of Khmer culture have helped me deal with past trauma throughout my life	72.2% (13)	22.2% (4)	5.6% (1)	0	0
2	I have witnessed things I feel uncomfortable talking about	33.3% (6)	27.8% (5)	22.2% (4)	5.6% (1)	11.10% (2)
3	I think talking about the Past is helpful to me and my family	66.7% (12)	22.2% (4)	5.6% (1)	5.6% (1)	
4	I am aware of mental health practices in the U.S.	44.4% (8)	44.4% (8)	11.1% (2)		

The full oral histories detail why the response to Question 1 is so strongly positive that Cambodian culture and traditions have helped deal with past trauma throughout their lives. The most important is the strong familial bonding in the family that goes well into the extended family. Often the most tenuous relationships resulted in their survival.

In Question #2, “I have witnessed things I feel uncomfortable talking about” does not follow the pattern of the others, with one third of the respondents neutral to strongly disagreeing that they feel uncomfortable talking about what they witnessed in their lives. The probable variables for this may be due to being very young under the Khmer Rouge or that they are not uncomfortable talking about what they witnessed.

On other hand, Question 3 about talking about the past is helpful to me and my family is at odds with experiences shared in the oral histories where the majority of narrators refer to not being able or willing to share their past with their family members. More poignant is that their family members, especially parents do not share their past with them.

Question #4 – 89% are aware of mental health practices in the U.S. which is very high. Reviewing the narrators’ professions 7 out of 15 are in helping professions and/or non-profits.

POST SURVEY RESPONSES AS FOLLOWS: N=15

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	As a result of telling my history I found that there were values and traditions of Khmer culture that did help me	60% (9)	26.7% (4)	6.7% (1)	6.7% (1)	0
2	During the Oral History narration, I was able to talk about things I previously had not talked about with anyone.	60% (9)	20% (3)	13.3% (2)	6.7% (1)	0

3	I found that talking about the past during the oral history narration was helpful to me	73% (11)	6.7% (1)	13.3% (2)	0	6.7% (1)
4	I would like to know more about mental health services in my area	YES: 40% (6)	NO: 60% (9)			
4a	If yes, would you like us to contact you?	YES: 4	NO: 9			

Question 1 “As a result of telling my history I found that there were values and traditions of Khmer culture that did help me.” Very strong response of 87% feeling this way because so often during the oral history, memories like learning to read and write Khmer or taking traditional dance classes came up strongly.

Question #2 “During the Oral History narration, I was able to talk about things I previously had not talked about with anyone.” Again 80% felt this way and in the oral histories they mention this. Often finding photos for the archives triggered conversations with family members as they searched for the photos and needed help remembering the people and circumstances of the photo.

Question #3 “I found that talking about the past during the oral history narration was helpful to me.” Again 80% found that the oral history process was helpful, but this is the only question that showed a strong disagree of nearly 7% which indicates a few people may have had a negative reaction.

Question #4 “I would like to know more about mental health services in my area and item 4a) If yes, would you like us to contact you?” Six people asked for more information. The project coordinator contacted all the narrators and asked if they wanted more information about services. One person asked for help and she referred the person to a Cambodian American therapist. During the oral history sessions, narrators were asked if they felt the need for any supportive services and this was followed up by the oral historians in the post-interviews. The CAOHS team tried to be sensitive to any emotional stress that a narrator might feel. One person said that the process of participating in an oral history was therapeutic. Of note are the number of narrators who ended up in a “helping” profession whether as a medical doctor or counselor themselves which may account for 60% not wanting to know more about mental health services.

[1] Here's a table for Religion:

Buddhist	10
Christian	4
Both Buddhist and Christian	3
Atheist	1