



Sirilak

Hamrah, together on a journey— The Hamrah Oral History Project is a series of interviews with immigrants, refugees, and asylees in Arizona, people who had to leave home due to oppression, war or violence, pursuing their future elsewhere. These are personal accounts of life between places and cultures, exploring how we arrived here and why we left home. Listen to stories of joy, dream and emotional pain that comes with the relocation and separation. Recorded at KXCI Community Radio's Historic Armory Park Studios in Tucson, Arizona.

Can you introduce yourself?

Yeah, my name is Sirilak. I am 26 years old. I was born in Udon Thani, Thailand. It is a province in the northeastern part of Thailand in the region called Isan. Culturally, we are closer to Laos than the main part of Thailand. I grew up in a village. It is very small. It is surrounded by rice patties. That was the main source of income there. You made rice and then you sell rice.

Can you tell me about your childhood?

I had a great childhood. I had so much freedom growing up in the village. There was just this sense of safety and you could go anywhere. And over the course of my life there, I had three bicycles and the bicycle, each bicycle grew with me and so I had a baby, one with the supporting wheels, and then I had a mid-size one, and then finally I just kind of grew into a big one and I took that I everywhere with me. It's how I went to school, it's how I went to the rice farm, which was my second home. It was about five minutes from my house. And on that farm there was a tree house made just for me. And it was built into the bamboo grove and it was four stories tall. And when it would get windy and I would be on the third or fourth level, I would be swaying with the bamboo. And it was this euphoric feeling of just being swayed gently by the wind until it got really windy and then I had to come down. Otherwise I probably would be flung into the air.

What was it like growing up in your country?

I don't know. I don't think I think much about that. It was, to me, a time of innocence because there were not a lot of expectations placed on me. I was the youngest kid in the family and my house was right next door to my two aunt's houses. And I could go between my house, one of

their houses, I could go with them to the rice farm, either my rice farm or theirs. And so yeah, there was not expectation placed on me. The only chore I had to do was making sure there was rice by the time everybody came home so they could make dinner and have dinner.

When did you leave?

I left in 2007. I was 11.

Who did you leave with?

I left Thailand permanently by myself. I came on a plane by myself.

Can you give some more details about that?

Yeah, so there had already been talks of immigration coming from my mom, so it wasn't a total surprise the year before I came here permanently. My parents and I came to the US for the first time for vacation, and we stayed for a month. And I think looking back now, that was the time that they used to kind of scope out this place as a possible place for our immigration. And then sometime after that they came to the US and settled here permanently. And meanwhile, I was still in Thailand in the village with my oldest brother and with my aunts. And then one day in October, 2007, my brother received a phone call from my mom saying that they had already gotten a plane ticket for me and that he needed to get me to Bangkok by the following Monday. And yeah, that's the story of how I left.

What happened to other family members who did not leave with you?

Well, they stayed behind. So my family and I, by definition, we immigrated here willingly and it was thanks to my stepfather who was an American. And so it was easier for us to come that way. It was through family migration. I was the first of the children to come because I was the youngest and then the next person was my middle brother, and he was under 21 years old at the time. And so by definition, he was still considered a dependent. And my oldest brother, by the time that we could petition for him to come, he was older than 21 years old. And so he was considered an independent by immigration status, which made him considered out to be a distant relative. And so because of that, he has to stay behind. He's been on an 11 year wait list.

Do you know why you and your family left?

This is similar to other immigrants out there, is that I think my mom had this idea that if we came to the US her kids would have a better life and there were opportunity, there would be more opportunities here. And compared to Thailand, I think in her perception there would be more opportunities here and too many immigrant families. I think America, when I was young and I think still is today, has this perception that it's a golden door to opportunities. And I think so many immigrants still believe that. And getting access to it is the number one step to do.

What was your journey like? You said your brother dropped you off in Bangkok, right? So what happened after that? Where did he go and what happened to you? How did you come alone in that airplane? Did no one watch while you were alone?

Yeah, so I did not come completely alone in the sense that apparently you could hire the airline to babysit you. Well, my mom hired the airline to babysit me the whole time I was on the plane. So going back a little bit, I had very little time to pack. I think I had one suitcase with me and then we took the bus to Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, and then we stayed there for about a day. And then we went to the international airport. And because I was a minor, my brother could actually stay with me until one of the people from the airline came to get me. And then, yeah, she just walked me through the plane, walked me to my seat, and that was it. I pretty much stayed put. Yeah, I was scared to use the bathroom. I was scared that I would break the monitor that they had. So yeah, I was too shy to ask how to watch movies on the monitor, and so I just slept most of the way I think.

What was it like when you first arrived in the US?

Unintelligible. That's the best way I could describe it. I had no knowledge of English and it was scary. It was isolating. People tried talking to me, but it just felt like I was underwater and I couldn't hear them and I couldn't decipher what they said.

Was it different than you expected?

