

## Roti Archaeology

How are reconstructions of Sri Lankan, Indian and Malaysian roti in America informed by the history and migration of Tamil diasporas across these regions?

The Roti Collective is a research initiative that focuses on the roti as a way of knowing and centering South Asian and diasporic narratives. Under this umbrella, *Roti Archaeology* highlights roti in multicultural diasporas as a way of tracing and uniting the historical movements and labor economies of Tamil people. The rise of the British Raj as a direct consequence of the East India Company's economic ventures makes evident that colonial movements were driven by capitalism<sup>1</sup>. These movements of human labor "resulted in the migration of curry to England as well as to its far-flung colonies"<sup>2</sup>. Spices, wheat grains, and rice were also moved across continents through the Raj's imperialist ventures. So by extension, these joint movements of food and people can be traced through the spaces in which capitalism and colonialism are reconstructed in multicultural societies today- the diasporic restaurant.

The homogenization of cultures and redefinition of authenticity are both forms of Orientalism with a table at this restaurant. Only a small portion of South Asian food is viewed by the West as authentic so many restaurants standardize their menus to fit that model. As a result, cuisines like my native Tamil are largely bypassed. Per Dr. Uma Narayan, the Orientalist view of 'exotic' food includes "recalling Indians to an authentic "Indianness" through the retrieval of their "lost" history and civilization"<sup>3</sup>. This view is projected onto immigrant communities across the West, where the

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<sup>1</sup> Metcalf, "A Concise History of Modern India", 50.

<sup>2</sup> Narayan, "Eating cultures: incorporation, identity and Indian food", 173.

<sup>3</sup> Narayan, "Eating cultures: incorporation, identity and Indian food", 167.

cultural expectations imposed obscure the versatility and history of these cuisines. Blending these cultures together under the label of nationality limits what is allowed to be authentic by these definitions and restricts how restaurants represent their cuisines. Projections like such onto immigrant culture are simply another reproduction of coloniality. This phenomenon situates the diasporic restaurant as an ideal place to observe the reconstruction of multicultural food histories.

The framework for reading culture in this project is rooted in archaeology. If the diasporic restaurant is an excavation site at the intersection of history and anthropology, roti is the material culture by which I conduct my analysis. To do so, I looked at the menus and websites of Sri Lankan, Indian, and Malaysian restaurants mostly in the New York Metropolitan Area. I observed broader trends in their culinary reconstructions then focused on six places to conduct a deeper linguistic analysis. I analysed what roti dishes were included and what weren't, how they were categorized, and the language used to describe them. This made the roti not only an ethnographic tool but also a key part of this project's archaeological record as it allows us to trace the migrations and histories of a community through their food. And since this ethnography doesn't interact with people of the community, roti becomes the artifact through which their history resurfaces. This research showcases these histories across multiple borders and gives dimension to layered diasporas who are flattened by the neocolonial gaze. This is done all through a single dish- the roti- a cultural icon of resistance, solidarity, and community that transcends borders.

Roti has travelled across South Asia and accompanied South Asians across continents, both as a result of imperialist labor economies. During and during the months preceding the Indian Rebellion of 1857, hundreds of chapatis were "passed from hand to hand and from village to village"<sup>4</sup> sometimes

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<sup>4</sup> Dash, "Pass it on: The Secret that Preceded the Indian Rebellion of 1857".

a few hundred miles a night. This was the infamous Chapati Movement that the “British regarded with deep suspicion, bordering on paranoia”<sup>5</sup> because they couldn’t understand the motive behind the movement. Some years later in an 1874 ‘Report on Coolie Emigration from India’, flour breads were highlighted as a necessary part of the transportation and by extension, the manipulation of migrants. The report conducted an informal and reductive ethnography that categorized Indians by rice or flour consumption. They then provided basic amounts of these ingredients to migrants to facilitate the very transcontinental movement dislocating them from their culture and cuisine. This fluidity of roti, especially during the colonial era, is key to its present day iconicity. So it seems fitting that roti be a way of knowing layered migrations across south and southeast Asia.

