



Mayuranacri Moeung, 14, has her makeup done by Sothary Sou, 15, as they prepare to perform a traditional dance at a Cambodian New Year celebration at the Park Village Apartments community center Monday.

## **Preserving old among young: Cambodian New Year celebrates tradition with food, music, prayer**

**By Jennifer Torres**  
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STOCKTON - In the last frantic minutes before the Cambodian New Year dance program was set to begin at Park Village Apartments this week, women passed handfuls of gold-colored belts and bracelets across a table and coaxed stiff, straight ponytails into curls.

Kunthea Tuy tucked flowers behind Mayuranacri Moeung's ear. Later, Mayuranacri would perform a classical blessing dance in bare feet on stage in the Park Village community center. And even later, she would take down her hair, trade her traditional dress for jeans and dance to hip-hop and Cambodian pop under lanterns and balloons on the complex's basketball court.

"I like both kind of dancing, both the same," the 14-year-old said. "It's just, like, culture. It's important."

Local Cambodian residents have celebrated their new year over the past three days with traditional food, music, games, dance and prayer.

After decades in California, many within the refugee community say the ties of language and culture are strained as children pursue lives that are more decidedly American.

They don't speak Khmer and they don't wear Cambodian dresses to the temple, 19-year-old Sophany Yinn said. "You can see the way they dance at nighttime. It's different."

Events such as this week's new year celebration become, at least in part, a means of preserving what's old in the lives of the young.

According to Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program, about 1.7 million people - 21 percent of Cambodia's population - were killed in the country from 1975 to 1979 when Pol Pot-led Khmer Rouge forces took over the country.

Yinn's parents were among the thousands who fled.

Now a student at California State University, Stanislaus, she has been studying Cambodian dance for about 10 years.

She was recruited to dance through her Girl Scout troop.

"I liked it because I was learning new things, especially about my culture," she said. "We're trying to live in a new society here. I wanted to keep at least something alive."

Before the dance on Monday, she lit incense outside the Park Village community center, pressed her palms together and bowed. "I just prayed to the ancestors to give me strength to do the dances correctly."

More than 10,000 Cambodian people live in San Joaquin County. According to U.S. Census Bureau figures, about 9,000 of them speak Khmer, or Cambodian. Nearly 60 percent also speak English.

Increasingly, though, language and culture gaps between parents and their children are becoming more pronounced, said Sophaline Buth, a liaison for the Stockton Unified School District.

"It's very difficult. Kids nowadays are so Americanized," Buth said. "In order to maintain that traditional culture, the only way the parents can is through the temple."

At the Wat Dhammararam Buddhist Temple on Carpenter Road on Tuesday - the last day of new year festivities - hundreds of families prayed, danced and left offerings at the temple's giant Buddha statues.

Children could play traditional games and practice speaking Cambodian - links to their parents' culture, Buth said.

According to research published Tuesday in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, minority adolescents who maintain cultural identity, especially through their clothing, have fewer mental health problems than children who adopted the style of the dominant culture.

"If you don't know who you are and where you came from, it's hard for you to be able to stand for something," said Sovang Lam, program manager for Stockton's United Cambodian Families.

Earlier this month, the nonprofit organization led a focus group of about 30 Cambodian families to discuss concerns and priorities.

Parents were concerned about their children's education and ability to find jobs, Lam said.

Many, she said, have trouble communicating with teens who learned English in school and don't speak Cambodian well.

"I see that all the time here," Lam said. "Most of it is, 'I don't know what they're saying, and they don't know how to tell me.' "

Yinn said her parents insisted she study Cambodian. "I read, write, speak, understand," she said. "Kids are losing that too. They're losing a lot of that right now."

Keeping it is a challenge, she said, waiting to make a new year offering to monks at a temple in Lodi.

"It's hard. You have to balance it out," she said. "For one thing, you don't want to change so much that you lose your Cambodian culture. You don't want to keep so much because you want to be updated on American society. ... You keep some things and change some things."

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