Oh yes, of course. So when we relocated, in the US, we were in a very small town in northern Arizona and from movies about America, you would expect big cities, just all kinds of diverse people living in it. But I grew up in a small conservative town made up of only mostly white people and also Mexican-Americans as well. But I think up until high school I was the only Thai American kid in school.

How long have you been in Tucson?

I have been in Tucson for about four to five years now, but I have lived in the US for 16 years.

What has been the most difficult part of adapting to life in the US?

I think isolation early on was the most difficult part for me because the first house that we lived in was so far away from everybody else. And when I was growing up in Thailand, I had the freedom to go anywhere I wanted. Like I said, I had my bicycles and I could go anywhere and I could just go hang out with the kids down the street from me, whereas here you couldn't go anywhere. You were fearful and everything was so far apart and having to grow up like that alone and quiet was really difficult.

What has been the easiest part of adapting to the US?

I am saying this with a little asterisk on the side and that I think the most easiest part for me was picking up English. And that was because I was the only Thai speaking person in school. And so to me, learning English was about survival because I did not want to be underwater anymore. And so I made myself write in English pretty much every day. And I think also the experience of just diving in helped me learn fast, but at the same time it was not without cost because I think I had to sacrifice not only language, but had to sacrifice other parts of me, the ethnic part of me in order to learn this language in order to survive.

Are you kind of disappointed that you had to sacrifice all of this stuff to be able to learn English?

Oh, yes. Now of course, but I think when I was young, what was I supposed to do? I had no point of reference what it's like growing up as a Thai American, let alone as an Asian American.

What do you like the most about Tucson?

Well, I moved here as an adult, so it was by choice for once, and I got the chance to grow up here and relearn what it's like to, I think, have my identity as an Asian American and as a Thai American back. And Tucson is a much bigger place than the small town I grew up in. And so there is welcoming, there's a sense of welcoming here in terms of you can be yourself here, you don't have to scrape off an ethnic identity to be here.

What do you not like about Tucson?

I don't think I have anything

Yet. What are some of the fun things you do in Tucson?

Some of the fun things I do in Tucson is very cliché. I like to hike and I like to eat lots of good food, and I also like to garden, and I'm really interested in cultivating native plants and restoring the habitat for the wildlife here.

How has your life changed since coming to Tucson?

I think my life has become richer here since I moved to Tucson, and I think that also has to do with the fact that I am now an adult and I have freedom to choose how I want to live on my own terms.

What are the things that have not changed at all?

I don't know what has really stayed the same. It's kind of hard to think back that far. I think lots of things have changed.

Maybe the love that you still have to your culture maybe and then be one?

The love for my culture. Oh no, I think that would be inauthentic to say that. Yeah.

Do you ever dream of going back to Thailand?

Of course. I dream of going back to Thailand. I miss my aunts, I miss my family. This is going to sound very shallow, but other than embracing my aunts and hopefully I can still speak to them in a way that they can understand me and I can understand them because I am losing my native language. Other than that, I really want some fruit. I want me mango, I want me the ripest, juiciest mango that is just sweet. You bite into it and it's succulent and it's sweet and it doesn't have strings that get stuck between your teeth. I just want that so much.

Do you wish that you never came here?

I have been in this country for much longer than the time that I spent in Thailand. I don't think I know what it's like to just be a person of one exclusive country and culture. And I'm not saying I have the duality of identities figured out. But yeah, I don't know. I don't have a question to that because if I never came here, then I wouldn't be who I am now. But at the same time, I don't know who I would have become if I had stayed in Thailand.

You said that you were really free, you had a lot of freedom when you were in Thailand. Most of the refugees or immigrants that are coming from different countries to the US are coming to the US because of the American dream, the freedom that as you said, the golden door and all that stuff. So do you think that it would be better if you stayed in Thailand with all of that freedom or it's just better to stay in here with the minimal freedom that you have compared to what you had in Thailand?

It's a hard question, I think to think about because I don't know, I cannot imagine a version of me that had stayed in Thailand.

What do you miss the most about your home country and culture?

I miss the land. I miss the simplicity of it all. And I'm not romanticizing the life, right, because I knew how hard my aunts worked. I didn't know. I mean, I could not have possibly known what it was like to lift up a 50-60 pound bag of rice over your shoulders every day. But from my perspective, when I was growing up, I had fun and I was cared for. I was sheltered by them, I was fed by them.

Can you talk about the role that language has played in our experiences living in us?

The role that language has played in my experience was about survival initially. And then once I became fluent, it opened doors for me because suddenly to the teachers, I was a smart kid. So once I got out, I tested out of the ESL program. They saw me as a smart kid and they put me in

an advanced placement program. And to me that led to different opportunities, different kind of fun that I could have. But then I think that also led me to become a very stressful and anxious academic because now I kind of value myself based on how well I do in school and it's really not healthy for you.

Do you think it would be better if there was any other Thai American school who did speak Thai and also English at the same time? Do you think you wouldn't forget Thai as much as you did or do right now?