This research centers the Tamils of Southern India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia who have migrated between these regions for many centuries. The movement of Tamils from India to Sri Lanka for trade can be dated to at least the second century BCE. The Chola dynasty’s (9th-13th century CE) incursion of Sri Lanka and trade networks in the Malay peninsula also established a sizable Tamil population. However, during the colonial period, both countries experienced a large second wave of Tamil migrations from India. After the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, British planters expanded the coolie trade as a new labor source. While it was considered voluntary labor, “the decision to experiment with a different form of labor was explicitly racialized”<sup>6</sup> and exploitative. Colonial ethnographers like Herbert Risley claimed “labor was ‘the birthright of the pure Dravidian’”<sup>7</sup> and so, caste and class oppressed Tamils facing debt to the British Empire and famine were specifically recruited. They were shipped to Sri Lanka to work on coffee and tea plantations and to Malaya to work

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<sup>5</sup> Wagner, “The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising”, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents”, 194.

<sup>7</sup> Solomon, “The Decline of Pan-Indian Identity and the Development of Tamil Cultural Separatism in Singapore, 1856-1965”, 261.

on “plantations, roads, railway lines, and ports”<sup>8</sup>. This movement of people based on British colonialism and related economies across the region produces, building on Lowe, a spatial intimacy that informs South Asian diaspora cultures and foods across continents.

These histories of Tamil migration are the foundation upon which the movement of roti as a food and as a word are explored in this project. But, Tamils are a minority in every country they inhabit and though roti has a strong presence in their cuisines, it is not an association made immediately. In fact, the heavy-handed division of South Asians into “flour eaters” and “rice eaters” made in the aforementioned ‘Report on Coolie Emigration from India’<sup>9</sup> marked a solidification of this binary. There is still an assumption that because Tamil cuisine is predominantly rice based, there is no bread in it at all. In order to account for this perception, I have adapted the roti to more thoroughly include southern South Asian and Southeast Asian diasporas as well. Here, rotis are not just unleavened wheat flatbreads but fermented rice flour and rice noodles breads and anything that serves as a vessel for curries. This is an important step towards broadening the definition of South Asian food and identity. An intimacy of the foods shared by these Tamil communities is that they sit between the cultural conceptions of South and Southeast Asian. Thus highlighting them involves amplifying this fluidity.

Restaurant Name	Location	Cuisine
Amma’s Kitchen	Edison, New Jersey	Indian Tamil
Lakruwana Restaurant	New York, New York	Sri Lanka
Mamak House	Jersey City, New Jersey	Malaysian and Chinese
PappaRoti	Farmington Hills, Michigan	Malaysian
Patiala Indian Grill	New York, New York	Indian
Sigiri Sri Lanka Restaurant	Edison, New Jersey	Sri Lankan

<sup>8</sup> Kamble, “Indians in the Plantation Industry of Malaya (Mid 19th - 20th Century)”, 1168

<sup>9</sup> Geoghagen, “Report on Coolie Emigration from India”, 53.

Table 1. Table of restaurants observed in this study.

Most of the ‘rotis’ I look at throughout this project transcend the binaries of rice and bread as they transcend south and southeast Asia. At Sigiri, dishes like appam, idiyappa, and pittu that are made out of crushed rice or rice flour are labelled as “traditional breads” as opposed to “Sri Lankan Rice Specialties”<sup>10</sup>. This challenges the idea of the traditional South Asian flatbread. At Lakruwana Restaurant too, their kothu dish can be made from both godamba roti (wheat roti) and string hoppers (rice noodles) which further emphasizes the fluidity in the use of rice and wheat flours. The term godamba roti itself is often used interchangeably with godamba dosa, a term usually reserved for fermented rice flour breads. How these dishes are then translated into English also highlight the fluidity of these dishes. Lakruwana’s hoppers (appams) are described as “crispy oval shaped pancakes”<sup>11</sup>. Meanwhile, online recipes label dosas as ‘pancakes’ and ‘crepes’ and roti jala as ‘net crepes’. Cultural homogenization is quite often linguistic in America which as a monolingual-izing society emphasizes English as the default over multilingualism<sup>12</sup>. These linguistic movements index rotis, dosas, and hoppers as bread items, like pancakes and crepes, for this dominant Western audience.

Diasporic restaurants are places for the “maintenance of cultural food practices”<sup>13</sup> and act as a way of keeping communities that are removed from the culture of South Asia together. Whenever I’m homesick, I visit a South Indian restaurant near where I live. The last time I was there, the owner tried to send me home with a 20 lbs bag of matta rice simply because it is native to our shared ancestral hometown. Amma’s Kitchen is another “authentic south Indian Kumbakonam style restaurant”<sup>14</sup> that marks themselves as distinct from other broadly ‘Indian’ restaurants. Kothu roti, parotta, chapati, and

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<sup>10</sup> Sigiri Sri Lanka Restaurant, “Our Menu”.

