



Children walk past the colossal statues Thursday at the Wat Dhammararam Buddhist Temple, which is hosting Cambodian New Year festivities through Sunday.

New year makes nod to past: Cambodian heritage a large part of traditional celebration

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STOCKTON - Around her neck, 20-year-old Narry Hoeung wears a locket with photos of her grandparents - her grandmother, who fled Cambodia when Khmer Rouge forces took hold of the country, and her grandfather, who did not escape but died in the campaign of killing that followed.

"In California, they tried to celebrate all the Cambodian customs that they can," Hoeung said of the Cambodian refugees who eventually settled in Stockton, "so that we, as a second generation, won't lose it."

On Thursday, Hoeung was with her sister at the Wat Dhammararam Buddhist Temple for the Cambodian New Year festival she has attended every year since her childhood.

"My parents and my grandparents worry: Will we do the things that they do? Will we understand?" Hoeung said.

Held every year in early spring, the Cambodian New Year celebration draws thousands of people to Stockton for an event that blends traditional dances, foods and rituals with modern entertainment. "They bring in famous singers from Cambodia," Hoeung said.

The event continues through Sunday. It is open to the public.

On Thursday, Buddhist nuns and other volunteers adorned the temple's colossal statues with bright silk flowers. Vendors set out cups full of sugar cane juice and Thai iced coffee. Bowls of oranges and bunches of bananas were piled on altars .

"Everyone gets together and celebrates," Oeun Chin, one of the temple's monks, said as dancing began. "When the people come to the temple, the monks bless the people."

As part of the celebration, a large mound of sand - called a stupa - has been built on a corner of the temple's grounds. Surrounded by four smaller mounds, it represents a spiritual monument to the Buddha. The smaller mounds represent four of his disciples.

Throughout the afternoon, temple visitors stuck bundles of incense and flowers into the sand in memory of relatives and friends who have died.

The sand, Chin said, is a reminder of the ephemeral nature of life.

"There is nothing stable for us as human beings," he said. "It's only sand. It's where we are from. It's where we will go. It's the dirt."

Over the course of the year, the stupas will gradually be disassembled as monks carry away the sand for other projects, he said.

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