Yes. I think it would be better and it would be different if I had grown up with other Thai Americans and maybe my English language acquisition would not have happened so fast, but at least I would not have to go into survival mode at such a young age to learn this language. I would've had help. And I think my sense of identity as a Thai person I think would've been more secured and I think I would've grown up more proud of where I come from and in a more authentic way. Because when I grew up, there was this aspect of being looked on as an exotic subject because most kids could not tell where Thailand is on the map. And so I kind of grew up as a spectacle. And I think that was also the reason why I wanted to kind of get rid of my identity as a Thai person so much because I did not want to be looked on as a spectacle.

So you were basically ashamed of being Thai in front of them. You wanted to be just like them. You don't want to be different than them, right?

Yes. Yeah. To put it bluntly, I was ashamed of who I was.

What made you think like that? What made you feel like you are not good enough, you are just like an extra person or whatever you felt in that time? What made you feel that?

I just felt like I couldn't belong in that place because there was nobody like me and I felt ugly and my skin was dark. And I remember wearing long sleeves in the middle of summer in Arizona because I did not want my skin to get darker.

Can we say it's because of the people that were around you because it was too whitewashed, like you were in a society that was full of white people or light-skinned people that you started hating who you were or your race or ethnicity or identity, whatever way?

I would say coming to the US in 2007, I think the climate had mostly changed even where I was growing up in a small town. People were nice to me, but as in they were not overtly racist and did not call me Chinese. But I think it's just the environment of being out there and isolated and having no point of reference and no contact with the people that look like you, that shared your own culture. That made me feel inadequate and not enough.

Have you found something that you really like, like food, new plants, new cultures, new opportunities? I guess?

Yeah, I like you all,

But something that would when you look back, you would be like, oh, that's actually worth coming to you, us or leaving my culture or my family behind.

Oh yeah. I mean of course I think looking back now and looking at what I do, I am here with you all. I'm here with Hamrah. I have this opportunity to be with you all and now going to school and working on finding ways and resources to help and now that I am in grad school, I get the opportunity to find ways and resources to help somebody who looked like me or who might have come from a similar situation like me who were not born here, and to be able to open a door or find a way in and just make it a little easier for those who will come after me.

So have you found any emotional support here? Any person that you go and talk to or it can be from your family, it can be from around your friends or anyone. Do you feel like they would understand you, what you're going through or at least would try to help you?

Oh yes. I have found emotional support here in various forms. I am open with my struggles now and I mean I'm not running to every person on the street and be like, listen to my story. Not like that. But I have made diverse friends, friends who come from the same background as me and yeah, I think it's great to be able to find somebody with the same past as you or with the same situation as you

Did the younger Sirilak have the same amount of emotional support?

Younger me did not have the same amount of emotional support, and that is why I am now reaching out to the right people and so I could relearn and reach back to younger me and give all the support that she needed then.

Have you faced any discrimination or prejudice in your new home?

Yes, I have faced discrimination or prejudice in the US, not in the most obvious ways. I think because I have the privilege of looking Asian and so I am blanketed with the stereotype of the model minority and that I would just be here and I would not cause trouble. But still that hurts. What makes you think I'm not capable of causing trouble? I'm right here on a radio show.

How did you deal with that since the day you came to the US? I bet you have experienced racism in an obvious way. I bet someone has called you a race that you are not, or an ethnicity that you're not. So how did you deal with them? Did you want to talk to them and try and explain it to them or just say It's all right?

I just leave alone. I don't think it's my job to educate people on what country or ethnicity I am. I do get mistaken a lot for different types of people, and I think it's not my job. I think it's their

job to understand that Asians can look brown too. And there are other Asians out there from Southeast Asia who look exactly like me.

So if you had a chance to tell the whole world, not just Americans, Europeans, Africans, non-Asians, or maybe there are some Asians in West Asia that follow the stereotype too, what would you tell them? What would you want to change about this idea of this stereotype asian thing?

Just don't ask where I'm from. Don't say my English is so good either. I would say read. I would say connect with me on a personal level.

What hopes do you have for the future?

I have a lot of hopes for the future. Seeing you all now being in this room, and especially you, I'm so excited for you. You are so fearless. You are so secured in your identity and to live in this place and holding the duality of your identity as an Afghanistan and as an American. That's wonderful.

What about your own personal goals? What do you want to do in future?

My personal goal is to become an effective educator and a community leader because there is still so much work to do here in terms of opening doors and keeping the doors open for immigrant communities of various statuses.

What is your major? What are you studying?

I am a graduate student in art education. My goal is to make art accessible for everybody.

What advice do you have for yourself and when you just have arrived?

You don't have to shed who you are.

What advice do you have for other people, for other kids who just has arrived to US? And maybe you are going through, you think that you are, were going when you were younger.

Take your time, be a kid. Especially for those who never had the chance to be kids because they came from countries full of conflicts. Take your time. You're safe here. You will go somewhere, but you got to be a kid. And that's it. Thank you.