<sup>11</sup> Lakruwana Restaurant, “A La Carte Menu”.

<sup>12</sup> Padilla et al., “The English-only movement— Myths, reality, and implications for psychology”.

<sup>13</sup> Reddy, van Dam, “Food, culture, and identity in multicultural societies: Insights from Singapore”, 1

<sup>14</sup> Amma’s Kitchen,

many types of dosa are available on their menu and in fact they have more roti options than rice. They also specialize in “fluffy wheat breads called parotta, one of the famous street foods in South India”<sup>15</sup>. This marks a departure from what Tamil food is commonly understood to be and adds dimension to these heritages. Their logo featuring former Tamil state politician J. Jayalalithaa also indexes this preservation of hyper-regional cultural identity. The restaurant Lakruwana, is a family run business that makes clear its goal of preserving Sri Lankan heritage through food and their museum of Sri Lankan culture<sup>16</sup>. These instances highlight the restaurant as a part of the larger goal of cultural preservation.

Alternatively, Malaysian eateries highlight the “sharing of cross-cultural food practices by different ... ethnic groups within multicultural societies”<sup>17</sup>. These ethnic groups all striving to maintain their practices facilitate a cross-pollination of linguistic and culinary traditions that result in distinct cultural fusions. Indian food was brought to Malaysia by colonial migrations and rotis specifically have been made in the country at mamak stalls. These are eateries run by Tamil Muslims who have created dozens of new varieties of roti with strong Malaysian influences. A variety called roti kaya shows culinary sharing through use of the pandan leaf soaked coconut spread called kaya, a staple in Southeast Asia. Likewise roti Jala, a lacy flatbread served in these stalls has inspired the creation of net or jalara dosas in India<sup>18</sup>. Linguistically, these dishes are all named roti but their descriptors all use Malay words like kaya or jala. The name roti is so prevalent that in the Malaysian lexicon it now indexes a generic wheat dough or bread. This can be seen in PappaRoti where roti no longer refers to South Asian flatbread but to the chef’s “brand new version of it – a roti bun”<sup>19</sup>. These restaurants, be they in

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<sup>15</sup> Amma’s Kitchen,

<sup>16</sup> Donohue. “All the Restaurants in New York”. Page 239.

<sup>17</sup> Reddy, van Dam, “Food, culture, and identity in multicultural societies: Insights from Singapore” 1

<sup>18</sup> Rajkumar, “Net Benefits”.

<sup>19</sup> PappaRoti, “About Us”.

Malaysia or the US, are integral in demonstrating the formation of cross-cultural cuisines between South and Southeast Asia.

While these are spaces of cultural heritage, diasporic restaurants must also conform to cultural conceptions of their community's food. "Westerners' taste for 'ethnic cuisines' contributes to the economic survival of immigrants"<sup>20</sup> and so their perception of what "ethnic cuisine" is is more relevant than what it actually is. Lakruwana mentions on their website that expansion from 20 to 85 seating was brought about by "US nationals who loved a spicy plate of Sri Lankan food"<sup>21</sup>. This is noteworthy because, per Dr. Krishnendu Ray, spice and heat became an Orientalist way of separating 'ethnic' cuisines from normative ones such that "claims of inauthentic mildness of ethnic food"<sup>22</sup> pigeonhole Asian restaurants. In a country that places capital value in homogenized communities, or say a melting pot, restaurants also face "constant business adaptation and cuisine hybridization for survival"<sup>23</sup>. The South Indian restaurant Rajni "by popular demand... extended [their] delicious north Indian menu and have introduced Indo-Chinese delicacies"<sup>24</sup> thus compromising on their original goal in favor of economic opportunity. To preserve their culture while making a profit, restaurants must assimilate to distilled and exoticized versions of their food while allowing certain practices to be sidelined.

In limiting their menus to the Western standard for Asian food, these restaurants end up providing a staple dish from the minority culture to substitute their entire cuisine. And while this is still an attempt at cultural preservation, it further marginalizes said cuisines. In the various Indian and Malaysian restaurants I studied, the production of Tamil dishes is a practice that has been sidelined. The name Mamak House takes inspiration from Tamil Muslim street food stalls found across Malaysia.

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<sup>20</sup> Narayan, "Eating cultures: incorporation, identity and Indian food", 180.

<sup>21</sup> Lakruwana Restaurant, "Story".

<sup>22</sup> Ray, "Exotic Restaurants and Expatriate Home Cooking: Indian Food in Manhattan", 220.

<sup>23</sup> Martini, "Restaurants in Little India, Singapore: A Study of Spatial Organization and Pragmatic Cultural Change.", 148.

<sup>24</sup> Rajni, "Home".

Mamak is derived from the Tamil word “mama” for maternal uncle and demonstrates the permeation of both Tamil language and cuisine in Malaysia and Malaysian diaspora. This restaurant in New Jersey however, serves Malay and Chinese cuisine with the single traditional mamak dish being roti canai<sup>25</sup>. Patiala Indian Grill showcases the “flavors from several regions of India like Hyderabad, Delhi, Chennai, and Kerala”<sup>26</sup>. However, the varieties of naan, paratha, and roti they serve all “approximate a particular genre of North Indian cuisine”<sup>27</sup> that fails to incorporate other regional breads. Per Dr. Uma Narayan, this results in a “standardized subsection of the wide range of dishes and cuisines ... becoming emblematic and representative ‘authentic Indian food’”<sup>28</sup> and authentic Malaysian food thus limiting the Tamil cuisine in both.

The homogenization of these layered diasporic food practices limits our ability to view histories of Tamil migration through multiple perspectives. Patiala Indian Grill only serving breads originating in northern India isn’t an issue on it’s own but can still perpetuate erasure. For instance, Malaysian roti canai has often been compared to North Indian parathas except for “In South Asia, the dough is rolled. In Southeast Asia, the dough is flipped and spun in the air, and thrown against the oiled work surface until paper thin”<sup>29</sup>. This is based on a comparison to more well-known Indian flatbreads. However, the preparation of roti canai and parotta at street food stalls, has more striking similarities. Both breads are flipped, stretched, spun, and thrown until the very end where roti canai is folded but parotta is coiled. So, whether it is called parotta, kothu, or roti canai, this dish spotlights “decades of culinary versatility through South India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia”<sup>30</sup>. Tamil food in

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<sup>25</sup> Mamak House, “Appetizers”.

<sup>26</sup> Patiala Indian Grill, “About Us”.

<sup>27</sup> Narayan, “Eating cultures: incorporation, identity and Indian food”, 174.

<sup>28</sup> Narayan, “Eating cultures: incorporation, identity and Indian food”, 175.

<sup>29</sup> Veneracion, “Roti Canai From Malaysia”.

<sup>30</sup> Sannith, “How the parotta became South India's favourite flatbread”.

diasporas have “undergone a series of adaptations and assimilations to the dominant context”<sup>31</sup> that are informative of the nature of the migration they resulted from. Giving a platform to these minority food practices can help highlight the dimensions of a multicultural community.

The final product of my research is a menu that highlights these Tamil diasporic cuisines across Asia as not defined or divided by borders. Since the diasporic restaurant is my research subject, it seemed fitting that this final product be a nod to the structures these restaurants are situated in. The menu explores connections between Tamil rice and wheat based dishes under the umbrella term ‘roti’ and emphasizes their shared histories through individual dishes that are relevant to Tamil diasporas from Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and India. I then take the themes of preserving, sharing, and modifying food practices and apply them to these dishes. Recognizing the history and cultural importance of these foods is an important way for us as South Asians and scholars to amplify the stories they tell as ‘unstandard’ ways of knowing. Many of the dishes mentioned here as well as many others not were moved across land and sea as a result of centuries of migration expanded by colonial and capitalist labor movements. These Tamil migrants were “locatable at intersections of labor, race, gender, class, and rank under imperial rule”<sup>32</sup> and their location is an important one too often left out of history. It is imperative to amplify these colonial histories and migrations through ways of knowing tied to the people impacted by these movements- and in this case something as ubiquitous as the roti.

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<sup>31</sup> Narayan, “Eating cultures: incorporation, identity and Indian food”, 174.

<sup>32</sup> Jegathesan. “Tea and Solidarity : Tamil Women and Work in Postwar Sri Lanka”,

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